

“Are We What We Eat?”

Parashat Shemini

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Ernie Campbell, Minister-Emeritus of New York's famed Riverside Church, wrote in a recent newsletter how the grandson of one of his dear friends was about to become a Bar Mitzvah. The boy and his extended family agreed that the customary monetary gifts would be less than a perfect idea for him. So, the young man was given his choice – what would he like for his gift?

His answer? A trip to Israel. And why? To be able to eat at McDonald's! You see the boy's family is orthodox, and Israel is the only place in the world where McDonald's serves kosher food!

Just before Pesach, there was a flurry of electronic conversation upon the Hebrew Union College Alumni e-mail network focusing upon a matter I thought was a joke, but which my colleagues actually considered of serious consequence. Here's a sample dated March 21st:

Colleagues:

A congregant of mine acquired a dog during the course of the past year. The dog food normally consumed has either rice or pasta mixed in with it. And, we know as the dog is in the Ashkenazi household, she can't consume either during Pesach. While not strictly kosher throughout the year, this family does a pretty rigid observance of Kashrut during Pesach, including stripping the house of chametz, using only Passover plates, utensils, etc.

What advice would you give to this family? Does anyone know of any 'kosher l' pesach' dog food? Please feel free to respond privately if you wish.

Arnie Fertig
Temple Beth Shalom
Melrose, MA

It took all the restraint I could muster to keep from sending a decidedly unsympathetic response, such as, "Arnie, get a life!"

I am happy than I kept such thoughts to myself.

The truth is, I don't think a whole lot about dietary laws! You probably don't, either. Far more stringent a determiner of my dietary selection is its fat or fiber content, and not its religious pedigree. So, my words and thoughts this Sabbath Morning about Kashrut, keeping kosher, derive from one, admittedly, has chosen to disregard virtually every dietary proscription of Judaism. And, I say that with no apology. The laws of Kashrut are simply not a part of my Judaism as I choose to practice it, though I grew up in a kosher home.

This subject of dietary laws was carefully considered by the early Reformers back in the 1830s and '40s. By 1885, the Pittsburgh Platform dismissed the ongoing utility of such ancient Jewish practice in these rather haughty words:

We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws
as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress
originated in ages and under the influence of ideas
entirely foreign to our present moral and spiritual
state.

The bland endorsement of Kashrut-like practice in the recently pronounced Pittsburgh Principles notwithstanding, today only a tiny minority of Reform Jews keep strictly kosher homes. Many do, of course, avoid eating both shellfish and pork, and not much farther than that.

It is also my impression that most members of this Congregation attempt to fast on Yom Kippur and do keep some manner of dietary consciousness at Pesach. Beyond that, all bets are off!

Nevertheless, I believe that you and I need to be aware of and conversant with the basics of our people's dietary laws. For one thing, we read about them in the Torah (as we do this Shabbat), and for another, we hear an awfully lot about them – even here in New Orleans. Who hasn't seen so-called "Jewish" pickles on the shelves of the Winn-Dixie, or come eye to eye with "Jewish Rye"? Funny, it doesn't look it!

Moreover, we Jews, just like most peoples of the world, have always had our shares of food taboos. Rabbi Bernard Bambrugger points out how food accepted in one culture...

...as proper and wholesome may be viewed with
loathing by another culture.

He cites the eating of horsemeat as an example.

We read, this Shabbat, those portions of Leviticus that lay out in gory detail exactly what is fit (Kasher) and what is Tamey ("unclean"). And if this were not enough, the whole lengthy list of dietary rules is repeated all but word-for-word in the 14th Chapter of Deuteronomy. That's something for which to look forward! I hope Cantor Colman will be preaching!

