

WHY KEEP KOSHER—WHAT’S THE POINT?

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We read in the Torah, “. . . Adonai spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying to them: Speak to the children of Israel, saying: These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are living on the earth.” (Leviticus 11:1-2)

The text then goes on to list all the permitted and forbidden animals.

We learn that permitted animals must have a split hoof and chew their cud; fish must have fins and scales. Elsewhere in the Torah we learn that we must not boil a kid in its mother’s milk, which the rabbi’s interpreted to mean that we must not mix meat and dairy products. (Deuteronomy 14:21) And, of course, we know that rabbinic law sets stringent standards for the slaughtering of animals and the *kashrut* (ritual fitness) of cooking utensils.

There is a rather surreal quality to these commandments and rabbinic ordinances, since probably more than 80 percent of American Jews ignore them. We often hear their reactions: “It’s an outdated tradition.” “It’s irrational law that I see no need to subject myself to.” “It would put unreasonable limits on my lifestyle.” “It would create distance between my family and friends and myself.” “Why keep *kosher*—what’s the point?”

It’s that last reaction that’s probably the most revealing, because the overwhelming majority of Jews who don’t keep *kosher* misunderstand the point of *kashrut*—the regimen of dietary laws specifying what is fit for Jews to eat.

The most common misunderstanding is that the purpose of *kashrut* is to foster health and hygiene, so of course keeping kosher is no longer necessary.

Apart from misunderstandings about *kashrut* that explain its disfavor among modern Jews, we also need to acknowledge that it’s inherently problematic as a *ritual commandment*.

Those two words—“ritual” and “commandment”—have an extraordinary amount of baggage for many in the modern world. The last half-century, especially, has witnessed a sharp decline in the understanding and acceptance of ritual. Likewise, there has been an increasing resistance to the idea of commandment—the “you-can’t-make-me” mindset that venerates personal autonomy and comfort above *everything* else.

It reminds Rabbi Moshe of a conversation he had many years ago on an airplane while waiting for his flight to take off. He was sitting next to a couple; they were in their late thirties and had two teenage children. Several minutes into the conversation they asked him

what he did for a living, and he answered that he was a rabbinical student. They were obviously incredulous, with expressions that seemed to say, “Funny, you don’t look like a religious fanatic.” That led to talk in which they revealed their impatience and irritation with commandments and ritual.

It prompted Rabbi Moshe to tell a hypothetical story about a group of employees flying to Europe on a company tour. Their plane crashed in the Atlantic Ocean and, as it turned out, it took five days before they were rescued. A few died, but most survived. After they were rescued and everyone had recovered, the company held a special ceremony, which was led by clergy from several faith traditions. There was an outpouring of thanks to God in song and prayer by and for the survivors. Those who died were remembered and memorialized. Those who acted selflessly and courageously were honored. And every year thereafter the company held a special memorial ceremony that all employees were strongly encouraged to attend.

Not surprisingly, none of what Rabbi Moshe related was offensive to his traveling companions.

Certainly it was a narrative about ritual, even commanded in the sense that it became company policy, but they and probably we too find it acceptable—possibly even uplifting—because we understand its connection to our lives.

It uplifts us by allowing us to confront and express our feelings and thoughts about the ineffable, that which ordinarily we cannot describe or express. We accept that in a sense we are commanded to participate, not because we can’t refuse—that option is obviously available to us—but because on some level we understand the consequences of ignoring the ineffable, of becoming spiritually bereft.

Rituals are communal investments through which we symbolically communicate with ourselves about that which we value and how as a community we are to practice and protect those things. As such, ritual plays a central role in nurturing and sustaining spirituality. It’s interesting to note that “ritual” is literally at the center of “*spirituality*.”

Most of us, however we regard the religious tradition of the Jewish people, want to have a “spiritual dimension” in our lives, a palpable connection to the ineffable. However, many contemporary Jews attempt to satisfy that desire by shifting their spiritual pathway from the communal life of the synagogue to their individual, privatized inner life. When we make that shift en masse, our notion of religious empowerment is no

longer to practice our faith as a *people*, but to regularly reinvent it according to our *individual* inclinations. It has the advantage of allowing us to satisfy our personal predilections, but prevents us from imagining and fulfilling much loftier aspirations as a *people*, accomplishing much more than we ever could by ourselves.

Catering to our penchant for personal autonomy has produced what Robert Wuthnow refers to as a “low-maintenance spirituality,” one that demands little and replaces religious guidance for the sake of moral society and community with feelings of individual emotional contentment. Spirituality then becomes connected and committed to autonomous self-acceptance rather than self-transformation in the Torah’s image of God. Another byproduct is a shattering of commitment to covenantal Torah community, replacing it with congregational participation based largely on cultural and social interests.

What does this have to do with *kashrut*?

In Leviticus 11:44-45 we read: “I am Adonai your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy. . . .”

