

KASHRUTH: AN INTERPRETATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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by
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The recent growth in the observance of kashruth-Jewish dietary laws, despite their great antiquity, is rather unexpected. At a time when many Americans have distanced themselves from tradition, the rise in demand for kosher food is particularly surprising. Certainly, much of the increase in kosher food consumption is attributable to the high reproductive rate of the very observant Jewish community who have many mouths to feed in their frequently large families. But more remarkably, we today are witnessing a return to kashruth observance among second and third generation American Jews whose parents or grandparents abandoned Jewish dietary observance along with other ritual observances, as they secularized and integrated into the American mainstream.

KASHRUTH IN JEWISH HISTORY

Throughout the millennia of Jewish history, kashruth has been a major rallying point for Jewish identification. Oppressive enemies who wished to challenge the Jewish peoples' right to their own customs and identity, soon focused on kashruth as a point of major confrontation. It was not uncommon for the oppressor, whether Greek, Roman, Ukrainian or Nazi, to relish the opportunity to prohibit the observance of kashruth altogether, or to even force-feed the Jews non-kosher foodstuff. Too numerous are the Jewish victims who chose to give up their lives for the principle of the sanctity of G-d's name rather than transgress this sacred covenant.

Ironically, the past struggles of the Jewish people to maintain their dietary practices in increasingly hostile environments, became even more painful when contrasted with the wholesale abandonment of kashruth observance among younger Jews in times of freedom and enlightenment and the breakdown of the ghetto walls and traditions.

WHAT IS KOSHER

The Jewish dietary laws define food as either "kosher" (right, proper, fit) or "*treifah*" (torn, unclean and therefore forbidden). Only the flesh of "pure or clean" animals that have totally cloven hooves and chew their cud may be eaten. Fish must have fins and easily removable scales. Only fowl that are traditionally known as "kosher" may be consumed. Creeping creatures and most winged animals that creep are forbidden, as are certain parts of the bodies of kosher animals that contain non-permissible fats and/or sinews. Also forbidden are non-kosher wines and cheeses, and the milk, eggs and roe of non-kosher animals, birds and fish.

In order to qualify for kosher consumption, animals and fowl must be slaughtered according to Jewish ritual law, inspected for disease or deformity and drained of blood. All mixtures of milk and meat or their derivatives are forbidden. In fact, two sets of dishes, utensils and silverware are the rule in the kosher household, one for meat, the other for dairy.

Neutral foods, such as fruits, vegetables and their derivatives are neither meat nor dairy. They are known as "pareve," and may be served with either dairy or meat. Fish, which is also "pareve" may be eaten at the same meal, but not together with meat.

Special dietary laws that govern the Passover holiday prohibit the use of any product that may contain leaven or anything made of fermented dough.

REASONS FOR KASHRUTH

To be sure, the Torah, the source for the laws and philosophy of Judaism, offers no definitive reason for the observance of kashruth, or for most commandments for that matter. The single definitive statement the Torah makes regarding kashruth is that by observing these laws the nation of Israel becomes an "*Am Kadosh*"--a "Holy people," (Exodus 22:31). Holiness is often defined by religious commentators as separate and/or different. The laws of kashruth certainly emphasize those two characteristics, and if the Jews have not yet achieved the anticipated levels of holiness, the laws of kashruth have certainly succeeded in making the Jewish people "a breed apart."

While no official reason for the observance of kashruth exists, many commentators and philosophers have sought to offer a rationale for the observances of the kashruth laws, often to draw those who had abandoned the practices back to observance.

HEALTH REASONS

The medieval philosopher, halakhist and physician, Maimonides, (1135-1204), suggested that the laws of kashruth were a means of enhancing human health (*Guide for the Perplexed*, Part III, Chap. 48). For this he was roundly taken to task by the famed Don Isaac Abarbanel,(1437-1508): "G-d forbid that I should believe that the reasons for forbidden foods are medicinal! For were it so, the Book of G-d's law should be in the same class as any of the minor brief medical books... Furthermore, our own eyes see that the people who eat pork and insects and such... are well and alive and healthy at this very day..." (Abarbanel, *Commentary to Leviticus*, Shemini).