But let us note very carefully that all matters of medical hygiene aside, (after all, unrefrigerated beef was no safer than unrefrigerated pork), our Jewish sages have always attempted to hone in on the element of discipline as the chief *raison d'être* for Kashrut. The mitzvot of God were given to discipline us, they have contended; God has Her own reasons:

In ancient Alexandria, scholar and sage Philo taught us that these dietary restrictions were intended to teach us to control out bodily appetites. Philo readily admitted that pork was the most delicious of all meats, therefore God forbade it to discourage excessive self-indulgence.

But why are we allowed to consume the flesh of animals that chew the cud and have divided hoofs? What is the reason? Are the reasons still relevant? What is the nature of a God who is such in Leviticus and then in II Samuel?

Says Philo:

Because a person grows in wisdom only if he repeats and chews over what he has studied and if he learns to divide and distinguish various concepts.

Self-control – that was the idea, agreed Maimonides!

And by the way, the traditional laws (drawn largely from our Torah portion, but augmented by other Biblical and post-Biblical sources) are found elucidated in great detail in the Shulchan Aruch, the “Prepared Table,” written by Joseph Caro in 15th century Safed. It is really a very, very complex subject, Kashrut is.

Both the slaughterer (Schochet) and the overseer (mashgiach) are supposed to be pious men. The Schochet is obliged to utter a short prayer before he performs his duty, which must be executed with a special razor-sharp knife without so much as a nick on its blade.

Afterward, the animal is carefully examined by the Mashgiach, who must inspect it for bruises or blemishes. If it passes, the meat is declared kosher, provided only those acceptable front portions are used.

Some Jews insist that the mashgiach perform an ultra close inspection involving the animals’ internal organs and lungs. If the lungs are completely smooth, the meat is ruled glatt Kasher (Smooth).

Not long ago, in speaking with one of our members about dietary laws, he made the statement:

Well, after all, Ed, God surely cares more for what comes out of your mouth than what goes into it!

I didn’t tell him, of course, that that’s exactly what a certain Rabbi from Nazareth is supposed to have said in a well-known, though disputatious, book by a fellow named Matthew – though the Nazarene, in his argument with his fellow Pharisees was likely not

speaking of food, but the requirement of washing one's hands before eating. Jesus probably never had a Big Mac either, and I doubt he'd have ever allowed crawfish in his synagogue.

I say, for those Jews who really want to observe Kashrut to whatever degree of completeness because it touches their souls and emboldens their sense of Jewish identification and sense of authenticity, I say, more power to you! Reform Jews are allowed to keep Kosher. Frankly, I wish there were more of us who felt uniquely called to do so!

We could use such folk to help lift our level of observance and Jewish consciousness. We dare not let ourselves drift so far afield from our tradition that our children begin to feel alienated from their fellow traditional and Kosher Jews because of our indifference and ignorance. To be a Reform Jew is to be an informed Jew! It always has been and always will be.

We need to be protective of and sensitive to the rights of our fellow Jews who need to have access to kosher food – whether at community-wide banquets, nursing homes, or hospitals. It is, after all, only common courtesy and “derech Eretz.” With the exception of our Seafood Bingo (where all are given fair notice), I can think of no reason why blatant trefe – pork or shellfish – should ever be served at congregation-sponsored events as hor dourves or main courses within the confines of our Temple building. It is both ignorant and it is insensitive, and it should not be countenanced.

But, surely there is justification in reaffirming our belief that far more central to our faith is kosher action, rather than kosher cuisine.

There is, we all know full well, an abundance of such trefe in our world – in our society, our city, our neighborhoods, and, dare I say it, our very homes! Drug and alcohol addiction, sexual infidelity, domestic abuse, hardheartedness, illicit business practices, scornful racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia – yes, “trefe” abounds! Don't be a part of it! Can we not strive, in the highest tradition of Reform Judaism, if not for kosher kitchens, then at least for kosher mouths and, hopefully, Kosher lives?

Hope and pray, search and quest for the “tahor” – for the clean; the highest in both word and deed. That, dear friends, that will be kosher enough for me! How about you?

Amen