This Week in Torah *Shemini*

In Leviticus chapter 11—this week's *sedra*—we read of kosher animals. Yup, animals that we can eat. So…. Let's talk about *kashrut* for a few paragraphs.

"Do you keep kosher?" Standard question that many Jews are often asked at one point or another. Most of us in Reform synagogues do not observe traditional Jewish dietary laws. What place do these laws have in our tradition? What place can they have? Are these laws/practices necessary for us to consider?

Contemplating this issue, my mind was surrounded with a circumfluent of ideas that kept changing the direction of how to respond to these questions. It is not a simple statement of following *mitzvot* as prescribed in Torah. Reform Judaism was founded on an intellectual connection to tasks that superseded blind faith—a valid, relevant, and meaningful explanation accompanies our willingness to observe rituals.

Is it to define us and keep us separate from other peoples? That is what Leviticus 20:26 states: "You shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine." In the 3rd century before the Common Era [BCE], a document appeared called a "letter of Aristeas to Philocrate." The Letter of Aristeas, called so because it was a letter addressed from Aristeas of Marmora to his brother Philocrates, deals primarily with the reason the Greek translation of the Hebrew Law, also called the Septuagint, was created, as well as the people and processes involved. In this Hellenistic document, dietary rules were singled out to note that Jews did not associate with others by religious practice. It fit into ancient Jewish attitudes that were both xenophobic to outside societal influences as well as embracing of individual foreigners. Throughout history before the age of enlightenment of the 19th century, fear compelled Jewish practices. Law enforced a strong societal practice so that Jews ate together, lived together, and did business together — all the while acknowledging the presence of an outside world. Today, *kashrut* helps identify a Jew as part of a community.

As our history sought to break down the xenophobic shtetl/ghetto mentality and as anti-Semitic regulations eased [with the exception of Nazi Germany], Jews found

assimilation and easier access to mainstream society. Was Jewish dietary rule still valuable?

A shift of understanding Kashrut is in the intellectual realm. As religious existentialism started to find a footing in European society, thinkers building on 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant's principles started to probe another idea—it was personally significant to build a Jewish core. Meet Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) who was a German-Jewish philosopher. As a young man he actually considered opting out of Judaism completely. But his intellectual bend compelled him to at least do a proper examination of Judaism first. So he went to a synagogue and, as it happened, experienced a spiritual transformation. He went on to become a serious student of Judaism. It's told that when Rosenzweig was once asked, "Do you keep kosher?" his answer was *not yet*.

Note—it was not "*no*", but "not yet" – and there is a critical difference between the two. *No* implies that I am not doing it now nor do I have any plans to do it any time soon. *Not yet* means that while presently I may not be there, I am still open to the suggestion. Maybe in the time, the relevance of *kashrut* will speak to me.

Here *kashrut* is an experiential encounter to heighten spiritual awareness. Maybe as we are concerned with eating healthy, we should add a dimension to eat healthy for our spiritual well-being. Perhaps if *kashrut* does not speak to you—maybe a sacred pause before eating will. It is a moment of gratitude; a sense of appreciation that our food source should not be taken for granted.

What about *kashrut* to reflect an ethical standard? A few years ago, I visited an Iowa pig farm—another story for another day—the farmer showed me around his property: water filtering devices to make sure the pigs were not drinking water that contained fertilizer run off; environmental awareness to keep his pigs "organic"; and farm laborers who were paid a living wage with health insurance. I laughed to myself as I wanted to deem his pigs "kosher" because of his ethical standards. In truth, we can eat kosher when our food reflects our ethical ideals!

In Leviticus, *kashrut* is defined by looking at the animal and how it is slaughtered. But for us, we can view *kashrut* as much more. Its significance and relevance are personal encounters with the sacred. Think about it—don't make it a firm "no", but give yourself the ability to see it as a "not yet" spiritual opportunity.