

# A CUP OF TEA WITH:

## RENA REISER

**OCCUPATION:**  
Intuitive Eating Counselor

**AGE:** 33

**YEARS IN THE FIELD:** 3

**PASSION:**  
Helping Jewish women live their truth

**WISHES PEOPLE WOULD KNOW THAT:**  
although intuitive eating doesn't have the same hype as dieting, it's an evidence-based lifestyle choice that really works.



Rena Reiser has always advocated healthy eating. Originally from Toronto, Rena and her husband moved to the northern Israeli city of Karmiel, where her husband runs a *kollel*. Although she's been working with women for approximately a decade, her epiphany happened three years ago.

"When I started working with clients, they would say things to me like, 'Just give me a food plan, tell me what to eat, and I'll eat it.' When I would tell them to listen to their body and they would know how much and when to eat, because the body knows best, they would look at me blankly."

At the same time that Rena was receiving such responses from her clients, she was experiencing her own inner confusion. "On the one hand," she says, "I was an intuitive kind of person. But on the other hand, I found myself listening to external rules about what I should be eating. I found that food was constantly on my mind. When I realized that something within me as well as within my clients needed to change and I started doing some research, I came across the idea of intuitive eating. It didn't take long for me to realize that this was what I had been missing all along."

For Rena, the missing puzzle piece to what she viewed as the ideal lifestyle was intuitive eating. "While there were certain principles that I knew myself, others blew my mind. I started incorporating this mindset into my own life and eventually trained in it. Today, this is what I teach women: how to listen to their bodies so they know when and how much to eat."

Intuitive eating is an evidence-based, weight-neutral approach to healthy eating. "It's not about losing, gaining, or maintaining weight," she explains. "Instead, it focuses on healthy eating, irrespective of a person's weight. The goal of

my coaching is to help the person regain her own authority over what her body needs, in what quantities, and when."

"Why don't we know how to eat intuitively on our own?" I wonder aloud.

"All people, with the exception of those with severe medical conditions, are born as intuitive eaters," Rena explains. "But somewhere along the way, during infancy, childhood, or even in our adult years, we begin to rely on an external authority as to how much we should be eating, when, etc. This can be a parent, a nutritionist, or a generic dieting plan, which disconnects us from our intuition."

"When we listen to external sources as to what we should be eating, as opposed to following our own intuition, we lose touch with what our body is telling us. The most common source of external thinking is diets. If someone has a medical condition, of course they should follow the guidance of a medical professional, but a healthy person following a diet for weight loss is giving himself over to an external authority, which leads to disordered eating," Rena claims. "The latest statistic is that 70% of women are dealing with disordered eating, and men are catching up."

Disordered eating manifests itself when food becomes a moral issue, such as when a person tells herself, "If I broke my diet, I'm not good." The person may

also have obsessive thoughts about which foods are okay, or just generally think about food. Another manifestation of disordered eating is when a person feels she can't go to a *simchah* or somebody else's house because there might be food there that she can't eat and that will cause anxiety.

According to Rena, the solution to disordered eating resulting from dieting is to learn to listen to our body's cues. "When we see a number like 70%, it gives us a picture of the sheer amount people who have tried different ways of eating and haven't been successful at it. There will always be a minority who succeeds, which makes it alluring."

"When people first hear about the concept of intuitive eating," Rena admits, "it's frightening to them. 'So you expect me to take authority?' they ask. Depending on their age, they may have been led externally for many decades. It's only natural that fear is the first emotion they encounter."

But when people are fed up with a lifestyle of chasing a constantly-fluctuating weight, they're ready to take the plunge. This is not a quick fix, Rena notes, but it makes sense, and leads to *menuchas hanefesh*.

"So you literally give no food plan to your clients?" I ask Rena, perplexed. "No food plan," she confirms.

So what is the work Rena does with her clients? "It's largely mindset work," she shares. "Intuitive eating focuses on dealing with hunger and fullness cues, as well as satisfaction, which means to eat foods that feel good, that give us the satisfaction that food should give us—not a dry piece of chicken."

Another factor in intuitive eating is the emotional element: knowing how to deal with emotions without using food, learning how to challenge negative thoughts, and feeling so secure about one's food choices that others can tell you whatever they want about food and your body but you remain the authority.

"There's also the element of respecting ourselves," Rena adds, "of being grateful for the parts of body that we have,

even if we don't love them. Most people today know the basics of nutrition, thus much of the work that needs to be done is to get rid of dieting thoughts and negative body image. They don't need me to teach them nutrition."

