

KASHRUT
BETH EL MARCH 29, 2008

Just when you thought it was safe to drink the water ...

the OU, the largest governing Kashrut organization in the world, issued a directive a few years ago that restaurants and caterers in New York should filter their water in order to make certain that there are no copepods—

small, nearly microscopic, crustacean organisms—in the water.

As you no doubt know, the Torah forbids us to eat shellfish.

According to the OU any copepod in the water might make the water treyf.

In a similar vein, the Orthodox rabbis in Israel ruled that it was forbidden to drink the water during Passover because fishermen might have used bread as bait, thus turning the entire Sea of Galilee – the Kineret – into hametz.

And Orthodox rabbis are kept very busy ensuring that genetically engineered enzymes used in food production are kosher.

These are of course extreme examples of efforts to observe the Jewish dietary laws which designate some food permitted and other food forbidden.

This week's Torah portion, Shemini, categorizes for us the animals, fowl and fish according to whether or not they are acceptable or abominable.

God tells us that we may eat any animal that has BOTH cloven hooves AND that chews its cud; and any fish that has BOTH fins AND scales.

In its original platform of 1885, the Reform Movement rejected laws of this nature, finding them to be, not only archaic, but also, a hindrance to achieving spirituality and a connection to the divine.

In contrast, the original version of the latest Reform platform, written by Rabbi Richard Levy, encourages us to practice kashrut as a means to achieve a higher level of holiness.

But, as my colleague Rabbi Michael Lotker once asked, Does God really care about what I eat for lunch?

The kosher laws are not laws for which God gives us any explanation.

The Torah does not say that certain animals are harmful to our health, for example, despite what many believe to be the origin of kashrut. Indeed, the commentary Akedat Yitzhak rejects this line of reasoning, saying:

“We would do well to bear in mind that the dietary laws are not, as some have asserted, motivated by therapeutic considerations.

God forbid! Were that so, the Torah would be denigrated to the status of a minor medical treatise...” –

and could be superseded and superfluous once we figured out how to make that food safe.

The commentator Abravanel adds: “There are ... poisonous herbs not explicitly forbidden by the Torah. All this merely teaches us that the Divine Law did not come to take the place of a medical handbook.”

Additionally, the Sefer Ha-hinukh comments: “You should know that the cause and effect of these prohibitions were not divulged – for our benefit, lest people with scientific pretensions should argue ‘The deleterious effects attributed by the Torah to this food is only applicable in certain climates and with certain types of people.’”

So what are these laws all about?

Well, there are as many rationales as there are species.

One is that pork is pagan. There is evidence that the Canaanites ate pig and that it was offered as a sacrifice in idolatrous worship.

The prophet Isaiah rails against those “who present as oblation the blood of swine,”¹ warning that those who offer swine’s flesh will be consumed. As Sir James Frazer writes in *The Golden Bough*, pig meat was forbidden because it had originally been a sacrificial animal. He says:

“All so-called unclean animals were originally sacred. . . .

The reason for not eating them is that many were originally divine.”

Philo of Alexandria associates who are with what we eat.

He says: “Just as a cud-chewing animal after biting through the food keeps it at rest in the gullet, again after a bit draws it up and chews it and then passes it on to the belly, so the student, after receiving from the teacher, through his ears, the principles and lore of wisdom, prolongs the process of learning, since he cannot at once comprehend and grasp them securely,

¹ 66:3.

until, by using memory to call up each thing that he has heard . . .

he stamps a firm impression of them on his soul.”²

In other words, it is only by chewing over the facts and concepts that the student learns that he can come to a full understanding of the material he is learning.

Midrash Tanhuma (Shemini 7) suggests that these mitzvot about food were given “solely in order to train people.”

“For what does it matter” it says,” the Blessed Holy One... about the ‘purity’ or ‘impurity’ of the animals we eat?”

Levi Yitzhak believe that, by being careful about what we put into our mouths to eat, we will also be careful about the words we speak. Thus observing kashrut will help prevent us from lying or engaging in *lashon hara* – harmful gossip.

John Prager and Joseph Telushkin offer six reasons,

for observing kashrut in *Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*:

1. To limit the number of animals the Jew is permitted to kill and eat.
2. To render the slaughter of the permitted animals as painless as possible.

² *Special Laws*, 4:106–107, *ibid*.

