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Dining In(to) the World to Come

Jordan D. Rosenblum

The ancient rabbis believe in two worlds: their present, lived reality, which they refer to in Hebrew as *olam ha-zeh*, or “this world”; and a future, not-yet-experienced realm, which they call in Hebrew *olam ha-ba*, or “the world to come.” It is in *olam ha-ba* that the just receive their divine reward and the wicked incur their divine punishment. The world to come thus solves the problem of theodicy, or divine justice. Since present, lived reality does not always accord with rabbinic ideals, the future realm of *olam ha-ba* establishes an alternate universe in which the real and the ideal resolve from discord into harmony. The world to come is how the rabbis explain theologically problematic but empirically observed paradoxes encountered in this world. For example, why do good things happen to bad people, while bad things happen to good people? Why is a young child afflicted with cancer or killed in a car crash? And why do reality television shows bring fame and fortune on the amoral and the rabbinically reprehensible?

While other essays in this volume explore additional aspects of the dual rabbinic realms of this world and the world to come, some of which also intersect with food, I focus in this essay on two specific, and interrelated, questions: (1) What diet in this world merits entrance into the world to come; and (2) Upon entering this future realm, what menu awaits therein? In doing so, I argue that consideration of dining into and in *olam ha-ba*, the world to come, is a mechanism for the ancient rabbis to justify their preferred dietary practices in *olam ha-zeh*, this world.

DINING INTO THE WORLD TO COME

In the Hebrew Bible, certain foods are permitted, while others are tabooed. Explicit rationales for the inclusion or the exclusion of various foodstuffs, however, are almost never found in biblical texts. The rabbis, like other both Jewish and non-Jewish ancient commentators, seek to explain the meaning behind these often unjustified practices. One example of this phenomenon is encountered during a conversation about why God chose to give the Torah to Israel (i.e., to Jews) rather than to any other nation. In the midst of this discussion, the following parable appears in *Leviticus Rabbah* 13:2:
[A] Rabbi Tanhum bar Hanilai said:

[B] This may be compared with the case of a physician who went to visit two sick persons, one who would live, and another who would die.

[C] To the one who would live, he said: “This and that you may not eat.”

[D] But to the one would die, he said to them: “Whatever he wants to eat, bring it to him.”

[E] Thus, of the other nations of the world, who are not destined for the life of the world to come, [it is written in regard to them,] “[Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you;] as the green herbs, I have given you all” (Gen 9:3).

[F] But to Israel, who are destined for the life of the world to come, [it is written,] “These are the living things [ha-hayyah] that you may eat from among all of the quadrupeds on the land” (Lev 11:2).5

Using the parable, a common rabbinic interpretive mechanism, this text discusses a physician who has two patients: one presents with merely a minor malady and the other with a fatal illness. To the one who will survive, the doctor prescribes a careful dietary regimen, since that patient will heal and recover. To the one who will not survive, however, the doctor permits all foods, since a dying person need not count calories, worry about how much sodium she is eating, or order the heart-healthy entrée. After all, there is no reason to skip dessert if these are your last few meals in this world.

Gentiles are the terminal patient in this parable. Destined to die in this world, but not be revived in the world to come, they can eat “all.” Hence, Genesis 9:3 allows them to eat everything. Jews, on the other hand, are the living patient in this parable. Destined to live beyond this world and to enter the world to come, they cannot eat “all.” It is for this reason that in Leviticus 11:2 their divine doctor commands them to only eat “living things” [ha-hayyah].5

I have purposely translated “living things” differently from how it is usually rendered when translating the biblical verse in its original context, simply as “creatures.” Playing on the dual meaning of the Hebrew word ha-hayyah, which literally means “living things,” the rabbis understand God, the divine physician, to command Jews to eat only living things, which in turn will grant Jews life in the world to come. Gentiles do not eat only living things, and thus they are denied access to the world to come.6
This text presumes the chosenness of Israel, who alone enters the world to come. Of course, this is not the only domain in which the rabbis presume that Israel is a special, chosen, and divinely set-apart people. It is for this reason, for example, that since the early rabbinic period, the daily morning liturgy includes a blessing praising the fact “that [God] did not make me a Gentile.”