Rena shares a case in point. One of her clients, who runs a baking business, used to have donuts lining her counters all the time. During the course of her work with Rena, she admitted that she would feel "defeated" by the pastries. They'd be there calling her name, and she couldn't stay strong enough to resist the temptation. "When I started working with her," Rena relates, "she asked me early on, 'So will you tell me that I shouldn't keep them in my house?' And I said, 'No. Right now you might feel that that's what you need to do, and if you feel that, do so. Eventually, you will get to a place where you'll have donuts lining your counter and you just won't care.'"

The client was skeptical. After working together with Rena for three months and learning to listen to her body, she reported: "I have donuts on my counter and every once in a while I'll take one, put it in a plate, and eat it at the table—maybe even half, and then move on. My life doesn't revolve around donuts anymore."

How does Rena do that? "My usual program for each client takes about three and a half months. We speak every other week, and in the intervals I have them listen to recordings."

When Rena speaks with a client, it's not to offer instruction regarding what and how to eat. She doesn't even provide a rigid structure, such as eating three meals a day. "I give a basic structure to make sure that they're feeding themselves consistently, but beyond that it's the client's call."

Rena makes sure to point out an important note of caution. "People look at intuitive eating and erroneously turn it into a hunger-fullness diet. 'I'll eat when I'm hungry and stop when I'm full,' they say. But that generally misses an important factor. When someone's been dieting for so long and is used to listening to an external authority, their internal cues and signals such as hunger and fullness aren't entirely gone, but they're very quiet and subtle. It's hard to pick up on them. So if I just tell them to eat when they're hungry, many clients will eat for the first time only at about 1 or 2 in the afternoon. They don't hear their hunger signals until then. Getting onto a consistent eating pattern enables the signals to wake up, and that takes some time."

"What happens if someone wakes up in the middle of the night and feels hungry?" I ask. "Do you tell them to eat?"

"The short answer is yes," says Rena. "But my long answer is that sometimes it's hard to differentiate between hunger and emotions. Are you really hungry, or is something bothering you, and you perceive it as hunger?"

I ask Rena if people report weight loss to her. "I definitely don't focus on it. Intuitive eating is weight-neutral, which means that it's unrelated to weight gain, loss, or maintenance. It does something different to every person, but it brings everyone to a stable weight."

How can people stay the same if they haven't been listening to their cues for so long, and now they suddenly are?



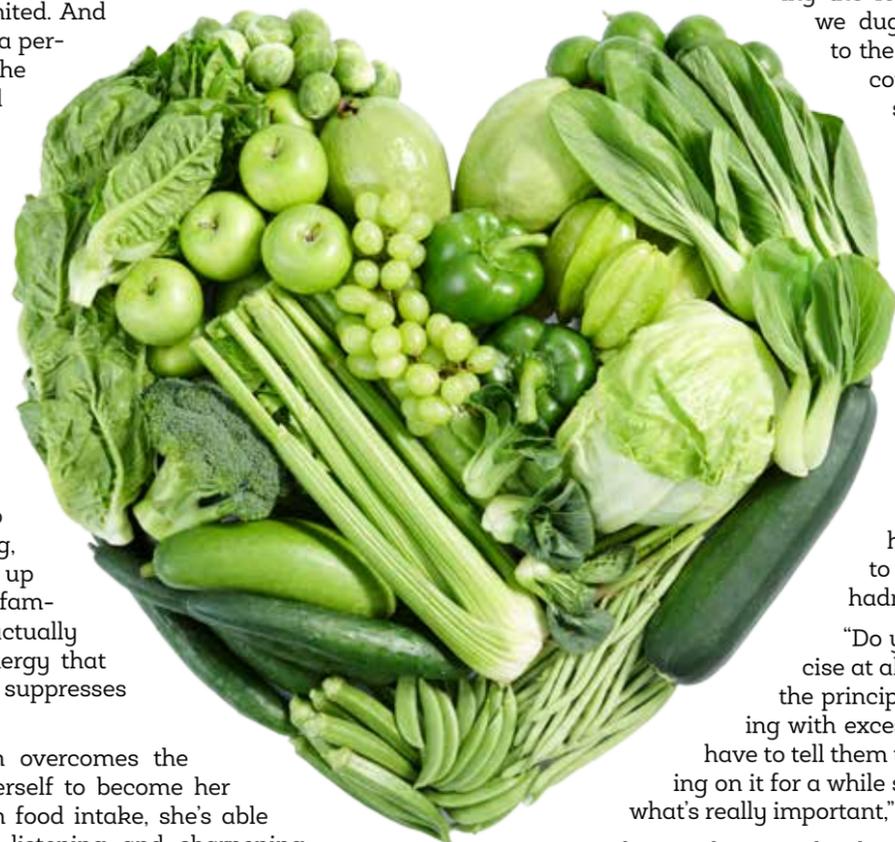
“The years of dieting can cause a person’s set point to go up,” Rena posits. According to her, dieting is considered any counting of grams, calories, points, any food rules that people have, such as “I can’t eat after this hour,” or “I have to exercise in order to eat that treat,” as well as limiting certain food groups not for medical purposes.