3. To cause revulsion at the shedding of blood.
4. To instill self-discipline in the Jew.
5. To help sustain Judaism and the cohesion of the Jewish community.
6. To raise the act of eating from an animal like level to one of holiness.

As Rabbi Lotker suggests, Kashrut thus means that,

every time I sit down to eat meat,

I must confront the fact that, in the words of Harold Kushner,

“eating meat is a moral compromise,”

that an animal had to give its life so that I could eat.

Kashrut means that I’m not like an animal.

I cannot eat anything that I want. I have to exercise some control.

We are created both in the image of animals and in the image of God.

Just like the animals we need to tend to our bodily needs.

But Judaism asks us to elevate these functions to reflect the fact

that we are also created in the divine image.

Jewish life means the conscious curbing of our appetites.

Eleazar ben Azariah taught, “Don’t say,

‘I have no desire to eat swine's flesh,’ but rather say,

‘I would like to eat it, but what can I do seeing that

my Father in heaven has decreed against it?”³

Even Philo of Alexandria said:

“Among the different kinds of land animals there is none whose flesh is so delicious as the pig’s, as all who eat it agree.”⁴

But sometimes God says: “No.”

Avoiding pig helps establish controls and boundaries in life.

Not every appetite is worthy of being satiated.

Unlike animals we don’t eat what ever happens to be lying around.

We bless and thank God before and after eating.

This is how we elevate the act of eating to a level of holiness.

As Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin states,

”In this sense, kashrut becomes a metaphor for life.

The whole world is not mine. I cannot always spend money the way I want, have sex with whomever I want, say anything I want, abuse the earth according to what I think I want.

Controls and boundaries are sorely lacking in our world.

We may want comfort and convenience and consumer gratification, but we need challenge and covenant and community and consecration.”

³ *Sifra, K’doshim*, 11:22.

⁴ *Special Laws*, 4:100–101, quoted in James Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998].

By transforming an activity that we often perform mindlessly,
into one of thoughtfulness and awareness,
we add a measure of holiness to our lives.

It is thus the spirit, almost more than the letter of the law,
that makes the observance of kashrut meaningful.

That is why the concern over finding microscopic crustaceans
in our water supply strikes me as overly punctilious.

By the same token, following the laws of kashrut
without regard to the conditions of the food preparation
violates the spirit of the law in my view.

The kosher laws mandate
the humane slaughter of animals.

If we adhere, not only to the letter of the law,
but to its spirit as well,

I believe that kashrut should encompass a concern
for worker justice and for the environment as well.

When I buy a package stamped with a K or an O,
I want to know that these symbols represent true righteousness
on the part of the food's manufacturer.

I don't know how many of you have read a really interesting book called "Postville." It's the story of a Jewish journalist who moves from San Francisco to Iowa, and discovers that he is within striking distance of the largest glatt kosher slaughterhouse in the world. The book ends up being an expose of this company -- Agriprocessors.

The butchers performed shechichta on the animals – in other words, they sliced their jugular with a smooth sharpened knife as mandated by the laws of kashrut.

However, the plant exploited its workers and mistreated the animals in other ways.

Agriprocessors employed many undocumented immigrants, paying them very low wages and offering them no benefits when our tradition explicitly tells us that we must treat our laborers fairly.

And the animals were kept in a pen, fully aware of what awaited them as they were thrown down a chute, then attached to an apparatus that turned them upside down before they were killed.

Agriprocessors continues to be investigated by civil

as well as religious authorities.

I am pleased to report that the Conservative Movement of Judaism has recently been awarded a grant to develop a Heksher Tzedek – a certification of ethical kashrut – which will be given to food products that comply with fair and ethical worker conditions.

As a leader of the Movement asserted:

“Discovering the overlap between our commitment to ritual mitzvot and social justice is exactly where the Conservative Movement needs to be.”

I agree – so should all of Judaism in my view.

So, to return to my friend Rabbi Michael Lotker who asked:

Does God really care what I have for lunch?

His answer, and mine as well, is, Yes, in that God demands that

I be conscious of the animal life I am taking.

Yes in that God demands that I never take the gift of food for granted.

Yes in that God demands that I be concerned with the pain inflicted on all of God’s creatures. Yes in that God wants me to be shocked and repulsed by the sight of blood.

Yes in that God wants me to join with other Jews in community.

And yes in that God wants me never to forget that,

although I may seem to be created in the image of an animal,

I am more than that. I'm a human being and a Jew.

I am called to a higher standard of holiness.