Chosen for a special diet with special benefits, Jews are rewarded. Meanwhile, like the child who was not chosen for the kickball team in gym class, Gentiles must remain eternally on the sidelines and watch while others enjoy the fun.

As a biological necessity, eating is a matter of life or death. For the rabbis, eating is also a matter of eternal life or death. One key reason for the biblical food laws is therefore to guarantee that, by following these dietary prescriptions, Jews ingest the essential vitamins and nutrients to assure them entrance into the world to come. Eating “all” food sustains Gentiles in this world, but eating only “living things” sustains Jews both in this world and in the world to come.

Though Jews must fastidiously observe the proper rabbinic diet in order to guarantee their acceptance into the world to come, the rabbis are careful not to renounce the permitted pleasures of this world. According to one tradition, for example:

[A] Rabbi Ḥezekiah [said] Rabbi Cohen [said] in the name of Rav: 

[B] In the future, man must give a summary and account concerning all [permitted foods] that his eyes beheld, but he did not eat.

[C] Rabbi Lazar considered this teaching and set aside funds so that he could eat every [permitted] thing once a year.

The world to come promises to be a culinary extravaganza. That being said, the rabbis do not want Jews to forget that there are myriad delicious foods available for consumption in this world. In fact, these very permitted foods combine to form the diet necessary for entrance into the buffet found in the world to come. A good rabbinic Jew should not completely forsake this world. To reformulate a famous biblical pseudo-quotations: eat all rabbinically permitted foods, drink all rabbinically permitted drinks, and be merry in all rabbinically permitted manners, for tomorrow you die in this world, but through engaging in a rabbinically permitted lifestyle, you will live eternally in the world to come.

**DINING IN THE WORLD TO COME**

Though proper diet merits one entrance into the world to come, upon arrival, two important culinary changes occur: (1) previously forbidden foods are now
permitted, and (2) previously mythical foods are now existent. Taken together, this means that the world to come features a cornucopia of cuisines unimaginable in this world.

The world to come is a realm of reversals. The wicked are punished; the good are rewarded; and perhaps most shockingly of all, nonkosher food is now kosher. In a fascinating reversal, foods forbidden to Jews in this world will be permitted in the world to come. The reward reaped by the pious rabbinic Jew for not eating nonkosher food in this world, therefore, is not only entrance into the world to come, but the opportunity to enjoy these formerly forbidden foodstuffs for eternity. As Leviticus Rabbah 13:3 makes abundantly clear: Why are Jews commanded not to eat forbidden food in this world?

[A] In order that you may eat it in the time to come.

[B] For this reason, Moses cautioned Israel, and said to them:

[C] “These are the living things [ha-ḥayyah] that you may eat” (Lev 11:2).15

The time to come, in Hebrew la’atid labo’, is a common variant rabbinic term for the world to come. This text contains another future-food-related exegesis of Leviticus 11:2, wherein the divine doctor is now the divine teacher. Acting on behalf of God, Moses declares only some foods suitable for ingestion by the Israelites in order to teach Israel the vital rabbinic virtue of self-restraint.16 To observe the rabbinic food laws is therefore to embody rabbinic theology relating to diet, eschatology, and ethics. Israel must refrain from placing pork on its plate in this world in order to cultivate self-restraint; and, in doing so, Israel shall enjoy piles of pork on its plate in the world to come. Or, to pun a common English idiom: a piggy saved is a piggy earned.

