

Our Kashrut Policy and Why it Matters

Some 20 years ago I was sitting at the dinner table at Rabbi David Hartman's home in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hartman had assembled an interesting mix of people from all streams of Jewish life. Sitting across from me was a man about my age, studying in one of the many Ultra-Orthodox Yeshivot in the city. Somehow the conversation landed on the importance of kashrut (keeping kosher) and I said, without really thinking, "I don't really think God cares what we eat!" David, who had been enjoying the debate but mostly staying out of the fray, turned to me and said something like, "You may not care what you eat, and God may not care what we eat, but kashrut has been important to the Jewish people for over 2,000 years. You might want to care about that!"

Fast forward five years: I am about to be ordained as a newly minted rabbi and I have a decision to make. Up until that point, I ate everything and was proud of it: pork, shrimp, crawfish etouffe, you name it, I ate it, and with gusto! But now, I was not so sure of myself; would it look bad for a rabbi to be sucking the juice out of an Alaskan Crab claw? How would folks feel seeing me chow down on some bacon in a restaurant? In truth, many would not care and some would be relieved; I knew this, but it still didn't sit well with me. It was as if David's words were ringing in my ear, "you may not care, and God may not care, but the Jewish people have cared for over 2,000 years..." To make a long story short, as part of my ordination I decided to stop eating pork or shellfish, and I have kept that promise, more or less, for the last 16 years. I miss certain things like crab cakes and Italian sausage, and when I encounter them on a menu I often say a little prayer to myself that goes something like, "God, I love this stuff and I am giving it up for You and the Jewish people..." Really! In that sense, not eating pork and shellfish has turned out to be a prayerful experience for me. It has also raised my food consciousness in as much as I have to stay attuned to what I am eating in order not to inadvertently transgress. And it has given me a greater sense of connection with Am Yisrael, the Jewish people as we have understood ourselves for most of our existence.

What about Shomrei Torah and our kashrut policy? I have noticed that many people are confused by our policy. The basics are that any Shomrei Torah-sponsored event, where ever it is held, should refrain from serving forbidden foods (pork products, shellfish, etc) and there should be no mixing of milk and meat.

There are three things that seem to challenge people: Knowing what products are made from a forbidden food like, for example, that pepperoni is made from pork; understanding what a "Shomrei Torah-Sponsored event" is and being aware enough when planning an event, or bringing a dish to the congregation, so that you do not inadvertently violate the "no mixing milk and meat" policy.

Most of the challenges with the kashrut policy have to do with awareness; you just have to take a moment and ask yourself if the food you are bringing or the meal you are planning complies with the policy. Perhaps a bigger stumbling block is the nagging question: "Why do this?" "After all, we are a Reform Congregation; we can eat whatever we want!"

Reform Judaism is all about informed choice. When we explored this as a congregation six or so years ago, these are some of the reasons we decided on the policy:

Inclusivity – it allows more Jews to comfortably be able to eat with us, while not pushing anyone else away.

Tradition – it connects us to our Jewish heritage, linking us up with over 2,000 years of Jewish tradition.

Awareness – it offers us a chance to think about what we eat.

What do you think? If you keep a form of kashrut, what does it mean to you? If not, why? What do you think of our policy? Any suggestion how we could help people/committees understand and comply with the policy?

I look forward to hearing from you.