

# Year of Reconstructionism

October, 2021 - Kashrut

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Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah says:  
If there is no Torah study, there is no derech erez (worldly involvement);  
if there is no derech erez, there is no Torah study.  
If there is no wisdom, there is no fear of God;  
if there is no fear of God, there is no wisdom.  
If there is no reason, there is no understanding;  
if there is no understanding, there is no reason.  
If there is no flour, there is no Torah;  
if there is no Torah, there is no flour.  
*-Pirkei Avot 3:21*

רבי אלעזר בן עזריה אומר, אם אין תורה, אין דרך ארץ; אם אין דרך ארץ, אין תורה. אם אין חכמה, אין יראה; אם אין יראה, אין חכמה. אם אין דעת, אין בינה; אם אין בינה, אין דעת. אם אין קמת, אין תורה; אם אין תורה, אין קמת.

## Starting at the Source...Mordechai Kaplan

In sorting out a respectful but voluntary commitment to kashrut, Reconstructionism was an enormous asset. Because it does not represent an “either-or” approach, but allows for and encourages people to find a place on the spectrum of observance, it is possible to begin to sort out where kashrut worked and where it did not.

Mordechai Kaplan's teaching that the ritual commandments are folkways designed to effect identification with the Jewish people led to an understanding that kashrut can be observed in some areas but not others, without inconsistency. As long as the level of observance supports and strengthens identification with the Jewish people, it is a functionally appropriate level of observance....

In a survey in the 1990s of members of Reconstructionist communities, many were surprised to discover that 34 percent reported that they observed kashrut. Of course, since the question was not specific, a wide range of patterns is represented in the affirmative response. (Some joke that for some Reconstructionists, “keeping kosher” means not using Styrofoam!)

I assess the information differently. What the statistic says to me is that 34 percent of Reconstructionists identified kashrut, however defined, as a category of meaning for their Jewish lives. This testifies to the validity of Kaplan's insight that ritual binds us to our people and

supports identity. It also suggests that the daily disciplines relating to food remain opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds to establish some level of kashrut.

Kashrut is a traditional category of meaning whose details often obscure the spiritual power which inheres in observance. Whether beginning with the simple act of saying a blessing over food, or restricting Biblically prohibited foods, or avoiding meat and milk, or setting up a fully kosher kitchen, Reconstructionist Jews should be able to find a level where comfort and meaning intersect to further the growth of our Jewish spirits and of our Jewish bodies.

-Rabbi Richard Hirsch, A Reconstructionist View of Kashrut, *Reconstructionism Today*

### **How Traditions Evolve (A Joke)**

God: Thou shalt not see the kid in its mother's milk. (Exodus 23:19)

Moses: You mean we should not mix meat and milk?

God: Thou shalt not see the kid in its mother's milk. (Exodus 34:26)

Moses: Ah. You mean we should wait three hours between meat and milk!

God: Thou shalt not see the kid in its mother's milk. (Deuteronomy 14:21)

Moses: Got it, God. You mean we should have two complete sets of dishes, one for milk and one for meat.

God: Whatever, Moses. Have it your way.

לֹא-תִבְשֵׁל גְּדִי , בְּחֵלֶב אִמּוֹ .

Thou shalt not see the kid in its mother's milk. (Exodus 23:19)

But why not?!

### **Kosher=Kindness?**

Philo of Alexandria (4th century),

He has forbidden any lamb or kid or other like kind of livestock to be snatched away from its mother before it was weaned... If anyone thinks it good to boil flesh in milk let him do so without cruelty and keeping clear of impiety... The person who boils the flesh of lambs or kids or any other young animal in their mother's milk, shows himself cruelly brutal in character and gelded of compassion.

-On the Virtues, 143-44

### **Maimonides (12th century)**

As for the prohibition against eating meat [boiled] in milk, it is in my opinion not improbable that—in addition to this being undoubtedly very gross food and very filling—idolatry had something to do with it. Perhaps such food was eaten at one of the ceremonies of their cult or at one of their festivals.

-Guide for the Perplexed, 3:48

### **Jacob Milgrom (1990s)**

The common denominator of all these prohibitions is the fusion and confusion of life and death simultaneously. The life-giving process of the mother bird hatching or feeding her young (Deut 22:6-7) should not be the occasion of their joint death. The sacrifice of the newborn may be inevitable, but not for the first week while it is constantly at its mother's breast and never should both the mother and its young be slain at the same time (Leviticus 22:27-8). By the same token, the mother's milk, the life-sustaining food for her kid, should never become associated with its death.