In fact, the Hebrew word for pig, ḥazir, contains this very lesson hidden within it etymologically. “Why is [pig] called by the name ḥazir? Because it is destined to restore [leḥaḥazir] greatness and sovereignty to its rightful owner.”17 In this text, “pig” stands in for all nonkosher animals. However, casting the pig to play this role is quite important. In antiquity, as in today, pig is understood to represent the most nonkosher animal. It therefore often serves as a synecdoche for the entire category of “nonkosher.” Further, “pig” was a common rabbinic metonym for Rome, Romanness, and Roman authority.18

So Rome, or “The Pig,” currently possesses greatness and sovereignty. However, that is only in this world. In the world to come, greatness and sovereignty will be restored to their rightful owner, the Jews. And how does the Hebrew word for pig, ḥazir, teach this lesson? In Hebrew, the infinitive “to
restore” is lehahazir. Pig, ḥazir, and “to restore,” lehahazir, therefore share the same Hebrew root letters, ḥ-z-r, a linguistic connection that the rabbis also pun in other texts. This shared root is understood to be instructive: in this world, Jews, who cannot eat pig, are ruled by Rome, or “The Pig.” As non-Jews, however, Romans cannot transcend this world; as such, “The Pig” shall not enter into the world to come. In the world to come, a world without “The Pig,” Jews will once again rule themselves. Restored to power, Jews may then eat pig, which represents both protein and power, both now rightfully theirs. But today, in this world, both the literal and the figurative pig is best avoided.

As we have just seen, the world to come features a smorgasbord that would put even the fanciest Las Vegas buffet to shame. In addition to famously nonkosher foods like pork and shellfish, the righteous, deserving diners in the world to come will be allowed to dine on formerly mythical beasts, like the Behemoth, a land creature; the Leviathan, a sea creature; and the lesser-known Ziz, a bird. According to some traditions, God created these mythical creatures for the specific future purpose of feeding those who merit entrance into the world to come. According to another tradition, found on b. Bava Batra 74b–75a, God created male and female Leviathans and Behemoths and then realized that, should they mate, they and their kin would be capable of complete world domination. (They are, after all, enormous sea and land creatures.) Turning lemons into future lemonade, God castrated both the male Leviathan and the male Behemoth, and then dealt with their potential mates: in the case of the Leviathan, Mrs. Leviathan is killed; in the case of the Behemoth, Mrs. Behemoth is “cooled,” which suggests a removal of her sexual drive, rendering her functionally sterile. This text implies that the male Leviathan and the male Behemoth are allowed to roam the world, without companion or mate. They cannot propagate; they can only wait.

The female Leviathan and the female Behemoth, however, are both “preserved for the righteous in the time to come.” Further, the future banquet at which the Leviathan’s flesh shall be served is understood to have a specific guest list: not just Jews, but talmidei hakhamim, or rabbinic scholars. The remainder of the Leviathan carcass will be sold in the Jerusalem markets, suggesting that nonscholars may enter into the world to come and that Jerusalem will still hold markets in the world to come, but also implying that if one wishes to have a seat at the best table and to eat the best food for eternity, then he should aspire to a life of Torah study. As is a common practice throughout rabbinic literature, the rabbis once again remind their audience of the importance of busying oneself in the study of rabbinic texts. Otherwise,
even if you are righteous enough to merit entrance into the world to come, you will spend eternity shopping for and eating second-rate cuts of Leviathan and Behemoth meat.

Further, according to Leviticus Rabbah 22:10:

[A] Rabbi Menahhem and Rabbi Bebai and Rabbi Aḥa and Rabbi Yoḥanan [said] in the name of Rabbi Yonatan:25

[B] As compensation for what I have forbidden you [in this world], I have permitted you [in the world to come].

[C] As compensation for the prohibition of fishes,26 the Leviathan will be a pure fish.27

[D] As compensation for the prohibition of fowl,28 the Ziz will be a pure bird. . . .

[E] And why do they call it “Ziz”?

[F] Because it has many kinds of tastes, [the taste of] this [zeh] and [the taste of] that [zeh].

