

Kashroots: Noah, Leviticus, and an Eco-History of the Kosher Laws - David Seidenberg

(quoted by S. Tamar Kamionkowsky in *Wisdom Commentary; Leviticus*)

Every religion arises in or is shaped by a place and teaches how to live in that place. Though every ritual has many levels interpretation, e.g. historical, theological and personal, the ecological meaning may be the soil in which all else grows. The depth of this meaning is not in generalities, but in the details.

In the case of kashrut, for example, the rule about not eating blood makes it almost impossible to eat hunted game. In an ecosystem where humans depended on large herds of wild animals like buffalo, as we find in the North American plains, this rule would be almost impossible to follow. But in an ecosystem where wild herds and habitats are less productive, a hunting culture is unsustainable. A culture where humans can carefully control the size of domesticated herds to fit the limits of the ecosystem and the needs of the population is what's called for. That was the ecosystem which shaped the religion of our ancestors.

This brings us to that most puzzling of categorical rules: which animals we can and cannot eat. Almost everyone knows the rule: mammals that chew their cud and have split hooves are kosher; all other land animals are not.[3] (Lev. 11 and Deut. 14) What do these two characteristics of hoof and mouth mean? Anthropologically, there are many interpretations, some of which can be found in Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. But ecologically, there is a specific meaning, which goes far beyond any hygienic or other rationalistic or symbolic interpretation.

That meaning practically speaking is straightforward: any animal that chews its cud can eat grasses and plants that are inedible to human beings, and any animal that has split hooves can walk (and graze) on land that is too rocky to farm with a plow. These characteristics together mean one very clear thing: the only land animals that we can eat according to the laws of kashrut are animals that do not compete with human beings for food.

VI. The rules we still follow in Judaism would in their original context in the ancient Mideast have allowed a civilization to thrive, without destroying the ecosystem it depended upon. In an ecosystem which is in some ways marginal, that is, an ecosystem which depends on intensive human input (agriculture and herding), as well as upon intensive "divine" input (i.e., rain, as it was understood by our ancestors), there was no room for devoting good farming land to livestock.

Embedded in this wisdom about locale is another truth: any culture which allows domesticated herds to compete with humans for food also pits farmers against herders. More importantly, it pits the poor who have no land against owners who control both land and herds.

We can easily see the dynamics of this problem in the modern world, where rising world food prices endanger the poor in many countries. Those prices are driven up in part by the industrial practice of feeding grain to cattle, instead of giving them their natural diet of diverse grasses and other pasture plants, and they are also driven up more recently by the use of grain to make ethanol fuel. Instead of competition between herders and farmers, we have competition between feeding our SUV's and cattle, and feeding other people.

In order to have justice, which may be the most important value within Judaism's culture, there needs to be a way for farming and animal husbandry to produce enough for all people, poor and rich. The way to achieve this value in different ecosystems might be different, but any culture founded on justice will always find a way to bring this value into alignment with its ecosystem.[4]

Going from animal husbandry back to agricultural rituals, it is obvious how the farmers took care of the poor: enough was always left over for people to glean and harvest, and in every seventh year, when the land was treated as ownerless, everyone (including every animal, wild or domestic) had the right to take from any of the produce of the land. (Some rabbinic interpretations of the law even require fences to be removed to make that easier.) In the fiftieth year, the land was redistributed according to a plan which gave each family an equal share.

With respect to animal herds, the way that wealth was recalibrated was more subtle: the products of the sacrificial system, which combined offerings and tithes of domesticated animals (including all first-born and most other male animals) with plants (first-fruits and tithes of produce and grain), went not only to the priest and Levite, but in many cases also to the poor and disenfranchised. The Priestly class, who had exclusive rights to parts of the sacrifices, weren't allowed to own land and didn't need land. But this privileged class received a significant portion of their wealth alongside the lowest class, those who didn't own and who were entitled by need.

I think this system would have had the potential to eliminate a lot of the stigma associated with receiving charity and to minimize class differences. In combination with all the agricultural rituals and rules mentioned above, we can see the plan for a society that was both socially and ecologically sustainable for many generations.

Ecologically, the sacrificial system also had a very specific lesson: the life and soul of the animal, found in the blood, remained holy, even after the animal was slaughtered, and the only suitable use for this lifeblood was as an offering to God.

The kind of industrial meat-production we see in our time would have been impossible, because it would fly in the face of every ecological, humane, and health consideration that underlies kashrut. The sacrificial system also fits into a broader pattern of rituals and rules related to animals and to the land, a pattern that gives us a unique model for how to create a sustainable civilization.

VII. My hypothesis for why animals must have cloven hoofs and chew their cud is just that: a hypothesis. It fits into a broader understanding of how the Jewish relationship to food is structured by the Torah, with its emphasis on equity and the sanctity of both human life and all life. If this theory could be proven wrong, kashrut would still have its other meanings. But in a time when all of the world's religions need to help us steer towards sustainability, it is worth so much to know that Judaism, from its earliest time and earliest stories, has an ecological underpinning that we can all listen to and search for.

Looking at the way Jews stereotypically eat and feel about kashrut, I think we may have a little work to do in order to listen better. But we need to hear this call to sustainability, if Judaism is going to be relevant in humanity's next century. If the eco-psychologists and philosophers and theologians are right, this search is also a way to become more fully human, and, I would say, more deeply Jewish.