

Sermon | Parshat Re'eh
August 27, 2022 | ל' אב תשפ"ב
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Choose Kosher, Choose Good

Vegetarian. Vegan. Paleo. South Beach. Atkins. Weight Watchers. Noom. I could go on at length listing the names of various diets that are or have been popular in our society. Many of those who follow such diets say that they are trying to become healthier by changing what they choose to put into their bodies. The hope is that there is something valuable to gain in abiding by a strict set of rules and regulations which govern what you eat, how you eat, when you eat. Why else would people subject themselves to such rules and requirements if it will not meaningfully change you and your life for the better?

And then there is *kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws. Kashrut begins in the Torah as a list of permitted and prohibited animals, along with a few related rules: not to cook a calf in its mother's milk (repeated thrice in the Torah), not to consume the blood of an animal, not to eat a limb torn from a living creature, not to eat an animal that has died of natural causes. Through the Oral Law and the interpretive tradition of Judaism, we now have a system of separating meat and milk not only on the plate itself, but even distinguishing between the plates and cookware we utilize to create such meals. We have an entire industry built around the concept of giving kosher certification to foods that we readily find on store shelves throughout the country. Kashrut is the Jewish diet. What does it promise? Why do I do it? Why should you?

Kashrut is like Shabbat. It is one of those mitzvot where the observance thereof may vary considerably from one person to the next. The motivations and values at play can also differ. The Reform movement published a book in 2011 called *The Sacred Table: Creating a*

Jewish Food Ethic. The articles are about the history of kashrut, and also modern questions about kashrut. A few of the articles are titled, “Curb Your Consumerism,” “Kindness to Animals,” “But is the Mashgiach Kosher?” and “Personal Kashrut.” You can sense that they are probing the ethical values of kashrut, rather than focusing only upon the technicalities of the practice itself. The Conservative movement has a pamphlet from 2000 that wrestles with kashrut from a similar perspective, and also asks about particularism and universalism, what it means to be holy and set apart, and then concludes with a sort of “How To” guide for keeping kosher. I am sure that I could find a plethora of similar materials in other denominations and movements, too. Each one will demonstrate that particular movement’s perspective, but all will include the questions (even if offering different answers) about why and how we keep kosher.

In the Conservative movement pamphlet, entitled *Keeping Kosher: A Diet for the Soul*, Rabbi Samuel Dresner argues that keeping kosher is about becoming holy. He writes,

But how is holiness achieved? For it is not a genetic inheritance like the color of our eyes or the length of our frame. We become holy through our own effort and with God's help, by hallowing that which is not yet holy, the profane, the everyday. And that is the labor of a lifetime.¹

Life is full of things that are necessary but mundane: brushing your teeth, using the restroom, eating food. One of the marvels of Judaism is that we seek to elevate the everyday, to reframe that which is otherwise mundane and transform it into something sacred and holy. This does not happen after doing it just once or just for one day, but it happens over the course of a

¹ *Keeping Kosher: A Diet for the Soul*, Samuel H. Dresner, p. 7.

lifetime. Judaism asks us to commit to a lifestyle through which we regularly sanctify moments in time and space.

In Parshat Re'eh, after listing the animals that are deemed *tamei* and *tahor*, pure or impure, or kosher and not kosher, the Torah concludes the section, "...For you are a people consecrated to your God Adonai, כִּי עַם קְדוֹשׁ אַתָּה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk, לֹא־תִבְשֹׁל גְּדִי בְחֵלְבֵי אִמּוֹ."² Based on a *midrash* in Sifrei Devarim, Rashi says that this idea of being "consecrated to your God" teaches us to go one step further, to sanctify oneself by abstaining even from things that are technically permitted. There is, according to this view, a value in being even more stringent than the law requires us to be. I am cautious about that approach because keeping kosher, like all of the mitzvot of Judaism, should be something that is attainable and achievable. Certainly our tradition encourages us to challenge ourselves, but not to make the task ahead of us impossible. Commenting on this idea, the Torah Temimah, Rabbi Barch Epstein, notes that it is less about the practice and more about the intention behind it: זֶה הוּא דוֹקָא אִם אֵלֶּה הַנּוֹהֲגִים כֵּן מְכוּוֹנִין לְסִיג וּפְרִישוֹת, "It only applies to those individuals who practice these stringencies with the intention to create limits and practice self-restraint." In other words, one of the reasons we keep kosher, and that we have developed additional stringencies over time, is because there is a value in practicing self-restraint, in learning how to make meaningful distinctions between what I choose to eat and what I choose not to eat.

The Sefer HaChinnukh, an anonymous 13th century work that explains all 613 commandments of the Torah, also teaches about the ability to make meaningful distinctions as one of the primary reasons for some of our dietary restrictions. In writing about the mitzvah of

² Deuteronomy 14:21.

not eating a limb taken from a living animal, he notes that doing so is incredibly cruel, and that there are mitzvot in the Torah which are designed to help us acquire good traits and choose *tov*, to choose that which is good. He concludes his thought with this statement: “This is my approach to most of the commandments, according to their contextual meaning.” According to this perspective, the purpose of the *mitzvot* is to teach us, to train us, through lifelong practice, to choose that which is good. Choosing good *is* making ourselves holy. When we do that which is right and good, when we prove to ourselves that we can show self-restraint and make meaningful distinctions, then we sanctify ourselves and we bring holiness into our lives.

Many diets are short-term or temporary because they have an intended goal: lose weight, lower cholesterol, etc. Once you reach the goal, the diet ends (or at the very least, our motivation to continue the diet ends). But kashrut, sort of like vegetarianism and veganism, is a values-based diet. It is not temporary or goal-oriented in the sense that you are not trying to reach a measurable goal. Rather, the goal is in upholding the values that animate the diet itself. Kashrut is about learning to make distinctions, developing a practice of self-restraint, and choosing that which is *tov*, good. We do not cook a calf in its mother’s milk because it is easy to see how that is incredibly cruel—how can we kill an animal with the very thing that is meant to give it life and sustain it. And from this principle we zoom out and apply it to all matters of meat and milk, learning to make distinctions and practice self-restraint so that we choose that which is *tov*, that which is good.

As I mentioned earlier, kashrut looks different for everyone. Some make distinctions between what they eat inside the home and what they eat outside of it. Others distinguish between Shabbat and holidays and other days of the year. I am not here to judge your level of

kashrut. What I am here to do is to encourage you to continue along your journey of what it means to maintain a Jewish diet that is driven by our values. For some that will mean taking a first small step, such as removing a particular non-kosher food from your lifestyle, or separating between dairy and meat, and for others who are already doing these things it might mean something else. The goal is to take a step forward. I have always said that Judaism is aspirational and encourages us to bring a greater sense of holiness into our lives. Parshat Re'eh reminds us that one way to do that, to do that each day throughout the day, is to develop that Jewish food ethic, a lifestyle of being *shomer kashrut*, keeping kosher, and training ourselves to choose *tov*, that which is good, and in so doing, we may become holy. Shabbat shalom.