

Parashat Shemini: Kashrut

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I hope everyone has had their fill of matzah and kneidlach by now – at least enough to hold you over for a year.

At this time of year, as the Passover holiday has just concluded, our thoughts as Jews focus on several things --- the food we are prohibited from eating during the holiday, the telling of the dramatic story of the exodus, the foods we are allowed to eat, the sense of being together as a family, the food we can and cannot eat, the obligation to pass on to our children the importance of the story, and the food we consume on the holiday.

Let's face it: food plays a critical role for our people. I remember reading an article in the business pages of the Post not too long ago listing the highest volume grocery stores in the state of Maryland – Kemp Mill in Silver Spring, Pikesville, Potomac, Bethesda, all areas with a significant concentration of Jewish population. Coincidence? I don't think so.

In today's torah portion, as the children of Israel are wandering in the desert, God issues the basic laws of kashrut: what animals, birds and fish they are allowed to eat and what they are not allowed to eat. It comes as an addendum to the section in the book of Exodus where we are told not to boil a baby cow in its mother's milk.

The list just kind of appears out of nowhere. Without any attempt to offer a justification for the restrictions or regulations, the Torah provides a lengthy list of which foods are kosher and which are not. And ever since, we have been trying to deduce and understand the rationale behind the laws and to attempt to ascertain and figure out what if any logic or principles underlie the laws of kashrut.

Consequently, not surprisingly, since it is not specified, throughout the ages our sages and scholars have engaged in speculation and have offered a number of answers and reasons to keep kosher. Some people assume that the laws of kashrut have something to do with health considerations, and believe that the Torah prohibited foods that would be harmful to us, especially at a time when refrigeration did not exist.

But most authorities today reject this as being the reason for laws of kashrut. One of the shortcomings of such an approach is that the laws were given for all time, not just until such time as refrigerators and meat inspectors were invented.

In fact, the answer to the question of why keep kosher can more likely be found in what we read this morning: “You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I the Lord am holy.”

Kashrut is a means of bringing holiness into our daily lives. Each time we purchase food, or sit down to eat, we encounter the Jewish injunction to be holy. In so doing, we are reminded of Jewish values and of the fact that we Jews have a unique, covenantal

relationship with God – that He places requirements, demands and expectations upon us. How we go about the whole process of consuming food has the potential to be a sacred act that reinforces our morality as well as strengthening our identity.

One of the most important reasons today to keep kosher is simply because of this matter of identity. Even if you do not feel commanded by God to keep kosher, even if you believe the Torah is antiquated, and the laws outdated, you have to agree that keeping kosher is at least one thing you can do on a regular basis which connects you to your people and to your identity as a Jew.

It connects you in many ways – By keeping kosher you know that you are linked to the generations who preceded you and thus, to your heritage. You also know that you are linked to other Jews around the world who share this tradition with you. For me, that was one of the initial reasons I started keeping kosher – I wanted to be a part of the Jewish people in an active, personal, identifiable way.

One of my favorite reasons for observing the Jewish dietary laws is because it reinforces a sense of discipline. I know that there are some things which I just cannot eat.

I recall the time when my oldest son Ezra was about 3 years old, and Symcha took him shopping at the food store. He held up a head of lettuce, and at the top of his lungs, he shouted to Symcha, who was at the other end of the aisle, “Mom, is this lettuce kosher?” At a young age, he understood that not everything in the grocery store, and thus in life is permitted. Placing limits on what we can and cannot eat, makes it that much easier to convey to my children that there are certain acts that are permitted, and there are things which we cannot do. Furthermore, keeping kosher, and being different helps to resist the alluring temptation of conformity.

Through the practice of kashrut, we learn that we can discipline ourselves, our drives, and our impulses, while at the same time enjoying life’s permitted pleasures. In fact, the great Jewish sage Maimonides, once wrote that it is ok to admit that you desire something that is not kosher, but to then realize that you cannot eat it because as Jews we are commanded by God and are prohibited from consuming it. This is how it teaches that we need to learn to set limits.

Another important aspect of the laws of kashrut has to do with instilling a sensitivity to the suffering of animals and to our responsibility to all forms of life. Part of its motivation is to appreciate the sanctity and holiness inherent in all forms of life. The act of eating thereby becomes more than a response to hunger, but a means of expressing reverence for life. The consumption of meat necessitates the taking of a life, and so the Torah places restrictions on who can perform such an act, how it must be done, and in so doing, we elevate and distinguish ourselves from animals. By being forced to think about what you eat and purchase, you are forced to encounter the ideals and ethics of your faith. Interestingly, the word kosher has entered the English lexicon. When used in English, as in – Is it kosher? it means whether or not something is correct, proper, right, acceptable,

or ethical. That in and of itself is a favorable and admirable reflection on the concept of kashrut.

There are some who Jews who keep a kosher home, but do not observe kashrut when they eat outside of their home. While this is not ideal, it is far better and preferable than not doing anything. Anytime you do any mitzvah, even in a limited fashion, brings holiness into your life. So if that is the only way you can do it, then start there. While there are those who do not allow eating out except in a kosher restaurant, the Conservative movement, based on the precedent of halakha and Talmudic law has ordained that one may eat fish, dairy, or vegetarian meals when eating out, and still be considered keeping kosher. Chances are no two Jews follow kashrut in the exact same way.

But the bottom line, however it is practiced, and to whatever degree it is observed is that it can be a powerful statement and means of reinforcing important Jewish notions. It requires commitment, some degree of sacrifice and self-discipline.

One last thought – It is never too late to start. Just the other day, I met with a family who has decided to make their home kosher. So as we resume our consumption of chametz this week, let us give thought to the role of dietary laws in our lives and how making the choice to do something can be a powerful act of affiliation and association with your people and heritage.

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