

As we emerge from this past week, which had us totally immersed in what we could and could not eat during the eight days of Passover, we now move into this third *Parsha* in the Book of Leviticus, *Shemini*, which contains the basic principles of *Kashrut* as a permanent instruction; not just for a specific portion of the year but relevant all year round.

Back in the Book of Exodus, we encountered the first statement about *Kashrut*, which instructed us not to boil the kid in its mother's milk. This very basic, maybe 'humanistic,' principle got extended by the Rabbis to the point where we are not allowed to mix dairy products and meat products. As an extra protective measure, we are also instructed to keep separate dishes and utensils. By doing this, we create an additional barrier which will help us avoid mistakes.

This week's Torah portion brings to our attention a detailed list of what foods are permissible and which ones are not. It is not only that we avoid mixing dairy and meat; there are creatures which we can eat their meat, and there are those which we cannot use them as food. This list includes fish and birds as well.

There have been countless attempts to find a logical explanation to what we can and what we cannot eat. Neither one of those explanations withstood the challenge. Still today, we don't have a comprehensive, unified explanation for why we eat the way we do.

Therefore, I would like to suggest that there is no such an explanation. Any attempt to reduce the system to one that is based on consistent reasons, one that makes sense, will, at the end, fail.

Is *kosher* food healthier than non-*kosher* food?

Needless to say, a system of dietary laws that are part of a religion which prioritizes life ('*ubakharta ba hayim*-you should choose life,' Deuteronomy 30:19) can never be one that jeopardizes our health. But, is this the ultimate reason, or just a by-product?

As part of this approach, we need to accept the fact that for traditional Judaism, food is not just a biological need; food is not just a response to an instinct that tells us that we have to feed ourselves in order to survive. The way we eat and what we eat (or refrain from eating) is part of our Jewish culture and values system and, ultimately, if we follow the teachings of the Rabbis, define who we are.

Then, according to traditional Jewish philosophy, we cannot separate our identity from the way we eat. In the biblical/religious approach to the understanding of what life should be, our identity as human beings and the way we eat are one and the same. Together, they define our Jewish way to be in this world.

This is the only way to justify the statement, right in the middle of this long list of dos and don'ts as part of the instruction about *Kashrut*, that the biblical text includes as part of this week's portion (Leviticus 11:44) **"For I the Lord am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not make yourselves impure..."**

In the biblical approach, what we eat and who we are, are part of the same revelation of what life should be. When we follow the rules of *Kashrut*, we align ourselves with the model of *Kedushah*, which demands from us to meet the expectations that come from being Jewish. These demands apply universally, regardless if you are a Jew by birth or a Jew by choice. At the end, we all have to choose to be Jewish, over and over again, all the time.

This week's *Parshat Shemini* reminds us, one more time, of how much the choices that we make when we eat define our identity and bring holiness into our lives and, by bringing holiness into our lives, bring holiness into the world.

Shabbat Shalom!

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