

You Are What You Eat

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On the night before he converted to Judaism many years ago, Bill* sat in our den with a group of friends, watching a movie and having dinner. The following day, he was going to be remarrying his wife in a Jewish ceremony under a Chuppah, so this even was called a “bachelor party,” the most kosher and possibly lamest one ever. As the evening winded down, my father asked Bill whether there were any foods he would miss now that his diet was about to become, officially, considerably more limited. Bill grew up in the deep South, and had eaten *everything*. Squirrel, possum, alligator, snake, crayfish- you name it, he had ingested it. Thinking for a moment, Bill said, “You know, having eaten all that stuff, I can’t really say there’s anything I miss. I think that Hashem makes something kosher to replace anything you can’t eat. You know the joke about how alligator tastes like chicken? It *does* taste like chicken! ”

Perhaps unwittingly, Bill referenced the statement that Yalta, the legendary wife of the Talmudic sage Rav Nachman told her husband¹ – that God created kosher alternatives for every non-kosher food. Alternatives notwithstanding, the Torah

¹ Chullin 109b

does place a great deal of emphasis upon what we eat, particularly in this week's Torah reading. First, the Torah offers several scenarios in which eating blood is prohibited. For example, when you offer sacrifices, you can and must eat the parts that are meant for you, but you cannot eat the blood (Devarim 12:16):

רק הדם לא תאכלו על־הָאָרֶץ תִּשְׁפְּכוּ כַּמַּיִם:

But you must not partake of the blood; you shall pour it out on the ground like water.

The Torah is just getting warmed up about blood. In the next section, the Torah permits us to eat meat that is not sacrificial in nature- with one caveat (Devarim 12:23)

רק חֹזֶק לְבַלְתִּי אֲכֹל הַדָּם כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְלֹא־תֹאכַל הַנֶּפֶשׁ עִם־הַבָּשָׂר:

But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh.

This is why we salt kosher meat- it draws out the blood that is still contained in the animal's body. What is interesting, though, is the Torah's language. "Strengthen yourself," the Torah says. You know you will want to eat blood, so you must do everything possible to resist the urge. Will you, though? You have an entire animal at your disposal, and the one thing you want to eat is *the blood*? Rashi quotes Ben Azzai, who views this as a paradigm for all mitzvot. If blood, from which most people recoil, requires us to strengthen ourselves, then other mitzvot, which do not

awaken the same level of revulsion, certainly require our vigilance and initiative to encourage their performance. But that still begs the question: If this is something we recoil from, why does the Torah require us to be careful? What could possibly induce us to eat something we would otherwise find repulsive?

Furthermore, the Torah, in its concern for our diets, delineates an entire list of animals that are permitted, and another list of animals that are prohibited- everything Bill used to eat in his earlier years. It would make sense that the Torah should discuss all these matters together- avoiding blood, laws of *shechitah* and a list of kosher and non-kosher animals. But the Torah does not do that. Instead, it pauses to describe a series of other scenarios: A false prophet tantalizes you with dreams you believe in, but are never fulfilled. A loved one trades upon your relationship to induce you to idolatry. An entire city succumbs to the convincing rhetoric of those who worship foreign Gods. Why does the Torah insert these in the middle of its dietary laws?

I think there is a common denominator here that answers both questions: *peer pressure*. The Torah understood that on our own, we may not be interested in consuming blood- but we would be if a friend was doing it. Perhaps, on our own, we may not be interested in idol worship, but we could be swayed by a prophet showing us superficial signs, a friend or relative who invites us to a church service,

or by our entire network of friends and community who begin practicing idolatry. The same thing applies to kosher animals, and then, to the Torah's final prohibition- cooking, eating or selling meat and milk together. There is a social and financial cost to following dietary laws; Refraining from prohibited foods- even ones we might otherwise find disgusting- requires the same kind of resistance, of spiritual fortitude, as resisting the pressures of a friend, a sibling, a community, to abandon our religious values and principles. It could be that Bill didn't miss the *taste* of braised possum, alligator steaks or snake tartar, but I'm sure Bill missed the *culture* around partaking of these foods- the familial meals and communal gatherings that he would no longer be able to join, at least not as an active participant. In prohibiting idol worship, the Torah recognizes the strong social component of religion; in regulating our diets, the Torah mandates the religious component of our social lives. That is why the Torah stresses that adhering to these laws make us קדוש- a word we usually translate as "holy," but is more accurately rendered as "separate." It does single us out, it does separate us, to be careful about what and where we eat.

It is Rosh Chodesh Elul, and this is the first sermon in a multi-part series titled "tips to tip the scales." Over three out of the next four weeks, we will be talking about practical suggestions to help tip the scales in our favor on the upcoming Yemei

HaDin, days of judgment. Of course, it should go without saying that this is a time for us to work on our *bein adam lechaveiro*, our interpersonal relationships.

Obviously, we would never say hurtful things to or about others based on their race, their religion, their political views, where they choose to educate their children and a host of other metrics. We understand the importance, especially at this time, of what comes out of our mouths- and the Torah does have many, many laws about this. But the Torah wants us to understand, as well, that we must be mindful about what goes into our mouths. It would therefore stand us in good stead if, at least for the month of Elul, we adhered consistently to a maximally kosher diet.

I know what you're thinking. Rabbi Rackovsky is a religious fanatic who has finally gone 'round the bend. But hear me out. What makes our community so wonderful is that the Yiddishkeit we practice here at Shaare is not an all-or-nothing proposition. I assure you that I am well aware of the minefield kashrus observance presents to so many in our community as they negotiate their familial and social lives. Kashrut standards can be a source of tension among friends, families and even couples. So many have to make conscious choices in their kashrut observance- what kind of kashrut they keep inside their home, whether they keep kosher outside the home and what kind of non-kosher food they eat out. It is limiting not go to a *treif* restaurant with friends or with business colleague. It is complicated when you

cannot eat the home cooked meals of your siblings. It's not just adults who deal with this, either. Our kids deal with this all the time- even those in completely Jewish schools. Dealing with these issues may require *seichel*, sensitivity and creativity to navigate, and those who do so often display discipline, sacrifice and heroism. That's why I am not suggesting a complete, permanent change in kashrus policy for everyone...at least not yet. For now, take on just a month (forty days, really, if you include *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*). Yes, it makes life more difficult, but tipping the scales does not come easy. A change in our destiny requires a change in our behavior, too. Still, for some, a dramatic shift in eating habits for a month may not be in the sphere of practical politics. If so, try changing your kashrut habits for a week or two or, at the very least, use the next month to adhere to a *higher* standard than you have been so far. Even if we fall short of the ideal, we at least understand where we should be; if we are not perfect, we should always strive to be growing. On days that we proclaim God's holiness, let us stand before God, having added more holiness to our lives.