

“Do You Like Lobster?”
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When one of my college roommates was a little boy, he was once on the Art Linkletter show. That was a daily variety show that aired in the 1950s and 1960s on which Art Linkletter, who had an amazing knack for establishing instant rapport with kids, would ask them questions and get them to say, well, as he put it, “the darndest things.” Getting on the show was a big deal. The day my friend was on, his entire family—his siblings, his parents, and his grandparents—were at his home gathered around the TV set. Like my family—like many of our families—my friend’s family came from Eastern Europe in the early part of the twentieth century. His grandparents, who were immigrants, were fully observant; his parents who were first generation Americans, much less so. Art Linkletter came up to my friend, and asked him a simple question: “What is your favorite food?” My friend thought for a moment, and then he said, loud and clear, “Bacon.” And that’s how my friend’s grandparents discovered that their children were no longer keeping a kosher home. We can only imagine the scene around that television set!

I thought about that story early this past summer. My wife and I had gone off for a few days to a wonderful vacation spot. We ran into a couple who were staying in the same Bed & Breakfast as we were. “What did you do today?” we asked them. “Oh,” the woman said with great energy, “we went to this fabulous village not too far from here.” She proceeded to tell me this and that about her day, and then she stopped, and with great energy, she turned to me and asked, “Do you like lobster?”

Do I like lobster? How am I supposed to answer that question?

As it happens, the great twelfth century Jewish sage, Maimonides (also known as the Rambam) has explained exactly how this question should be answered.

Should you try to weasel out of it, by saying that you don’t like lobster? No, you should not. You should never say that you don’t like bacon or ham or oysters or any other kind of non-kosher food; you should say instead that, though such foods are quite tasty, and though you would very much like to taste them, you refrain from doing so because they are forbidden according to the laws of kashrut. (See



Maimonides, Eight Chapters, 7:2b, quoting Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah in Sifra Kedoshim 9. See also Rashi, Commentary on Leviticus 20:26.)

I would venture to say that almost every one of us, at one time or another, faces questions like this one. The question might involve our diet, or why we don't observe Christmas, or why we take time off from work to observe Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. The reason is that Judaism involves behavioral expectations that other faith traditions don't have. And those behavioral expectations are hard to explain to others, because they're not rational; rather, they arise out of the Jewish tradition. We don't all agree on what those expectations are, but we know they're there.

Judaism, as much as it consists of a set of **values**, and as much as it's about certain fundamental **beliefs**; as much as it's about improving the world in a very general and universal way; it's also **a way of life**—and we are here today as an expression of our commitment to that way of life. Judaism has what to say about every area of life: it teaches us how to be charitable, how to give thanks, what and when we should study, what we should say before we eat (namely, *brachot*, or blessings), and what we should not say behind someone's back (namely, *l'shon ha-rah*). It guides us how to dress (namely, modestly), how to respect and express caring for other human beings, and also, yes, what to eat and what not to eat. **It isn't accidental that the very first behavioral restriction recorded in our Bible, in the Garden of Eden, is a dietary one.** We Jews have a way of living, a *halachah*, that guides us in all those areas.

No coherent conception of Judaism is possible without a conception of behavioral expectations. Not, “nice things that I *might* do,” but expectations. Duties. Duties that, if we really reflect on them, we realize we are obligated to fulfill, if we want to be, not just good people, good human beings, but good Jews.

This past Passover, I learned about a most unusual seder. Unusual because although they used a haggadah, the seder was conducted the way an ordinary seder would be, there was a seder plate on the table, traditional seder food was served, and no hametz was to be seen,—out of the 21 people there, only one of them was Jewish!

Let me tell you how that seder came to be. A number of years ago, a woman in our area decided to convert to Judaism. Her husband wasn't Jewish, but her daughter, who was born after her conversion, was. When her daughter was about two years old, the woman developed leukemia. When her condition became grave, she called

her mother to her bedside. She was concerned, she said, about her daughter's Jewish identity, not so much because her husband wasn't Jewish as because he didn't have any particular interest in religion. So she asked her mother—the child's grandmother—to ensure her child's religious identity as a Jew. Her mother agreed. Shortly thereafter, the woman died.

That grandmother, although she was and is a devout Episcopalian—or perhaps because of that—realized that it wasn't enough for that little girl to know that she was Jewish; she needed to learn what duties were incumbent upon her as a Jew. She needed to know not just what Jews believed or didn't believe, but how Jews were supposed to behave.

That Episcopalian grandmother knew Jews, but she didn't know all that much about Judaism. And so she took a course called Mother's Circle, specifically intended for non-Jewish women raising Jewish children, to learn how to raise her grandchild as a Jew. In that class, she learned about Shabbat and Kashrut and Tzedakah and other mitzvot. She also learned how to prepare her house for Passover and how to host a seder—and that's precisely what she did. She kashered her kitchen for Pesach, and served only kosher for Passover food. And it was she who hosted that seder for 21 people, only one of whom, her 4 year old granddaughter, was Jewish.