“The statistics are pretty depressing when it comes to the efficacy of diets,” says Rena. “After five years, only 5-15% of dieters are successful at maintaining their weight loss. It’s the initial success that gives people the push to keep trying, but 85-95% of the population is unable to sustain long-term weight loss. They go off their diet, gain weight drastically, and then their desire to lose weight is reignited. And the more attempts a person has at dieting, the less success she’ll have.”

So, according to the latest evidence and research that Rena reviewed, going on diets leads to weight gain “because our bodies are really smart. Hashem created them in a wonderful way—if we try to suppress our eating, the body will catch up with us. It thinks a famine’s coming, so it actually holds on to the energy that we feed it, which suppresses the metabolism.”

Once the person overcomes the fear of allowing herself to become her body’s authority on food intake, she’s able to gradually start listening and sharpening her cues. “The results are so much more than just how the person will look,” Rena says of intuitive eating. “It’s about being able to live a life that’s truly meaningful because we’re no longer plagued by obsessive thoughts around food and our body. We’re able to take that energy and that mental space and use them for things that are truly important to us, whether it’s our family or work. We’re able to really celebrate the yom tov without focusing on foods or whether we gained a pound or two.”

What does Rena’s eating schedule look like as the intuitive eating coach? “At this point,” she shares, “every day is different. On average, I probably end up eating three regular-sized meals and two small meals. I definitely concentrate on nutrition, but most people working on intuitive eating know everything about what each meal should consist of, so that’s not our focus. Also, it doesn’t feel good to eat non-nourishing food all day long. Even if they know noth-



ing about nutrition, most people intuitively know how to have some sort of balance. And once they hone in to what their body is telling them, they end up stopping to indulge in junk foods.”

One phrase Rena has been using a lot recently is that many people know the how-tos about eating, but the real work goes beyond that. She offers an example to illustrate.

“I have a client who had a tremendous struggle with figuring out what to eat for lunch. The how-to would be to give her suggestions for meals. But her question wasn’t about specific foods; it was more about getting to the root of what was holding her back from choosing the foods she likes. After we dug deeper, she came to the conclusion that she couldn’t have what she really wanted, like sandwiches or crackers, because they were too carb-heavy—something she’d been telling herself for years as a result of the many diets she’d been on. She finally figured out that the source of her frustration was this ‘rule’ that she had been holding on to for so long, and she hadn’t even realized it.”

“Do you encourage exercise at all?” I ask. “It is one of the principles, but when working with excessive dieters, I often have to tell them to stop hyper-focusing on it for a while so they can focus on what’s really important,” Rena answers.

When I ask Rena what her passion is, she asks for a moment of quiet. She takes a deep breath and then provides her answer: helping Jewish women live their truth. I wonder about the process she did in that moment of silence, and she gladly shares. “During this time, I asked myself, ‘What do I love doing? What’s coming to me?’ Not, ‘What will look nice on paper?’ or ‘What do I want people to think is my passion?’ And it came to me. Knowing that there’s no pressure and that it’ll come in the right time also helps us access what we’re truly thinking.”

In the same vein, in order to access the voices of hunger and fullness, there’s an element of mindfulness that comes from being in the present moment. “When we finally learn to listen to our bodies, everyday life becomes exhilarating. We’re in charge—which is where we’re meant to be.” ♥

Rena can be contacted through *The Wellspring*.

# AGE WELL

ISSUE 21  
OCTOBER 2017  
TISHREI 5778



## INSIGHT ON SENIORS' EYESIGHT TREATMENT AND PREVENTION OF AMD

SAGE ADVICE KEEPING BUBBY SAFE IN THE KITCHEN