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OUR FAITH IN THE PLANET

Why we should all waste less food

By Dr Jonathan Straight

A widely circulated statistic shows that we waste over one-third of all food produced. This fact is almost unbelievable, but it is also very easy to be in denial about. It is easy to think that all this wasted food is being generated in other parts of the world and that the food wasted here in the UK comes from growers, producers, and retailers.

While it is true that there is significant waste in every sector, research shows that 70% of the food wasted in the UK comes from within our own homes. The amount we waste is staggering – 6.7 million tonnes each year. It is easy to say this quickly, making the number seem less stark. At least 4.5 million tonnes of this food could have been eaten, three meals a week, every week, for every single member of the population ... binned. And the UK is no better or worse than any other country; developing or developed, a similar amount of perfectly good food gets wasted everywhere.

The most wasted food in the home in this country is potatoes, then bread, then apples. Almost half of all salad purchased is chucked away uneaten. This discarded food is worth £14 billion, so at the most basic level we are wasting money, but that is only the tip of the iceberg. Food waste makes up 19% of municipal waste, so it also costs us in our local taxes. But this still does not tell the whole story. In wasting food, we also waste all the transport in the supply chain, the packaging, the energy used to produce it and the embedded water used in growing the food or manufacturing the finished product.

But there is still a more significant reason why we should stop wasting food. Food waste feeds climate change. If food waste were a country, it would be the third biggest emitter of greenhouse gasses after the USA and China, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. If we stopped wasting food as a planet, we would cut 8% of our emissions at a stroke.

So how do we change? Awareness is the first stage, and practical solutions are in abundant supply online. Search online for Love Food Hate Waste, for starters. It is so easy to waste less by buying more sensibly and ensuring we eat everything we buy, safely storing anything we don't need to use immediately.

By extending this mindset wherever else we can, less food is wasted. It only took one conversation to ensure that any kiddush leftovers at my Shul in Leeds started going to local homeless charities instead of going into the bin – so simple and with a positive impact for the Shul, people in need and the planet. I hope this short article might inspire others to consider this issue. If we all wasted a bit less, the overall impact would be huge.

Dr Jonathan Straight is a board advisor to Surplus Group, which runs the Approved Food online supermarket. He is chairman of the international waste management charity WasteAid and is a British Library Advisory Council member.