A kosher Lent

By Debra Dean Murphy
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There are so many sources of wistful regret to choose from, so many different clocks to mark time. — Elizabeth Ehrlich, *Miriam's Kitchen*

With the imposition of ashes imminent—this stark ritual signalling the onset of a season starker still in its confrontations with mortality and its fleshly (and fleshy) deprivations—I am reading about food. Glorious food.

Miriam's Kitchen is the 1997 memoir of Elizabeth Ehrlich, a smart, skeptical, secular Jew who, in her mid-30s, found herself, despite herself, drawn to *kashrut*—the dietary laws of Judaism. Her gentle yet resolute mother-in-law, Miriam, and the memories of her grandmothers' kosher Brooklyn kitchens beckon Erhlich toward a way of eating—a way of life—that causes her to wonder: "have I consented to my own oppression?"

But the food. God in heaven, the food.

Honey cake and *mandelbrot,* mushroom barley soup and noodle kugel, potato pudding and summer squash, cheese danish and chocolate sour cream cake. (Did I mention cake?) And more than a dozen other dishes, recipes included. (Once when I taught this book in a Women and the Bible course at an all-women's college, we brought many of these dishes to class one day. I remember how text, tradition, food, faith, and gender—and the quotidian realities of their complicated convergence—came to life for us in the extravagant meal we shared).

And as Lent arrives I think about the many ways we often regard food as an enemy. There is, of course, something toxic about much of our contemporary relationship to food—the literal poisoning of our bodies with chemicals and additives, the alarming rise in chronic conditions such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and coronary disease. We are prone to promiscuity in our eating; we can be mindless gluttons.

Not for nothing, the day before Ash Wednesday is known as "Fat Tuesday," but how does this observance make any sense in a culture of excess where all meals easily

become feasts of overconsumption?

A kosher Lent—a fit or proper Lent—might mean giving up the practices of individualizing—in mostly negative ways—our relationship to food: Shared abundance—not private obsession in the form of, say, counting fat grams or giving up chocolate—might be the better Lenten discipline.

Ehrlich makes this observation:

> Kashrut*, I believe, gave Jesus his great opening. He ate with the common people in their homes, when other learned teachers wouldn't. Poor folk might not have had enough wooden bowls, ceramic vessels, and cooking implements to adhere perfectly to dietary laws. They might not have enough knowledge or resources to make their kitchens kosher enough for the standards of a truly learned man. Jesus swallowed his own squeamishness, perhaps, sat down and broke bread. You can get to heaven without all of this, he taught. I can see the appeal.*
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> *But oddly enough, and at the same time, trying to be kosher confronts one with the ultimate impossibility of perfection. Finally you have to live with your accommodations, the limits of being human. As with a calculus problem, the solution may draw close to an imaginary line, but never quite get there. At least, I'm sure I never will.*

Her last point here—about living with limits—is Lenten theology at its best. We are finite creatures. We are dust and to dust we shall return. Yet in our finititude, in the boundaries set by our being human, lie the possibilities for experiencing the fullness of life we were created for. During Lent we ponder this paradox.

But too often we make the Lenten experience an exercise in personal heroics–as if it were a solo trip, a competition, even. Whatever challenges we face in the wilderness of our own temptations, we are pilgrims together on the journey to resurrection light and joy. Sharing our lives, sharing food (did I mention cake?): fitting ways to observe a holy Lent.

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