

Kashrut: The God Diet

In Leviticus 11 we find the first mention of the dietary restrictions from which are derived the rabbinic laws of *kashrut*. After defining which of the land animals, fish, birds, insects and reptiles we may and may not eat, Leviticus concludes: *[So] these are the instructions ... for distinguishing between the unclean and the clean, between the living things that may be eaten and the living things that may not be eaten.* [11: 46-47]. From this listing of animals acceptable and unacceptable, the Pharisees, and then Rabbis, over 2000 years ago, constructed the elaborate and complex system of dietary regulations called today the laws of *Kashrut*-- the majority of which are found nowhere in Torah—but all of which, we're told, are derived from Torah. I suppose we might call it "the God Diet".

Long before our culture was calorie conscious, over 2000 years before we feared the effects of "SuperSize Me", or coined the expression "you are what you eat"—Jews were identified by their diet. As early as the 4th C BCE a student of Aristotle reported that his master had a conversation with a Jew, and came away from it deeply impressed by the Jew's philosophy and the Jew's strict diet. And still today, a good 2500 years since Aristotle, the one thing non-Jews know about us is that 'Jews keep kosher'—even if they don't understand what "keeping kosher" means!

Folks may not understand what "keeping kosher" means for one's kitchen, but just about everyone uses *kosher* as an English expression, and popular slang. To designate behavior as "kosher" is to say that it can be either legal or moral (or both). I'm not aware of any other expression that conveys the same thing. More problematic, however, is when the term is used to describe food, for instance a "kosher pickle". What is it that makes it "kosher"? If for most folks, including *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, a "kosher" pickle is defined as 'a pickled cucumber flavored with garlic'. If so, then "kosher" no longer has a "Jewish", or legal or moral value! And when that qualifying adjective does convey a particularly religious quality, as in the claim that Empire packaged poultry is "kosher"—most people outside the Jewish community assume that it means that the chicken or turkey was "blessed by a rabbi". The truth is that a pickle can be halachically "kosher" (or not), and Empire doesn't "bless" its chickens. So the questions are: what exactly does "keeping kosher" mean? And if it's The God Diet, is it a better way to eat?!

The place to begin is Leviticus which delineates acceptable and forbidden land animals, fish, fowl, insects, and reptiles (of which the latter are all forbidden). But Torah does not explain why catfish are not OK and grasshoppers are. The only explanation comes with the conclusion of this section, and it's really little more than a "Because I said so" statement. Leviticus 11 concludes "[You must do this because] I am Adonai, the one who brought you out of Egypt to be your God; you will therefore be holy because I am holy"! The purpose, it seems, is that in restricting oneself to eating only these animals one achieves 'holiness' – nothing about health or hygiene.

Now 800 years ago Maimonides disagreed. He claimed that the purpose of *kashrut* was indeed to achieve and sustain good health. But his arguments were, for the most part, rejected. Typical is this statement from a leading rabbi of the 16th C.: "The dietary laws are not, as some have suggested, motivated by therapeutic considerations, God forbid! Were that so, Torah would be denigrated to the status of a minor medical treatise, or even worse!"

Maimonides should have listened to Philo, who in the 1st C told his audience much the same thing as is written in modern diet books: "it's not so much what you eat, but how you eat." Philo explained that the dietary laws of *kashrut* are meant to aid in the development of one's personality. They are intended to teach us control over our bodily appetites. Philo almost 2000 years ago wrote: "When Moses declared that pork, that most delicious of all meats, is forbidden, it was to discourage self-indulgence." In addition, Philo believed that the reason we are forbidden to eat carnivorous animals and birds, is so that we might learn gentleness and kindness. And Philo found particular meaning in God's permission to eat animals that chew a cud and have a split hoof.

In his own explanatory midrash Philo wrote: “We grow in wisdom only if we ruminate, ‘chew over’ what we study, and as we learn to ‘divide’, to ‘split’, to distinguish concepts of good and bad, right and wrong.” [Philo, “Special Laws” IV, p. 97 f].