SPIRITUAL REASONS

Abarbanel, R. Isaac Arama (*Akeidat Yitzchak*) and Nachmanides, (1194-1270), suggest that the dietary laws were given not for the good of the body, but for the benefit of the soul. They maintain that animals that are permitted to be eaten are of a higher spiritual nature, resulting in a higher spiritual health and a more saintly character for humans who consume them.

SELF DISCIPLINE

The Midrash *Tadshe* and Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato,(1707-1746), see self-discipline as the primary reason for kashruth observance. Kashruth laws allow the Jew to be in control of his food rather than have the food control the Jew. Thus each Jew is led to acknowledge the yoke of his Maker, and to remember G-d and His Providence that act "as a restraining factor on our passions and implants in us the fear of G-d that we should not sin," (Luzzato).

CONSEQUENCE OF SEPARATION

As indicated at the outset, there are many who maintain that the dietary laws were designed to serve as a barrier to separate the Jews from the nations of the world. Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, (1843-1921) in his commentary to Leviticus, takes issue with that formulation, positing that the separation of the Jewish people from the other nations has already been performed by G-d, and as a result Jews are obligated to observe the Divine precepts. To Hoffman, kashruth is not a vehicle for separation but a consequence of it.

TO DISCOURAGE MEAT CONSUMPTION

Contemporary commentators have found new meaning in the kashruth laws and rituals. Some point out that until the time of Noah, early man was vegetarian, and meat became permitted only as a concession to man's base nature, suggesting that vegetarianism is a more spiritually uplifting diet. Certainly, the regulations governing the preparation of kosher meat make life more difficult and expensive for the observant Jew, thus insuring that meat consumption is likely reduced or held to a minimum. Certainly, the kosher meat consumer will pause to consider whether to eat a casual snack of meat at all in light of the fact that according to kashruth regulations there must be a considerable wait after eating meat before a dairy product may be consumed.

MORAL AND ETHICAL VALUES

Many commentators emphasize the moral and ethical values of the kosher diet--viewing all food as a Divine gift. Any flesh that was produced in a process that caused undue pain to

the animal may not be consumed. Nor may milk and meat be eaten at the same meal, suggesting that if a human can be so callous as to take the life of an animal in order to satiate one's appetite, the least such a person must do is to be certain not to drink milk, a substance that nurtures animal life, with the meat, that represents the destruction of animal life.

JEWISH IDENTITY

Whatever the reasons for its observance, kashruth for the contemporary Jew has become a significant rallying point for Jewish identity. So much so, that even the non-observant Soviet "Prisoners of Zion" refused to consume non-kosher food in their prison cells in order to affirm their identification with the Jewish people past, present and future. Some Soviet Jewish heroes and heroines subsisted on diets of tea and crackers for years rather than let a non-kosher morsel pass through their mouths.

The question of the moment then becomes this. We, the Jews of the United States, who were able in the 1970s and 80s to convene 1/4 million Jews on the Washington ellipse in short order to rally

on behalf of freedom for Jews who languished behind the Iron Curtain, we who spared no expense to transport our Ethiopian co-religionists to Israel so that they may flourish in the Jewish state, we who are free to practice our religious rites and rituals---should we not feel the obligation to identify with our people, past, present and future, by freely adopting the customs and practices that have kept our people together? Dare we say to Joseph Mendelovich, "You are a hero for practicing Judaism under incredible adversity--but your observance to those of us who are free, is meaningless?" Dare we announce to the contemporary Maccabees who refused to eat the sacrifice of the swine--"What you did was suitable for your time, but is thoroughly irrelevant for us today!"?

Kashruth in the 21st century is far more than a religious ritual. It is, in effect, a profound bond that unites Jew to Jew, a most meaningful tether that secures an individual to a nation, it is the sacred energy that connects a people and a nation to its very essence.

May you be blessed.