

# The Basics of Kashrut

Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun

## 1. Why keep kosher? It is NOT about healthy eating.

- a. It IS about holiness. (**Leviticus 11** and **Deut. 14** – detail the specific animals that are kosher and not kosher – land, air, and sea. But also says this is about being Holy: Lev. 11:44-45 and Deut. 14:2, 21.)
- b. The ideal was for human beings to be vegetarians. (Gen. 1:28-29 and Gen. 3:17-19; Gen. 9:3-4 – after the Flood, God allowed Noah to eat meat.)
- c. Kashrut is about restricting our diet of meat. It is about the sacredness of all life – including animals' lives and the need to be aware that our enjoyment of meat comes at the expense of the life of an animal.
- d. It is about kindness to animals – even when we kill them for food.
- e. It is about our (the Jewish people's) special relationship with God.

## 2. It is all about restricting our diet of meat.

- a. Only certain animals may be eaten. (Leviticus 11, Deut. 14) **Fish** with fins and scales. **Land animals** with split hooves and chew their cud. **Birds** that are not on the list of forbidden birds (generally, predatory and scavenger birds, but also many others including ostriches)
  - b. They must be killed in a humane way, draining all the blood which symbolizes life. (except for fish)
  - c. We separate meat (death) from milk (the ultimate life-nourishing nutrient). (Ex. 23:19, Ex. 34:26 and Deut. 14:21)
  - d. Foods that are neither made from meat of land animals or birds, nor made from dairy products (milk, cheese, whey, etc.) are “Pareve” and can be eaten with either dairy or meat foods.
  - e. A kosher kitchen has separate utensils for meat and dairy foods.
  - f. Commercial food products use a variety of food colorings, flavorings, emulsifiers, thickeners, non-stick sprays, etc. that can come from non-kosher sources. The safest way to avoid this problem is to purchase only food products that have been supervised by a kosher observer to verify that no non-kosher products were used in making the food.
  - g. When eating out at restaurants, the safest way to avoid these problems is to only eat at supervised restaurants. But in many cities that limits your options a lot.
3. It does not have to be taken on all at once, but one can slowly grow into a kosher lifestyle – giving up pork, then shellfish, then meat that is not supervised, etc.

# WHY KEEP KOSHER?

(Compiled and edited by Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun)

## Torah – It's about Holiness

“You shall be holy people to Me: you must not eat flesh torn by beasts in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs.” (Exodus 22:30)

“For I the LORD am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. (Leviticus 11:44)

“For you are a people consecrated to the LORD your God: the LORD your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people. You shall not eat anything abhorrent. These are the animals that you may eat...” (Deuteronomy 14:2-4)

## In the Beginning, the Diet Was Vegetarian

### *Genesis 1:28-29*

“[28] God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky and all the living things that creep on earth.’ [29] God said, ‘See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.’”

### *Genesis 3:17-19*

*[After eating the “forbidden fruit,” God tells Adam that he will have to work hard to get food from the earth. Here again, the diet is to be vegetarian:]*

“[17] To Adam He said, ‘Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed be ground because of you. By toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life: [18] Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field. [19] By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat....”

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### *Genesis 9:3-4*

**[After the flood, Noah and his descendants – i.e., all humans – are granted permission to eat animals:]**

*[God speaking to Noah]* “[3] Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. [4] You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it.”

### **[Isaiah predicts vegetarianism in the world to come:] Isaiah 11:6-9**

“[6] The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and fatling together, with a boy to herd them. [7] The cow and bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw. [8] A babe shall play over a viper’s hole, and an infant pass his hand over an adder’s den. [9] In all of My sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done; for the land shall be filled with devotion to the LORD as water covers the sea.”

## Isaac Abarbanel

[Spanish scholar who lived 1437-1508. The quotation below is taken from his comment on *Parshat Shemini*, s.v. *issur hama'akhaklim*.]

“God forbid that I should believe [that the reasons for prohibiting the forbidden foods are medical]! For if this were so, the book of God’s Law would be on the same level as a small book among medical books. ... But this is not the way of the Law of God and the depth of its meaning. Moreover, we see with our own eyes that the other nations eat pork and insects and ... all the other types of unclean fowl, beasts, and fish and they are all alive today and well. ... Furthermore, there are animals that are widely known to cause injury ... which are not mentioned at all among the prohibited ones. Also, there are among the herbs and plants those that cause injury or death by means of their poisons ... and the Torah does not prohibit eating them. All of which teaches that the Law of God did not come to heal bodies and seek their well-being, but to seek the well-being of the soul and heal its illnesses.”