-Leviticus 1-16 (Anchor Bible, vol. 3)

### **Wetting the Blade**

After the Ba'al Shem Tov passed, a new shochet took his place. He was well-learned in all the laws and followed them scrupulously. He sharpened his knife, knew just where to hold the neck, how to make the cut. He noticed, though, that a man would watch him as he slaughtered the chickens, and shake his head in disapproval. After several days, he asked the man what he was doing wrong.

"I wet the blade, I sharpen it, I make the smallest, quickest cut, just as I learned from the Ba'al Shem Tov. What am I doing that's upsetting you?" The man, who remembered watching the Ba'al Shem Tov prepare for and slaughter animals, shook his head.

"It is true, you wet the blade and sharpen it. But where you use water to sharpen your blade, the Ba'al Shem Tov used his own tears."

-Chasidic folktale

### **Rabbi Solomon Efraim Lunchitz**

What was the necessity for the entire procedure of ritual slaughter? For the sake of self-discipline. It is far more appropriate for man not to eat meat; only if he has a strong desire for meat does the Torah permit it, and even this only after the trouble and inconvenience necessary to satisfy his desire. Perhaps because of the bother and annoyance of the whole procedure, he will be restrained from such a strong and uncontrollable desire for meat.

-Kli Yakar

### **Can Meat Even Be Kosher?**

Apparently the Torah was in principle opposed to the eating of meat. When Noah and his descendants were permitted to eat meat this was a concession conditional on the prohibition of the blood. This prohibition implied respect for the principle of life ("for the blood is the life") and an allusion to the fact that in reality all meat should have been prohibited. This partial prohibition was designed to call to mind the previously total one.

-Rabbi Moses Cassutto, quoted by Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Genesis*, 77.

The Torah teaches a lesson in moral conduct, that man shall not eat meat unless he has a special craving for it... and shall eat it only occasionally and sparingly.

-Babylonian Talmud, Chulin 84a

Only a scholar of Torah may eat meat, but one who is ignorant of Torah is forbidden to eat meat.

-Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 49b

When a human being kills an animal for food, he is neglecting his own hunger for justice. Man prays for mercy, but is unwilling to extend it to others. Why then should man expect mercy from God? It is unfair to expect something that you are not willing to give.

-Isaac Bashevis Singer, writer and Nobel laureate (1902–1991)

As it is halachically prohibited to harm oneself and as healthy, nutritious vegetarian alternatives are easily available, meat consumption has become halachically unjustifiable.

-Rabbi David Rosen, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland

Kashrut involves more than just the way the animal's throat is cut and the checking of its vital organs. Kashrut involves the whole relationship between humans and the animal world. Indeed our sages say specifically in relation to shechitah that "the mitzvot were only given in order to refine people" (Genesis Rabbah, 34; Leviticus Rabbah, 13.) If at point Z the animal's throat was cut the right way and its internal organs checked, but from A to Y all injunctions and prohibitions have been ignored and desecrated, how can that product really be called kosher?

Modern technology and innovation, which currently compound the evil, may eventually offer us ways out of this imbroglio. Nevertheless, in the meantime if not for longer, responsible rabbinic leadership should be advocating a plant based diet as much as possible, as the most kosher diet available for most people today. It is perfectly feasible in our modern world to obtain full nutrients for a healthy body without needing to be party to such immorality. And all this is not to mention other ethical issues, such as greater and more equitable distribution of food resources, and the environmental damage done by the livestock trade (which is greater than all the forms of transport in the world put together.)

Of course there were great rabbis such as Rabbi Avraham HaCohen Kook and before him Rabbi Yosef Albo and others, who envisioned a messianic age in which there is no killing of animals (and which will even be reflected in the Temple service itself). But even if you are not attracted

to such visions, in today's modern world the more one's diet is plant based the more one is truly keeping kosher.

-Rabbi David Rosen

## **Another View; Kashrut Keeps us Separate**

### **Meals with gentiles**

Every type of liquor made by Kutim [certain class of gentiles]—liquor made from dates or figs or barley or wheat or honey—is forbidden because [it might lead to inter-marriage. And [these beverages] are not forbidden except in the place where they are sold.