[G] As compensation for the prohibition of beasts [behemah], the Behemoth [will be eaten on] a thousand mountains.29

The rabbis imagine God as offering what psychologists term delayed gratification, in which a mild pleasure or small reward now is deferred in order to receive a significantly greater pleasure or reward at a later time.30 The divine reward for following biblical food taboos was built into the system by God at Creation. This conceptualization provides a subtle rabbinic rationalization for unjustified biblical culinary regulations. Why should a Jew not eat a fish without fins and scales or a biblically forbidden bird, such as the raven, in this world? Because to do so is to forfeit forever an opportunity to dine on an even better meal in the world to come. Why eat a McDonald’s cheeseburger today when you can feast on Behemoth burgers on “a thousand mountains” for all of eternity? Why eat bland chicken not slaughtered according to rabbinic regulations, when you know that one day the nuanced flavors of the Ziz will caress your palate? These mythical creatures provide a sense of purpose to unjustified biblical law. They whet the theological palate.

CONCLUSION

As a realm of reversal, retribution, and redemption, the world to come rebalances the rabbinic scales of justice. It also serves as a mechanism to explain
the unexplainable in this world. This is especially true in regard to the biblical food laws. The rabbis divide all biblical commandments into two categories: (1) *miṣpatim*, which are based on logical principles; and (2) *hukim*, which are illogical in nature. The rabbis categorize the biblical food laws as *hukim*, and hence, though they must be followed like any other biblical commandment, they lack a logical justification. A rabbinic Jew must engage in these practices simply because God said so.

The role that diet plays in regard to dining into and dining in the world to come therefore serves as an important rabbinic means of justification for a seemingly illogical set of divine commandments in this world. Though illogical, dietary rules are central to daily practice; for this reason, that which is unjustified demands justification. The function of dietary practice in dining into and dining in the world to come offers significant explanatory value for the function of dining practices in this world.

Faithfully following these illogical divine commandments promises a good rabbinic Jew an opportunity to earn the golden ticket, allowing entrance into Chef God’s eternal banquet of mythical and magical mouthwatering foods. Much like Charlie in Willie Wonka’s Chocolate Factory, a Jew in this world is presented with temptation. After all, according to one rabbinic source:


[B] But [rather, a person should say]: I want [to perform this prohibited act, but] what can I do, for my father in heaven decreed concerning me thusly?

As Charlie discovered inside Willie Wonka’s Chocolate Factory, rejecting one illicit offer can lead to a far greater reward. Acknowledging gastronomic temptation, the proper rabbinic Jew must make the theologically correct decision and delay his or her gratification in this world. By doing so, the faithful rabbinic Jew merits entrance into the world to come, wherein he or she reaps the reward of delayed gratification: not only is the formerly prohibited now permitted, but previously unimaginable delicacies are now on the dinner menu.

### NOTES

1. I discuss this process in *The Jewish Dietary Laws in Late Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). The core of this essay draws from a section therein (see 135–39).

2. The plural pronoun *[la-hem]* here either anticipates the application of the parable (wherein the dying person is compared to the other nations), is addressed to the ones
taking care of the patient, is a typographical error (the singular form appears in one manuscript), or the plural form should appear in both instances (as it does in some manuscripts) and merely suggests the general application of this parable.


4. Though in a different context, a similar metaphor is used by the early Christian author Augustine (On the Profit of Believing, 29).

5. Some rabbinic slaughter regulations are derived from the same wording of this passage (e.g., b. Hullin 42a).

6. For other discussions about Gentiles eating everything only in this world and only Jews entering the world to come, see Pesiqta Rabbati 16:6, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1.9.1. Converts receive entrance to the world to come and can partake of the food therein, as is implied in regard to the Leviathan in y. Megillah 1:13, 72b (see y. Megillah 3:2, 74a, y. Sanhedrin 10:6, 29c). On this text, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The Conversion of Antoninus,” in The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture I (ed. Peter Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 141–72.


8. t. Berakhot 6:18 (ed. Lieberman 1:38); see also b. Menahot 43b.

