

Rabbi David Novak, Parashat Shemini, "What is Kosher, Anyway?"
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Kosher.
Trafé.
Milchik.
Fleisheik.

No, we are not traveling back in time to meat and dairy kosher restaurants. . .or when it was easy to go to the neighborhood butcher for a nice flat cut of kosher brisket.

The most recent research from the Pew Forum on American Jewish practices found that 22% say they keep kosher. This means, of course, that more than three-quarters of American Jewry do not keep kosher.

Keeping kosher is an important part of Jewish identity, yet for many it is apparently not the most important part. Among other things it is more expensive, it is more challenging to find kosher food, and perhaps does not serve the same role that it once did.

To understand kashrut one begins in this week's Torah portion, Sh'mini where the dietary laws are promulgated.

They are broken down by the four categories of land, water, air, and creeping.

First the land animals. Torah tells us that any animal that has true hoofs, with clefts through the hoofs and chews the cud we may eat. These are what are known as horned ruminants meaning beef, veal, lamb, goat and venison.

It then describes what is prohibited for food from the land animals: camel, daman, hare, swine. With respect to pig, Torah tells us that "although it has true hoofs, with the hoofs cleft through, it does not chew the cud: it is impure for you."

Anything from the water one may eat, excluding those that lack fins and scales. One may eat halibut, a bottom dweller, for example because it has fins and scales, but shellfish is prohibited. Also prohibited are eels, sharks, catfish and sturgeon.

Torah tells us what birds are prohibited: eagle, vulture, black vulture, kite, falcons, raven, ostrich, nighthawk, sea gull, hawks, the little owl, the cormorant , great owl, the white owl, the pelican, the bustard, the stork, herons, the hoopoe and the bat. Unlike land and water creatures, it never tells us what is allowed for us in this category, but we infer that it is acceptable to eat chicken, ducks, geese, turkeys and pigeons.

Locusts, bald locust, crickets, and grasshoppers are fair game.

There you have it.

You might be asking yourself: now that we know what is available to us to eat, what are the reasons for these dietary laws?

A good question.

The answer: there is no explanation whatsoever given. They just are.

The elaborate system of dietary laws from the Torah and further extended by post-biblical teachers is probably unique. . .and motivations for the laws are lacking in our sacred texts.

Researching this in our Plaut commentary we find that early hints at the laws from the Noah story when Noah, in chapter 7 of Genesis was commanded to bring into the ark seven pairs of each species of pure animal, but only one pair of impure beasts. Similarly when Jacob wrestles with the angel in Gen. 32:33 we are informed that Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle. This is why most filet mignon in this country is not considered kosher.

The lack of explanation has not stopped people from speculating. Again in the notes in the Plaut we find Philo of Alexandria stated that the “Dietary laws are intended to teach us to control our bodily appetites. Moses did not demand Spartan self-denial; but, to discourage excessive self-indulgence, he forbade pork, the most delicious of all meats. He further prohibits the eating of carnivorous beasts and birds, in order to teach us gentleness and kindness.” Philo finds a symbolic meaning in the permission to eat of animals that chew the cud and have divided hoofs: humans grow in wisdom only if they repeat and chew over what they have studied and if they learn to divide and distinguish various concepts.

Maimonides thought that the dietary laws are intended to inculcate self-control--although as a doctor he thought they had validity for good health. "All the forbidden foods are unwholesome."

One must keep in mind, however, that at the time of Maimonides in the 12th century medical knowledge was not as robust as it is today. . .even though today we know that uncooked pork may call trichinosis and many people are allergic to shellfish.

Torah goes on to inform us that even coming into contact with these prohibited animals creates what is called ritual contamination. . .meaning that one is unclean ritually until clothes are washed, earthen vessels are shattered, and glasses are smashed. In other words, this ritual contamination would not last long. These same animals when eaten, then, mirror a kind of contamination that has nothing to do with dirt or showering but rather purity for participating in the rites.

One of the most plausible reasons that I found for why the dietary laws are prescribed in such detail is that among the majesty of creation these laws are sharing with us what is permitted to eat, reserving the rest for, well, creation itself, God's world.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas in her wonderful book Leviticus as Literature compares our beings to the altar as to which parts of the living world are proper for the sacrifice and are similarly proper for our human consumption:

"God is compassionate for all living things; not only to the humans, he is good to all his creatures (Ps. 145:8-9). So if he himself does not detest them, why should he tell humans to detest any of his animals?"

"In religious terms, the mosaic dietary code is an invitation to Israel to join in the divine work of creation by living a life that honors the way God made the world and the covenants God has made with his people. "

Douglas demonstrates that what is fit for sacrifice is fit for the body; likewise what is unfit for the body is unfit for sacrifice.

In the scheme of the world, upholding kashrut is one of the many ritual actions that Jews in modernity are able to choose to do. Some Jews have adapted it to "ethical kashrut" that extend the idea of what is kosher to how

animals are not only slaughtered but how they are treated in life. Others keep kosher by being vegetarian, an option that is given to us in Genesis.

On its own, kosher is not inherently cleaner, more humane, or a healthier way of eating.

Its main purpose seems to be a way of allowing the Israelites to make the act of eating holy by allowing part of, but not all of God's creation for the food that sustains us.

And that is food for thought.