Judaism’s goal is to transform basic human drives, hunger in this instance, from narrowly personal purposes to the nation’s service of God—as it does with the need for shelter or sex. We sanctify the everyday activity by doing it in a way that has us consciously striving upwards to God. Ordinarily we see a sharp boundary between the one holy day in the week and the other six non-religious days. But Judaism seeks to integrate those two worlds, to hallow and sanctify what is ordinarily only our everyday experience.

The root meaning of *kosher* (כֹּשֶׁר) is “to prepare,” “to connect properly.” Almost nothing is more ordinary, yet more essential, than eating. By choosing to eat only *kosher* food, by limiting the source of our energy, we prepare and ritualize the aspiration of using that energy to connect to God. Every day we make a direct connection between our energy and its source, between the food we consume and using our energy to serve God. In effect, the purpose of keeping *kosher* is that together we prepare our physical bodies through a spiritual discipline. By keeping *kosher* we separate ourselves out from the other nations and into the Jewish people.

Thus we become holy, sanctifying our bodies, by hallowing that which is ordinary, for which the *mitzvot* (commandments) are our guides. The root meaning of the Hebrew word *kadosh* (holy—קָדוֹשׁ) is separation or withdrawal, to be separated out for a special purpose and to forgo other purposes. We thus remind ourselves everyday that by keeping *kosher* we choose holiness not as individuals, but to join the historic mission of the Jewish people to be doers of righteousness and justice, keepers of sacred time and space, propagators of the Torah’s vision and path—and thereby a light to the

other nations. Contrary to popular misconceptions, then, the laws of *kashrut* have nothing to do with physical bodily health, but are aimed to energize our free-willed moral spiritual powers, raising us up as *humankind* from the morally un-free animal world.

How does *kashrut* sanctify us through our eating?

When we take care to eat *kosher* meat, we confront the reality of killing animals, and we reaffirm by our *actions* the need to put the animal to death as painlessly as possible. When we separate meat and dairy, day in and day out, based on the biblical injunction, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk,” (Deuteronomy 14:21), we remind ourselves to show consideration and kindness to all living creatures.

The *kosher* requirement for the removal of blood, which is the most potent symbol of life, teaches us to have an active, conscious reverence for life. But possibly even more important, the tradition teaches that the blood is the bearer of the soul and, above all, we are to avoid symbolic consumption of the souls of animals, which risks increasing the likelihood of compromising our own free-willed moral spirituality.

Similarly, when we consume only permitted animals, we avoid symbolically inculcating in ourselves the characteristics of predators and lower animals. It is a commonplace cultural belief in virtually every time and place that “we are what we eat.” Human predators often fancy themselves empowered by consuming the flesh of their animal kindred. Insofar as permitted animals, however, it is not the signs of *kashrut*, but their characteristics—that they are receptive and not antagonistic to human influence—that ensures they are suitable to be assimilated *morally*, and thus for us to avoid the degrading and deranging effects of certain foods on the human psyche, such as insects and predators. Withal, it’s not the physiological effects of such animals that are problematic, but their *symbolic* meaning.

Skeptics often argue that there is no symbolism attached to the food they consume, and thus it has no effect on their attitudes or actions. But when we consider the most extreme form of consumption, cannibalism—it doesn’t matter whether we’re the imagined consumers or consumed—the symbolic potency of what we consume emerges in stark relief. What is most repulsive to us is the loss of human dignity—in effect, that we’re treated or treat others as if no different than the lower animals, as if without the capacity to be moral spiritual beings. We’re repulsed by the idea that after death, human remains are treated as carrion. And, of course, the primary purpose of *kashrut* is to distinguish, separate, and elevate the behavior of humankind above the lower animals, which have no capacity for moral spirituality.

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that the separation of meat and dairy is a reminder: God

gives the laws of nature by virtue of *lemino* (למינו)—each specie “after its kind”—allowing humankind the opportunity to lift itself up to the heights of moral spiritual freedom; so that, unlike all other animals, it is not our bodies that control our spirits, but our spirits that control our bodies.

In the words of Rabbi Samuel Dresner, “*Kashrut* is a systematic means of educating and refining the conscience. . . .” But the Midrash asks: “Of what concern is it to the Holy One . . . whether one ritually slaughters an animal and eats it, or he stabs the animal and eats it?

Or, of what concern is it to God whether one eats of permitted animals or one eats of forbidden animals?”

And the tradition answers: “Understand . . . that the *mitzvot* have been given only to refine and purify humankind. . . .” (Tanhuma Shemini 8) So the goal of *kashrut* is to teach us unceasing reverence for life by raising us up from the animal nature within us to our greatest capacity for free-willed moral spirituality—and thus through dietary ritual to fulfill us by bringing us closer to God’s Divine Providence (השגחה) for humankind with every mouthful of food we consume.

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