9. On the rabbinic limitation of the applicability of kosher laws only to Jews, see Jordan D. Rosenblum, Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 68–73. For a text that depicts Gentiles unsuccessfully trying to alter their diet in order to enter the world to come, see Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1.9.1.

10. Speaking more generally, b. Yoma 39a notes that if one makes himself impure in this world, then he is impure also in the world to come (an exegesis of Lev 11:43); in contrast, if one makes himself sanctified in this world, then he is sanctified also in the world to come.

11. y. Qiddushin 4:12, 66b (ed. Schäfer and Becker 3:432); see also b. Eruvin 54a. On making sure to eat food that one likes (perhaps with repercussions in the world to come), see Avot d’Rabbi Natan A26:19. For further discussion of one’s yearly food budget, see b. Betzah 15b–16a.
12. This belief, which appears often in rabbinic texts (e.g., Pešiqa Rabbati 41:5, b. Ketubbot 111b, and several texts noted in this essay), is not unique to the rabbis. Other Jews in antiquity held the same belief, though each group interpreted this future practice based on its own theological assumptions. For example, see the messianic banquet described in the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., 1Q28a 2:11–22). It should be noted that not all rabbis agreed with these views. For example, Rav argues that there is neither eating nor drinking in the world to come (b. Berakhot 17a). Most rabbis, however, presume not only eating and drinking, but sumptuous feasting therein.


14. This “quote” jumbles Isaiah 22:13 and Ecclesiastes 8:15.

15. Ed. Margulies 279 (emphasis added). Also see Midrash Tehillim 146:4, which contains traditions both supporting and arguing against the permission of eating in the world to come flesh that is forbidden in this world. I thank Dov Weiss for this reference.


17. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1.9.1.


21. See Pešiqa Rabbati 48:3; Ballentine, Conflict Myth, 165.

22. b. Bava Batra 74b. See Ballentine, Conflict Myth, 163–64. The term “preserved” is different for each animal in this text, as more literally the female Leviathan is “salted” and the female Behemoth is “kept/guarded.” Perhaps Mrs. Leviathan is “salted” because she is killed (at least in this world), and salting is a common method for preserving meat.

23. b. Bava Batra 75a. On converts eating Leviathan meat, see above, n. 6.

24. Throughout, I am careful to use the gendered pronouns that most accurately reflect ancient rabbinic opinions. For example, I use the male pronoun here because the rabbis
gendered Torah study as a male activity (see Satlow, “Try to Be a Man”). However, when the gender is not specific or can include either gender, then I use gender neutral and/or inclusive pronouns.

25. The names of these rabbis are not consistent in the manuscripts. On the redemptive value for citing the names of those who uttered a rabbinic tradition, see b. Hullin 104b.


27. On the Leviathan as a pure fish, also see, e.g., b. Hullin 67b.

28. In Leviticus 11:13–19 and Deuteronomy 14:11–20. Biblical texts offer no explicit criteria for inclusion or exclusion of fowl from the category of pure (and hence permitted for ingestion). Later interpreters claim that the category of excluded fowl are birds of prey (e.g., b. Hullin 65a [commenting on m. Hullin 3:6], b. Niddah 50b).


31. See Sifra Ahare Mot 13:10 (see also b. Yoma 67b).

32. When I delivered this essay, I had not yet read the recent book by fellow contributor Christine Hayes: What’s Divine About Divine Law?: Early Perspectives (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). In this excellent volume, Hayes contextualizes the claims I make herein within the broader scope of the rabbinic corpus. While we worked in parallel and without knowledge of each other’s recent scholarship, we agree on most related issues. I also would like to thank Christine Hayes for offering useful feedback on the version of this essay that I delivered at the conference.

33. This is a major reason why many of the texts I cite in the body of this essay are from Leviticus Rabbah, a rabbinic commentary on the book of Leviticus, which contains the locus classicus for the biblical food laws (Lev 11; see also Deut 14).

34. Sifra Qedoshim 11:22 (ed. Weiss 93b).