But, if one buys the liquor and brings it back to his home and drinks it there, then it is permitted. This is on account that the decree is [established] lest one has a meal with the gentile. And the decree only applies in a case where a Jew makes specific plans to drink [with the gentile] in the way that people gather to drink [i.e. a bar], but if [a Jew] enters the home of a gentile and drinks in a casual manner as a matter of happenstance, this is permitted. And similarly, one who sleeps in a gentile's house, it is considered like one's own house [and therefore one could drink with the gentile].

-Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 114:1

### **The purpose of kashrut**

I believe that the purpose of kashrut is to make eating a special experience and to serve as a reminder of a Jew's ethical conscience as well as of the other unique teachings of Judaism. To me, distinctiveness and not separation is the Jew's calling. This feeling is possible in the presence of non-observant Jews and of non-Jews. The values of friendship, human solidarity, and socializing are highly esteemed Jewish values; making a living and exchanging professional service (sometimes performed over a meal) also are respected in Jewish culture. One of the great qualities of the Jewish tradition is its ability to balance contradictions—idealism and realism, Jewish particularism and unusual concern for humanity. Similarly, in the act of eating, one can strike that balance between fidelity to one's own principles and shared friendship and respectful contact with others.

- Blu Greenberg, How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household

### **Eco-Kashrut**

“I invented the word eco-kosher, to say that something is ecologically kosher. I'll give you an example of eco-kosher. The regular kosher way, is about the dishes that mustn't be contaminated, etc. If I pick a cup to have coffee, styrofoam would be the best thing to have. It hasn't been used before and after I drink from it, I'll throw it away and nobody else will use it.

From the usual kosher place that's the direction to go... but in comparison to what will happen to the planet by my drinking in a styrofoam, I'd much rather make the other choice... eco-kosher."

-Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi



### **Eco-Kosher Hekhshers**

- Ma'agalei Tzedek is an Israel-based hekhsher for businesses that are accessible to disabled people and who treat their workers fairly
- Wholesome Kosher (WK) certifies healthy & kosher food in the US
- Earth Kosher certifies a range of food, clothing and health products
- Natural Food Certifiers offers an Apple K Kosher label for kosher food that is also healthy
- The Conservative Movement is in the process of developing standards for a Hekhsher Tzedek that would indicate adherence to traditional laws of kashrut as well as a commitment to social responsibility and workers' rights

### **Eco Kashrut is based on traditional Jewish values**

**Tzar ba'alei cha-yim:** respect for animals / avoidance of suffering

**Bal tashchit:** not ruining or needlessly destroying

**Shemirat ha-guf:** the protection of one's own body

**Tzedakah:** justice / doing that which is right

**Oshek:** not oppressing workers

**Beracha kedusha:** consciously affirming a sense of holiness and blessing when we eat

### **But is it Really Kosher?**

As a Jew who believes kashrut is part of the discipline of Judaism, kashrut is kashrut.

Eco-kashrut is something different. Not that I'm opposed to eco-kashrut, but it's something else.

-Jack Wertheimer, Former Provost JTS

### **Redefining the Term**

At this point I think we should consider dropping the phrase eco-kosher. It allows traditional halachic Jews essentially to ignore the underlying issues that eco-kashrut often addresses, on the basis that eco-kashrut is not traditionally halachic. And it causes liberal Jews to establish their own categories, rather than address traditional ones.

But the issues that are often discussed under the rubric of “eco-kashrut” are in fact thoroughly within the domain of traditional halacha. My friend Rabbi Julian Sinclair – an orthodox rabbi of unimpeachably traditional credentials – argues that driving an SUV is against the halacha. He doesn’t mean “eco-halacha,” he means traditional halacha. Retiring the phrase eco-kashrut doesn’t mean failing to address the underlying issues; rather it means engaging them with intellectual integrity in Jewish communities of many sorts, including the Orthodox community.

-Nigel Savage

**And...Another Joke**

Moshe goes to see his Rabbi. “Rabbi, last week I missed saying grace after meals.”

“Why,” asked the Rabbi.

“Because I forgot to wash my hands before the meal.”

“That’s twice you’ve broken the law but you still haven’t told me why.”

“The food wasn’t kosher.”

“You ate non-kosher food?” asked the Rabbi.

“It wasn’t a Jewish restaurant.”

“That makes it even worse,” said the now angry Rabbi. “Couldn’t you have eaten in a kosher one?”

“What, on Yom Kippur?”



ברוך רחמנא  
 מלכא דעלמא  
 מריה דהאי פיתא

Brikh raḥamana  
Malka d'alma  
Ma'arey d'hi pita

You are the source of life for all that is and your blessing flows through me