## Bradley Shavit Artson

[The quotation below is taken from Bradley Artson *It's a Mitzvah!* (New Jersey: Behrman House, 1995), p. 87.]

“Kashrut harnesses the act of eating to our identity, our community, and our morality. For thousands of years, the dietary laws have created a potent bond, solidifying Jewish identity, forging a link with Jews throughout time and across the globe, and strengthening family and friends into communities devoted to a more humane order on Earth. Through the regimen of kashrut, we learn that we can discipline ourselves, enjoying the pleasures of life while affirming our highest sense of humanity. Kashrut allows us to establish a sense of control in a world that is, in many ways, random and chaotic. Finally, the practice of kashrut, motivated at its core by a recognition of the holiness of all living things, can instill in us a sensitivity to the suffering of animals and a sense of responsibility to other forms of life.”

## Samuel H. Dresner

[The following quotations and paraphrasing have been taken from Samuel Dresner “The Jewish Dietary Laws: Their Meaning for Our Time” in *The Jewish Dietary Laws*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly of America and United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1982).]

“How does Kashrut hallow the act of eating? Kashrut teaches, first of all, that the eating of meat is itself a sort of *compromise*. To many it will come as a surprise that Adam, the first man, was not permitted to eat meat. Yet we have only to look closely at the Biblical text to see that this was surely the case.” [p. 21] [See [Genesis 1:28-29](#)]

“The law for Adam and the law for Noah both represent man: Adam in the Garden of Eden in his ideal state, Noah outside the Garden of Eden in his real state. Adam was not satisfied to live in the paradisaical society. He rebelled against God and turned away from him. He wanted the flesh of living creatures for his food and was prepared to kill to obtain it. And so it was with his descendants. Man ideally should not eat meat, for to eat meat a life must be taken, an animal must be put to death. But man will eat meat. It is his desire and, perhaps, too, his need.

“Just as at the beginning of time, in the perfect society as symbolized by the Garden of Eden, there was no eating of meat, so at the end of time, in the perfect society as described the prophet Isaiah, there will be a return to the original state.” [p. 23] [See [Isaiah 11:6-9](#)]

“Included in the prophet’s description of the future perfect society where all conflict within nature will give way to peace and harmony is the fact that the lion shall no longer live on the flesh of other beasts but like the ox eat the growth of the field. And can we, therefore, not draw the inference that if the carnivorous animal will disappear at the end of time, how much more so the carnivorous man? If blood-thirsty animals will themselves no longer devour other animals but live on fruits and vegetables and even straw, how much more so man? Man too, then, in the future time will no longer eat meat.” [p. 24]

“The permission to eat meat is thus seen to be a compromise, *a divine concession to human weakness and human need*. The Torah, as it were, says: ‘I would prefer that you abstain from eating meat altogether, that you subsist on that which springs forth from the earth, for to eat meat the life of an animal must be taken and that is a fearful act. But since you are not perfect men and your world is neither a Garden of Eden nor the Kingdom of God, since your desires cannot be stopped nor your nutritional requirements altered, they must at least be controlled; since you will eat meat and since, perhaps you need to eat meat, you may eat it, but with one restriction – that you have reverence for the life that you take.’” [p. 26]

“The laws of *Sh’chitah* provide the most humane method of slaughtering animals. Great care is exercised that the knife to be used must be regularly examined before and after it is used to determine that it is perfectly smooth, without a notch that might tear the flesh. ... The one who slaughters the animal, the *Shochet*, must be carefully chosen. ... [He] must be both a learned and pious person ... and is obliged to recite a blessing before he executes his duties, ever reminding him of the nature of his labor, that this whole process is but a ‘divine concession.’” [pp. 27-8] “... [A]nimals which are *n’velah* (that which dieth of itself) or *t’refah* (that which is killed by another animal) are forbidden. Such animals have not been killed according to the Law, which procedure alone renders them permissible for food, since it alone attempts to reverence the life it takes.” [p. 29]

