

Recipe for a Meaningful Year  
Rosh HaShanah 5770  
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The cookbooks in our home have been opened for weeks lining the kitchen counters preparing for the feasts that we call the High Holidays. Sometimes it seems that food is the most central part of our days and our lives. Food Network, Cooking shows, Iron Chefs, nutrition and diet experts- all try to share with us and teach us the right way to cook and to eat.

This summer, the movie “Julie and Julia” made audiences hunger for delightful French cooking with a message about finding meaning and fulfillment in challenging times. The movie follows the lives of two women separated by 50 years but in similar situations- the famous chef Julia Child, as a young newly married American lost in France, and Julie Powell, a young newly married secretary fielding depressing phone calls for the government in a very small cubicle next to the site of Ground Zero just months after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Julia Child began her quest to find meaning in a foreign land by going to cooking school- le cordon blue. She quickly learned that the key to cooking was courage and humor- the courage to try something new like flipping a pancake out of a frying pan in mid-air. Julia Child was fearless in the kitchen. And it was clearly evident in watching her cooking shows, she had fun and truly great joy from cooking. She believed in the basics like butter or for us kosher cooks pareve margarine and following recipe rules but always insisting to never be afraid of following your convictions.

Julie Powell on the other hand was timid, stuck in her little cubicle- unable to emerge from her difficult work. Determined to find fulfillment and meaning, Julie challenged herself to cook every single one of Julia Child’s recipes in her book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in the span of one year and to write a blog or internet web log journal of the experience. In Julie’s opening internet posting- she wrote- “government drone by day, renegade foodie by night.” Julie was looking for a challenge, a way to assert herself in new directions and to grow. She found it in 365 days with 524 recipes. The most difficult recipe and the most symbolic of her struggle was the final one- which was to bone a duck. Now, this is no easy task- and she needed strength and courage to complete the challenge. With the recipe guiding her and Julia Child’s words- take your knife and confront the duck- Julie Powell learned to be fearless in the kitchen and cooked a delicious dinner- completing her year’s project and finding the true joy of cooking. Julie learned from Julia Child that to find possibility, happiness and fulfillment- requires the courage to take on new challenges.

In these turbulent times, where is that fulfillment, possibility and happiness? Our friends, our family and even our own situations have changed this year. Within our own congregation, many have lost jobs or been cut-back and others question whether their jobs will be there tomorrow.

College graduates have returned home instead of moving to New York, Chicago or DC in search of temporary employment to pay their loans and begin their career in fields they had not planned. Thankfully many of us are still employed and working hard with increased pressures to produce and succeed. Sitting next to you, your friend may now be relying on food stamps or meals from the synagogue, family or friends to fill their stomachs. Across the nation and world, hunger is an ever-growing problem. In America, there are over 36 million suffering from hunger including 12 million children. This year alone, 10 % of all American homes were food insecure meaning at hunger lines or near. So, how can we find sustenance when hunger is so prevalent? Where do we find happiness? What can bring fulfillment to our souls and help bring sustenance to the world?

Our prayers today lay out a challenge for us not unlike the story of Julie and Julia- to have courage, to deepen our Jewish connection, to lift ourselves up and find fulfillment this year. What is your Jewish soul food that will nourish and challenge you this coming year? I will put on my chef's hat and apron to dish up for you- a savory and hopefully inspiring morsel- that is not intended for your stomach but for your mind and soul. I present to you- A recipe for a year filled with meaning.

First you take **flour**- or in Hebrew *kemach*: There is a wise teaching in Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Sages, "*Im Ein Kemach, Ein Torah v'im Ein Torah Ein Kemach*- If there is no food, there can be no Torah and likewise if there is no Torah, there can be no food." The simple explanation of this teaching is that one cannot study on an empty stomach. The rabbis expand the commentary on this line to teach that this is both referring to the physical sustenance and nourishment we receive from food but also the spiritual sustenance we receive from Judaism. Without the fulfillment that comes from Jewish traditions, from prayer and study, observing rituals like lighting Shabbat candles, keeping kosher, visiting the sick and helping the needy, then no food in the world can truly give us sustenance. We read in the Torah- man cannot live on bread alone and that is because we also need food for our soul. Another way to read this passage is that the word *kemach* or food can be translated as a job or livelihood- a bread-winner. Without a job or livelihood, is it possible to truly live a meaningful life- imbued with Torah, community and connection to God?

Next, slice some **carrots**: There is an ancient Sephardic custom first discussed in the Talmud to hold a Rosh HaShana seder- an arrangement of special foods to be eaten that have a linguistic connection or word play for a blessing for the new year- for example, one should eat carrots- in Hebrew *gezer* which sounds like *g'zar* decree- so that we may avoid the harsh decree of heaven. It is called the *Seder Yehi Ratzon*- may it be God's will- for just like today's world of instability not knowing what tomorrow will bring, what will be in our bank accounts, our health care situation- we eat foods to bring our soul and tummy strength and security in times of indigestion and emptiness.