One of the more modern, and pragmatic explanations for the dietary laws has it that they were ordained to separate us from the non-Jewish world-- that their purpose is not only to keep us together, but particularly away from the attractions of foreign gods and non-Jewish communities. And whether or not one believes that this was their intent, it has certainly functioned that way. The system of *kashrut* does restrict our relationships, bringing Jews together with Jews, separating us from non-Jews-- if we can't eat in their houses, it's difficult to establish relationships.

If the original reasons for these dietary restrictions are unclear, its effect and impact on our Jewish history is very clear. Not only has it forced us to maintain a protective sense of “community,” but it also has given value to the kind of community we constitute. In following the dietary laws we come to understand and establish a certain reverence for life. *Kashrut* thus explained by some as a compromise with God's ideal of vegetarianism. How so? Because we were from the beginning supposed to be “veggies”-- so God instructed the Man and the Woman in the Garden of Eden. We were only permitted to eat meat after the Flood.

The Jewish vegetarian movement points with an accusing finger to the Torah story of the Israelites and their “craving” for meat in the desert after leaving Egypt. They say that since it is nearly impossible for us to curb this carnivorous “craving”, Torah imposes regulations to help us control ourselves. Thus the dietary laws of only eating animals which chew a cud and have a split hoof are meant to forcibly impose restrictions on those of us who cannot achieve God's originally promoted, and ideal directive, of a meatless diet.

Traditional Judaism supports this idea by reminding us that if we have to kill a creature of God, then it ought to be slaughtered according to God's rules: without panic or pain. The death of any creature should not be taken casually or callously, and certainly not with suffering. Slaughter, when necessary, must be careful and controlled. This is a primary reason that Jews rarely hunt as sport. Jewish tradition reminds us that we must be responsible for what happens to all other living things, that ‘what’ and ‘how’ we eat are really moral statements. It was this broad understanding of *kashrut* that prompted a Boston rabbinical court in the 80's, to rule that grapes picked by oppressed Chicano workers were not-kosher.

So what then does the term *kosher* really mean? Clearly it transcends the sanitary cleanliness of food, or the ‘purity’ of food products. *Kosher*, in fact, does not at all mean “clean”, or “healthy”, and certainly not “holy” or “blessed”. It means “proper,” and religiously appropriate. Thus a *tallit* would be “kosher” if the *tzitzit* are tied correctly, a *m'zuzza* is “kosher” if the scroll inside is properly written and checked, and a marriage ceremony is “kosher” if the appropriate ritual elements are included.

The dietary laws of *kashrut* prescribe the foods and the food management system that are proper and appropriate. And perhaps on a deeper, more philosophical level, they represent guidelines for proper, right behavior. Quoting now Rabbi Bradley Artson of the Conservative Movement's seminary in LA--

[This] Torah portion establishes the core of Judaism's teaching that how we eat and what we feed ourselves are sacred and communal matters--nurturing identity, morality, and relationship while simultaneously feeding the body. Kashrut offers an opportunity to harness the act of eating, to contribute to who we are, and [defining] our values. Kashrut summons us to elevate eating from an animal response to an encounter with holiness, transforming our kitchens and our dining room tables into sacred altars, our meals into reminders of our deepest values as Jews.

Traditional Judaism speaks of *kashrut* as *mitzvah*/commandment. Regardless of how any of us invest religious, moral or ethical values in our dietary choices-- at the very least we can affirm that how we eat reflects the basic *mitzvah* of our ‘prime directive’-- that we preserve and protect every living thing, that we treat all life with the

dignity it deserves.

So what makes a pickle “kosher”. Orthodox certification of a “kosher” pickle has nothing to do with the addition of garlic, and everything to do with the pickling process. Cucumbers, like all vegetables, are always acceptable, they are by nature “kosher”. However, brining a cucumber in a solution of water and salt often includes the addition of polysorbates as an emulsifier. Polysorbates are made from animal fat, and if derived from cattle properly slaughtered, then the OU and other Orthodox authorities will certify the pickles as “kosher”. The USDA, however, in its governmental wisdom doesn’t know from polysorbates, and has ruled that pickle processors are permitted to promote their products as “kosher” with only the addition of garlic in the brine.

And now you know.

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