“It is not enough that the animal must be killed in the most humane way, that the life of the animal is taken with care and concern, but even the *symbol* of life, the blood, must be removed. ... There is no clearer visible symbol of life than blood. To spill blood is to bring death. To inject blood is often to save life. The removal of blood which Kashrut teaches is one of the most powerful means of making us constantly aware of the concession and compromise which the whole act of eating meat, in reality, is.” [p.29]

Kashrut is only one spice in the blend that creates the Jewish flavor of holiness at the dining table. After noting that the Talmud equates the table upon which we eat with the altar of the Temple [Avot 3:3; Berakhot 55a], Dresner lists some of the points of similarity: (i) we ritually wash our hands before eating bread, just as the priests used to wash their hands before offering a sacrifice [e.g., Mishnah Tamid 1:4, 2:1]; (ii) we sprinkle salt on the bread, just as the meal offerings were salted (Leviticus 2:13); and (iii) during the Grace after the meal, knives are covered or removed from the table because knives were not allowed on the altar, since they are an instrument of war and the altar was a symbol of peace [cf. Mishnah Middot 3:4]. In addition, Dresner notes other rituals of a meal which serve to consecrate it: we bless the food before eating it and recite Grace afterwards reminding us of God’s goodness and lovingkindness which provided for our needs, and during the meal we should speak some words of Torah to nourish our souls while we nourish our bodies [see Avot 3:3, and Megillah 12b].

*Dresner concludes*: “Today we have no Temple in Jerusalem, no altar there, no sacrifices, no priests to minister. But in their stead we have something even greater. For every home can be a Temple, every table an altar, every meal a sacrifice and every Jew a priest. And what was formerly an animal function, a meaningless, mechanical behavior, is suddenly transformed into an elaborate ritual full of mystery and meaning.” [pp. 39-40]

“Kashrut ... demands sacrifice, self-discipline and determination – but what that is really worthwhile in life does not? It demands the courage to turn our face against the powerful current of conformity that almost overcomes us daily, not only against the gentile world as in the past (that was difficult enough, yet in doing so, one could always feel part of an united people), but against the majority of the Jewish world, thus standing witness to God amongst our own nation as well as the ‘nations.’ ... Perhaps we should thus describe the Jew who observes Kashrut today as ... “tradition”-directed. It is the weight of the centuries which he carries in his soul that gives him strength, the yoke of the

*halakhah*, the “way,” which determines his course, the long chain of tradition to which he is bound and to which he yearns to add one more link, that guides his path – while before his eyes remains the glorious vision of the end of time when all nations will be one. Because he says “yes” to the glory and the grandeur of Jewish tradition, he has the courage to say “no” to the world with all its allurements and blandishments, with all its captivating call to conformity. The problem of Kashrut is very much involved with the will to live as a Jew.” [pp. 53-54]

### **Abraham J. Heschel**

[The following is excerpted from *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Young, Inc., 1951), p. 265, 267.]

*With respect to the performance of mitzvot generally:*

“In our relation to the immediate we touch upon the most distant. Even the satisfaction of physical needs can be a sacred act. Perhaps the essential message of Judaism is that in doing the finite we may perceive the infinite. ...

“God is not hiding in a temple. The Torah came to tell inattentive man: ‘You are not alone, you live constantly in holy neighborhood; remember: ‘Love thy neighbor – God – as thyself.’” We are not asked to abandon life and to say farewell to this world, but to keep the spark within aflame, and to suffer His light to reflect in our face....

“Judaism teaches us how even the gratification of animal needs can be an act of sanctification. The enjoyment of food may be a way of purification. Something of my soul may be drowned in a glass of water, when its content is gulped down as if nothing in the world mattered except my thirst. But we can come a bit closer to God, when remembering Him still more in excitement and passion.”














### **Peter Knobel**

[The following is a paraphrase of Peter Knobel “A Reform Perspective on Kashrut” *Reform Judaism*, Summer 1995, p. 25.]