Now add some **honey** (*d'vash*): To bring joy and happiness for the upcoming year, we eat honey in all its sweetness dripping through all the days- on our challah, our apples

and our lives. We must always look for the good in a situation and good will come back to us- live your life with honey tinted glasses.

Platter a **fish head**: Last year our oldest son- then a kindergartener at Schechter- made a request- to eat a fish head for Rosh HaShana. Now he is your typical kid into grossities and the like- but he was teaching us about the *Yehi Ratzon seder* when some Jews even use a sheep head on the new year's table- reciting the blessing- "*Yehi Ratzon*- May it be your will God that we will be "*Rosh v'lo zanav*" heads and not tails, leaders and not followers." The custom emphasizes that we should always use our head - praying on this day of the *rosh*- the head of the year. A fish is seen as a symbol of fertility and protection- a fish's eyes never close even when they sleep- and so too we pray that God watches over us every day and every night. The custom of serving fish heads is not prevalent any longer because the Hebrew word for fish- *dag*- is similar to the word *dagah* which means to worry- and we certainly have enough worries. The fish head stands for courage- Julie and Julia's kind of courage- the strength to open our eyes to the challenges of the next year and to use our heads to conquer them without fear and not to turn tail. Our tradition teaches that we should arise each morning with the vigor of a lion and be bold to bring justice like a leopard.

Add a **pomegranate** (*rimon*): For many years now, I hold a food challenge for our Confirmation class to count the seeds in a pomegranate. Tradition holds that the delectable fruit native to Israel has 613 seeds, the same number of mitzvot in the Torah. So far, the closest we have come is 620 seeds and a lot of red-stained shirts, regardless- the pomegranate seeds are sweet inside but protected by a hard peel- similarly- we should be strong but let our sweetness shine forth. When we eat the *rimon* at the Seder we pray- *Yehi Ratzon*, May we be as full of good deeds as the pomegranate is full of seeds. The Rabbis teach that learning leads to good deeds. To add meaning to our lives, we need to open up to Jewish learning, by studying Torah, reading Jewish books, listening to Jewish music to grow in our rich traditions. Through our Weingold Jewish Learning Series starting in October, our vast array of books, CDS and DVDs available in our libraries, Thursday morning classes, and one on one learning with the clergy, we can help bring you Torah this year.

Throw in some **beets**- yum- The rabbis advise that we eat leeks or in Hebrew *karti* so that our enemies- *y'kartu*- are cut off thereby letting us strengthen our friendships and be more loving. We should also eat a beet- *selek*- so that our enemies *yistalku*- using the word play on beets- that those who have beaten us- will beat it out of town this year and let us laugh and love in peace. Laughter and love start with acts of chesed- kindness. Our chesed committee which is looking for more volunteers is working hard to provide meals to congregants in crisis from illness, loss or financial hardships (and if you are in hard times please come to us and ask for help because we are in this together as a family). The chesed committee is also continuing to cultivate our relationships with Cleveland inner-city school children who rely more and more on our donations and reaching out to Jewish American soldiers serving overseas.

The last ingredient in our recipe for a meaningful year is a **new fruit** you have not eaten all year so you can recite the prayer *shehechyanu*. You see the last ingredient is gratitude. In Jewish tradition, we end a meal with words of blessing- *Birkat Hamazon*- the grace after meals. This ritual is based on the Torah's teaching- "v'achalta v'savata uveirachta- When you eat and you are satisfied then bless God." The Torah acknowledges the satisfaction we can find with food and then prescribes us to not simply sit in that moment of zen after a delicious meal- but to respond to it by thanking God in gratitude for the opportunity of achieving fulfillment and satisfaction. The *shehechyanu* prayer is one way we remember that what we accomplish in life- we do not accomplish alone but with God's help. Join us for prayer services- or find some time to learn prayers from Cantor Shifman on CD, mp3, the internet or in class- we daven here every morning, every evening, Shabbat and holidays- challenge yourself to come to one more service each month to show your thanks to God for the many blessings in your life.

My recipe for a year filled with meaning- honey for joy, a fish head for courage, pomegranates for study, beets for lovingkindness and any new fruit for thankfulness. Does this seem too hard- happiness, courage, Jewish study, kindness and gratitude?

Just remember Julie and her duck. With courage, confront the new year to find meaning and fulfillment. *Shana Tova U'Metukah*- Wishing you sweet year filled with satisfaction, inspiration and meaning and Bon Appetit!