By the way, that is not all she has done: She listens to Jewish music with her granddaughter. She's enrolled her in a Jewish pre-school. She regularly lights Shabbat candles with her, and she says the blessings with her, in Hebrew, every Friday night.

Here is someone who understands that to raise a child as a Jew requires more than a commitment to being a mensch—a “good human being,” more than a commitment to doing good deeds, as important as that is. It requires a commitment to specific observances that have long characterized Judaism, and that are necessary to build not just a Jewish identification but a Jewish identity.

For some of us, Jewish observances such as *kashrut* just don't have much meaning. How many times have you been told, “You don't have to keep kosher to remember that you're a Jew. And you don't have to keep kosher to be a *mensch*. So why bother? And besides, there are plenty of people who do keep kosher who are actually not very nice.”

Recently, the Jewish world was shocked to learn about the conditions at the largest Jewish slaughterhouse and meat-packing plant in the world, in Postville, Ohio.

Think of it: “black hat” Orthodox business owners accused of exploiting illegal immigrants; colluding with them to deceive immigration officials; violating child labor laws and workplace safety rules; mistreating humans and animals alike.

That scandal suggests that being nice people and being observant are two separate categories, and that we have to choose between them.

But we don’t. And we shouldn’t. What has been going on at that plant is a disgrace. When observant people are insensitive to the suffering of their fellow human beings, when they are indifferent to the suffering of animals, that is a case of *hillul ha-shem*, the desecration of God’s name. Such a circumstance brings disgrace upon the Jewish people and upon Judaism.

Finally some improvement is taking place at that plant. I’m particularly pleased and proud that Rabbi Morris Allen, a Conservative rabbinical colleague of mine in Minnesota, has persuaded the Conservative Movement to develop its own certification, to be called a Hechsher Tsedek, (a “Social Justice Certification”) that will ensure not only that kosher products are prepared according to the proper Jewish methods, but that the food is produced in a way that demonstrates concern for those human beings who are involved in its production.

Do we have to choose between observing Jewish rituals and being *menschlich*? It’s a question Jews have been asking since Talmudic times. In Bereshit Rabbah (44:1), Rav asks, “Does it really matter to God whether one slaughters an animal across the throat or across the back of the neck?” Does it really matter to God, we might ask, whether we wait several hours after eating meat before we eat dairy? Does God care if we eat a piece of pie whose crust was prepared with lard? Rav’s answer to his rhetorical question—and ours—is this: “The *mitzvot* were given *l’tsafef et ha-briyot*—for the purpose of refining human beings.” To elevate our lives. That’s their goal. Do they always succeed? Of course not. People can fulfill *mitzvot* like automatons, without paying attention to their underlying rationale. They can remain untouched by their magic. They can remain un-stimulated, unmoved, untransformed. Are there other ways to refine human beings? Of course! But is this particular way, the way of *mitzvot*, the quintessentially Jewish way to refine human beings? Absolutely.

Mitzvot achieve this by enabling us to reach for the holy and to bring it into our lives.

“Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, [a leading Reform thinker, once] described the *mitzvot* as jewels embedded in the Jewish path; as you walk along, you reach down to pick

up these gems and discover that some come up rather easily. ‘Don’t murder’ isn’t much of a problem for most people. ‘Don’t eat shellfish,’ and ‘Honor your father and your mother’ are a bit more challenging.” (Anita Diamant, *Choosing a Jewish Life*)

The question is not whether we like lobster or not, but whether we’ve integrated kashrut into our Jewish identities and Jewish values. The question is not whether we like lobster, but whether, when the opportunity presents itself, we choose to be elevated, and—as Rabbi Morris Allen, once humorously put it—to “chew by choice.”

Given that today is Rosh Hashanah, let me refine that: It’s not whether we like lobster, or whether we ate lobster last week, but whether we will eat it next week, whether we like it or not. For, as we know, our past does not determine our future. We need not be creatures of habit, for we have free will. Every day is another opportunity to look anew at ourselves and how we express ourselves Jewishly, and to live our lives with renewed devotion and commitment.

So, there I was, with that friendly woman asking me, “Do I like lobster?” I finally said, “Actually, we don’t eat lobster, ...” but before I could say another word, the woman said, “Oh, that’s too bad, they’re simply scrumptious at that place!” All the while, her body language was saying to me, “You don’t know what you’re missing!”

Anita Diamant, in her book, *Choosing a Jewish Life*, picks up on Arnold Jacob Wolf’s metaphor. “At any given time, [she writes,] a mitzvah may seem too deeply embedded for you to pry it out of the ground. And yet, there comes a day when you discover that a mitzvah that seemed immovable just months earlier is now loose; *kashrut* for example, no longer seems an arbitrary and arcane system of prohibitions but becomes a meaningful reminder that everything—including eating—can be an opportunity to find and create holiness.”

May this New Year bring holiness to all of us. Let’s partake of our unique and precious way of life, filled with wonderful opportunities to access the holy and—in the process—refine ourselves, those around us, and the entire world.

Shanah Tovah!