*The famous Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform) held that the laws of kashrut (among other rituals) “originated in ages and under the influence of ideals altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our day is apt rather to obstruct than further modern spiritual elevation.” However, almost a century later, the movement changed its position by nearly 180 degrees. In Gates of Mitzvah (CCAR 1979) it is recommended that Reform Jews observe some type of kashrut on a daily basis, and in the 1988 Call to Commitment of the Joint UAHC-CCAR Task Force on Spirituality, it states, “Such elements of our tradition as talit, kippah and kashrut can deepen and confirm the faith of Reform Jews who choose them.” The primary reason given in Gates of Mitzvah for observing kashrut was, in fact, to promote holiness – both an inner sense of holiness and an outward separation. Also given as reasons were (i) a sense of unity with the Jewish people all over the world, (ii) an ethical discipline, (iii) the authority of Biblical and Rabbinic injunctions, and (iv) the ability to have any Jew feel comfortable eating in one’s home.*






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	The "RCC" Community Kashrus Division of the Rabbinical Council of California Rabbi Nissim Davidi & Rabbi Avromon Union - Rabbinic Admin Phone: (213) 489-8080; Fax: (213) 489-8077
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**Some Web Sites Dealing with Kashrut**

<http://www.kashrusmagazine.com/>

<https://oukosher.org/> and [https://www.ou.org/jewish\\_action/food/kashrut/](https://www.ou.org/jewish_action/food/kashrut/)

<http://www.kashrut.com/> and <http://www.kashrut.com/articles/>

<http://www.jewfaq.org/kashrut.htm>

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/kashrut-dietary-laws/>

# HOW TO BEGIN KEEPING KOSHER

Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun

## LEVELS OF OBSERVANCE – IT IS NOT “ALL OR NOTHING”

By integrating the Jewish dietary laws into our lives and our communities, add a level of *kedusha* (holiness) into our daily routine, affirming our Jewishness, as well as making a conscious commitment to the preciousness of life.

If you have never kept kosher, it may seem like an insurmountable task – getting new dishes, depriving your family of certain foods, discarding some of your favorite recipes, shopping for food with greater care. The key is to enjoy each new step. Only by progressing gradually, advancing to a new step only when ready will it be possible to retain a sense of meaningful observance, rather than feeling you are adding a new burden to your life.

Moving on the ladder of holiness step-by-step is not hypocritical. It is a way to grow in observance.

## STEPS TO KEEPING KOSHER

Adapted from “Jewish Living Now: *Kashrut* – Moving up the Ladder,” a United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism pamphlet.

### **Step 1: Don’t eat Pork**

The first rung up the ladder of *kashrut* observance is the abstinence from all pork products. Although pork has no greater biblical significance than any other unkosher meat it has become a symbol of *kashrut*. Not only are pigs the first animals thought of when *kashrut* is discussed, but historically, forcing Jews to eat pork has been a form of persecution since the time of the Maccabees.

As a first step towards keeping kosher, refrain from eating pig products: e.g., ham, bacon, pork chops, etc. This simple step will force you to think about what you are eating and how that fits in with your commitment to living a Jewish life.

### **Step 2: Don’t Eat Shell Fish**

While pork is the best known of the forbidden foods, there are many others. Of these, shellfish are the most commonly eaten in America and Canada today. Therefore, the avoidance of all shellfish should be the second step up the ladder of *kashrut* observance.

In general, we are permitted to eat any fish that has [fins and scales](#) – e.g., tuna and salmon. Fish without either fins or scales are forbidden. This includes: clams, oysters, mussels, crab, lobster, octopus, squid, etc.

### **Step 3: Eat only Biblically Permitted Meats**

The next rung in *Kashrut* commitment is the eating of only “biblically permitted” meat. The only animals that are kosher are certain [poultry](#) and [land mammals](#) that have cloven hooves and chew their cud. Some refer to this level of kosher as “biblical *kashrut*” because it entails eating only those animals permitted in the Torah. For example, a pig has cloven hooves, but does not chew its cud, therefore it is not considered kosher. A full observance of *kashrut* requires the kosher slaughter of animals.

### **Step 4: Separate Milk and Meat**

After becoming comfortable with the avoidance of prohibited foods, it is time to move on to the next rung of *kashrut* observance – the separation of milk and meat.

“Milk” in the context of *kashrut* refers to any food product which contains either milk, or milk derivatives.

“Meat” refers to all meat and meat derivatives. (Please note that within *Kashrut*, poultry (e.g., chickens and turkey) are considered to be meat. Fish is considered to be neither milk nor meat).

*Kashrut* forbids us from mixing the two categories of food together either in cooking or in eating. Examine food packages carefully to see if they contain milk or meat derivatives. If a kosher product is marked “*pareve*” this means that it is neither a milk or meat product and can be eaten with either category of foods. (See “[Certified Kosher Foods](#)”)

### **Step 5: Wait Between Milk and Meat**

Once you have adjusted to modifying your diet to the standards of *kashrut* observance, there are behavioral changes that you need to consider.

