

Kashrut

This week's portion, Re'eh, summarizes the Jewish dietary laws (kashrut -- fitness): [Deut 14:3-21]

- You shall not eat any abomination. [Deut 14:3]
- These are the animals that you may eat: ox, lamb, and kid; gazelle, deer, and antelope, ibex, chamois, bison, and giraffe. And every animal that has a split hoof and has a hoof cloven into two hoof sections, [and] chews the cud among the animals that you may eat. [Deut 14:4-6]
- These you may eat of all that are in the waters: all that have fins and scales, you may eat. But whatever does not have fins and scales, you shall not eat; it is unclean for you. [Deut 14:9-10]
- You may eat every clean bird. But these are those from which you shall not eat:... . [Deut 14:11-12]
- Every flying insect is unclean for you. [Deut 14:19]
- You shall not eat any carcass [animal not properly slaughtered]. You may give it to the stranger who is in your cities, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner; for you are a holy people to the Lord your God.[Deut 14:21]
- You shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk. [Deut 14:21]

Rules of kashrut

Biblically prohibited foods

- Animals that do not both chew the cud and have split hooves
 - Both are necessary. Forbidden are the camel, the hyrax, and the hare, which chew the cud but do not have split hooves, and the pig, which has split hooves but does not chew the cud.
- The milk, eggs, or other products of such animals
- Birds with no tradition of being eaten
 - Torah only lists 21 *non*-kosher birds
- Fish that do not have both scales and fins (e.g., shellfish)
- Reptiles or amphibians
- Animals that have not been slaughtered according to the laws of *shechitha*

- Land animals, which were created from the soil, are rendered fit to eat by the severing of both vital passages (the windpipe and the gullet).
- Fish, which were created from the water, do not require any *shechitah*.
- Birds, which were created from a mixture of soil and water, are rendered fit to eat with the severing of either one of the two vital passages. [Chullin 27b]
- Animals with significant defects or injuries
 - 70 categories of abnormalities
- Insects (except some locusts)
 - Vegetables must be checked for infestation
- Blood (removed through salting) [Lev. 3:7, 17:11]
- Some fats (*chelev*) [Lev. 7:23-25]
- The sciatic nerve (because Jacob's was damaged when he fought with the angel) [Genesis 32:33]
- The limb of a living animal [Genesis 9:4].
 - This is even one of the 7 Noahide laws, which apply to all mankind
- Untithed food (*tevel*)
- Fruit during the first three years (*orlah*) [Leviticus 19:23]
- New grain [Leviticus 23:14]
- Wine that may have been used for idolatry
- Chametz (leavened items) during Pessah

Biblically prohibited mixtures

- Mixtures of milk and meat [Ex. 23:19, 34:26; Deut. 14:21]
 - Use two sets of dishes and utensils
 - Wait up to 6 hours after meat before eating dairy
 - Some also wait up to 3 hours after dairy before eating meat
 - Fish are pareve – neither milk nor meat
 - But Sephardim avoid eating fish with milk
 - May not even derive benefit from such mixture
 - But may derive benefit from other non-kosher food
- Interbred plants or animals (*kil'ayim*)
 - “You shall not sow your field with a mixture of seeds” [Lev. 19:19]
 - Some permit eating but not planting

Rabbinically prohibited foods (observance varies)

- Non-Jewish wine: May have been produced for idolatrous purposes
- Non-Jewish milk: May include milk from non-kosher animals
- Non-Jewish cheese: May have non-kosher rennet
- Non-Jewish bread [Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 112:1]

- Food cooked by a non-Jew [Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 113:1ff]
- Food the Talmud considers unhealthy, such as mixtures of fish and meat [Pesachim 76b; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 116:2]
 - They may be eaten in the same meal, but not mixed together

Comments on kashrut

- The Torah lists the *chassidah* (stork) as a non-kosher bird. *Chassidah* means "kind". Talmud: This bird is called *chassidah* "because it shows kindness [hasiduth] to its companions." [Chullin 63a]
 - The Kotzker Rebbe asked: Why then, is it a non-kosher bird? Because, he explained, "it shows kindness to its companions." One must also, and especially, show kindness to the "other" -- kindness directed only towards one's peers is the mark of a non-kosher Chassid.
- The giraffe is kosher, but is not eaten because of the high cost, the difficulty in restraining it, and the fact that it is an endangered species.
- Since Hebrew National's 1960s campaign "We answer to a higher authority", many non-Jews have sought kosher food.
 - Today, non-Jews account for 80% of the kosher market in the US (Muslims, Hindus, vegetarians, people allergic to dairy, people who believe kosher is healthier, kinder to animals, etc.)

Possible reasons for kashrut

- Kashrut is a *chok* (commandment whose rationale is not obvious). So the first reason is: Because God said so
 - Nevertheless, tradition allows us to speculate on possible reasons for commandments, as long as we continue to observe them no matter what conclusions we reach. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Korbanot, Temurah 4:13]
- Limiting the killing of animals
- Slaughtering animals in humane fashion, to minimize pain
- Encouraging us to be vegetarian
 - By making the consumption of meat difficult

-Separating life (milk) from death (meat)

-Health concerns

- Incompletely cooked pork can cause trichinosis
- Shellfish easily accumulates bacteria and toxins
- Unlikely reason because Torah says: "You may give [unkosher meat] to the stranger who is in your cities, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner." Surely Torah would not want to harm non-Jews.

-Teaching self-discipline

- Any constraints achieve that goal

-Encouraging cohesion of the Jewish people

- But it also discourages socialization with non-Jews

-You are what you eat

- Ramban: The birds and many of the mammals forbidden by the Torah are predators, while the permitted animals are not. We are commanded not to eat those animals that have a cruel nature, so that we should not absorb these qualities into ourselves. [Nachmanides]

-All fish that have scales also have fins (and are thus kosher). But there are fish that have fins but do not have scales, and are thus impure. If so, the Torah could have written only "scales," without having to also write "fins"? ... Said Rabbi Abbahu, and so it was learned in the study house of Rabbi Yishmael: This is so that "Torah may be increased and made great" [Isaiah 42:21]. [Niddah 51b]

-A contemporary rabbi explains: Behind all the laws of kashrut is the concept that the soul is influenced by whatever the body eats. The Talmud states that the kosher birds are the ones that are non-aggressive, so that we shouldn't absorb bad character traits by eating them. This can also explain the requirement for kosher animals having split hooves which are used for fleeing, as opposed to claws used for attacking. Chewing the cud is the compensation to allow these species to flee when necessary but still be able to maintain an appropriate intake of food in harsh environments. In a short stay upon a fertile feeding ground they are able to accumulate enough fodder to survive, and they can flee at the appearance of an attacker and digest their food later.

The same applies to fish: the fins aid retreat while the scales act as a protective covering. Together, they are specifications which classify them as the hunted and not as the hunters.

-Mystical reasons

-Hassidic: The great Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, taught that every created thing possesses a "spark" of divine energy that constitutes its essence and soul. When a person utilizes something toward a godly end, he brings to light this divine spark, manifesting and realizing the purpose for which it was created.

Thus, one who eats a piece of kosher meat and then uses the energy gained from it to perform a mitzvah, thereby elevates the spark of divinity that is the essence of the meat, freeing it of its mundane incarnation and raising it to a state of fulfilled spirituality. However, if one would do the same with a piece of non-kosher meat, no such "elevation" would take place. Even if he applied the energy to positive and godly ends, this would not constitute a realization of the divine purpose in the meat's creation, since the consumption of the meat was an express violation of the divine will.
[The Chassidic Masters]