Observe a [waiting period](#) between eating a meat meal and any dairy product. This waiting period can remind us that animals are living creatures and nourished by milk. There are many traditions as to the correct time to wait between milk and meat. Many observant Jews, however, wait anywhere from 3 to 6 hours. There does not have to be a waiting period after a dairy meal.

### **Step 6: Look for the Kosher Label**

When shopping, purchase only food that has a [kosher label](#) on it. A kosher label tells you that the food was produced or prepared under the supervision of a specific rabbinic authority.

The kosher label will assure you that the product does not contain any derivatives from unkosher sources. It also may inform you if the food item is *pareve* (neither milk nor meat).

### **Step 7: Eat Only Kosher Meat**

The next step is to eat only kosher meat. The kosher status of meat is determined both by the species of animal (e.g., no pork products) and by the [method of slaughter](#). To be kosher an animal must be slaughtered by a *shochet*, a slaughterer knowledgeable in the laws of *kashrut*.

The knife used must be sharp with no imperfections, and the animal must be killed with one cut severing its throat. This minimizes the animal’s pain while also draining the blood from the meat.

In addition, the meat must be [soaked in water](#) and salted to remove any remaining blood. It is only after all these steps are followed that the meat is considered fit, “kosher,” and can be eaten. (Most kosher meat is now soaked and salted before purchase.)

### **Step 8: Kasher Your Kitchen**

Kashering your kitchen is an important step in the ladder of commitment. Now that you have changed your diet and eating habits, you should look into the acquisition of separate dishes to be used for milk and meat meals. Your kitchen should also be *kashered*, cleansed of any unkosher foods, or remnants. Your rabbi and synagogue may have resources available to help you in the *kashering* process.

### **AN ALTERNATIVE PLAN: A TWELVE STEP PROGRAM**

Rabbi Jack Moline has suggested a 12-month family program for the adoption of *Kashrut*. Each month, the family adds a new observance – takes a new step up the ladder. This yearlong plan is based on his idea:

Tishrei	Don’t Eat Pork
Heshvan	Eliminate Shellfish
Kislev	Only Biblically Permitted Meats
Tevet	Separate Milk and Meat
Sh’vat	Wait Between Milk and Meat

Adar	Look for the Kosher Label
Nisan	Experiment with Full <i>Kashrut</i>
Iyyar	Purchase Necessary Replacement Items
Sivan	<i>Kasher</i> the Kitchen
Tammuz	Get Comfortable
Av	Celebratory Barbecue (after Tisha B'Av)
Elul	Invite Families not Keeping Kosher to Dinner

### **RAISING KASHRUT CONSCIOUSNESS -- A FAMILY ACTIVITY**

(Adapted from *Kashrut* Activity by Rabbi Shelley Kniaz, *Tov L'Horot*, 3 — the Newsletter of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism's Department of Education.)

Here are some ways for you and your family to take a step or two to sense how it feels to keep kosher. Try one of these alternatives for a week. They will give your family a chance to experience some aspects of keeping kosher. Of course, they do not constitute keeping kosher (that requires separate utensils and kosher meat) but it is a way to put *kashrut* on the family agenda.

Members of your family might each want to keep a journal of what they did to keep kosher, how this affected them, and what they thought.

#### **Alternative #1**

- a) Go to a kosher butcher with your child to buy meat. Kosher frozen meat might also be available at a supermarket.
- b) Plan meals with your child that do not mix meat and milk foods.
- c) If you eat out this week, choose a kosher restaurant with you child OR eat only dairy foods or fish that are kosher in the restaurant of your choice.

#### **Alternative #2**

- a) Plan meals with your child which do not require any forbidden foods such as pork or shellfish.
- b) Plan meals with your child which do not mix meat and milk foods.
- c) If you eat out during this week, choose a kosher restaurant with your child Or avoid forbidden foods and mixing meat and milk in your meal.

#### **Alternative #3**

- a) Go to a kosher restaurant with your child. Look at the menu. What are the possible combinations of foods in this kosher meal?
- b) Plan some meals with your child which do not combine milk and meat foods. Avoid forbidden foods such as shellfish or pork.

With any of the above alternatives when shopping during the week, check for the U-O or other *kashrut* symbols on packaged foods.

Your child may also decide to consider *kashrut* when packing a lunch for school.