

Mishpatim

When I was twenty three, I moved to a kibbutz in the Galilee. I chose the kibbutz because it was religious, and I wanted to learn on my own how to keep kosher and to keep Shabbat.

Since that time, I have kept kosher, including of course, the injunction in this week's Torah portion, not to mix meat with milk.

To understand Kashrut, we have to turn back to Genesis. There, the Torah states, The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat" (2:15-16). What we learn from this is that the original vision that God had for human beings is that we would be vegetarians. Eating meat is a concession that God makes after the Flood. "The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky—everything with which the earth is astir—and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand. Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these" (9:2-3). We don't, however, live exclusively by the laws of Noah, so another level of ordinances had to be levied for the sake of making us a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). The Torah lays out the ordinances of what becomes our system of Kashrut in Leviticus chapter 11 and Deuteronomy chapter 14. For animals, fish, and birds, the Torah how we determine which ones we may eat and which ones are forbidden to us.

I take an open, not a strict, view of Kashrut. I think knowing the laws of Kashrut is important and observing them can enhance one's connection to the Jewish people, Torah, and God. However, I don't see the keeping of Kosher as the end all and be all of Jewish existence. I am often put off by how central kashrut is considered to Jewish existence. This is one of the reasons that I began

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this discussion with the subject of vegetarianism. For a brief period in college, I practiced vegetarianism. It was a fulfilling experience but ultimately one that I was not interested in maintaining. I always start every conversation about kashrut with a discussion of vegetarianism because these origins are not incidental.

In order to eat meat, enormous amounts of agricultural land and produce must be dedicated to raising livestock. In addition, the preparation of meat in meat factories is not the prettiest of processes and involves treatment of animals in ways that are less than ideal. Kashrut resolves some, but not all, of these problems. The purpose of kosher slaughter is uphold a sense of humaneness in how we interact with the animal world. The animal is not incapacitated before being killed. It is not struck on the head or electrocuted. The method of slaughter is intended to be as painless as death can be. Cutting the animal's throat leads it to bleed out and lose life very quickly therefore minimizing the pain that the animal experiences. Kosher slaughter provides us with a better means for acquiring meat and that is reflected in the price, which is higher, than standard meat.

Kashrut is, of course, not only about animal slaughter. It's also about how we maintain our homes. It creates a sense of community and ensures that our home is not just any home but a kosher home. Some have attacked kashrut as a mechanism for keeping Jews and non-Jews separated from one another. In an era in which integration between Jews and non-Jews is highly valued by both parties, how do we understand a practice like Kashrut?

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I also was worried about this at first, but two points have come to mind over time that lead me to think that kashrut does not serve as an impediment. First of all, nothing prevents you from having whomever you want over to your house. The ability to invite guests to one's home is one of the most honored practices in the Torah's teaching. Second of all, you can eat at the house of a non-Jew as long as the meal is either cold or vegetarian. You can always eat if the food is cold; if you're less stringent, you can eat hot food that is vegetarian. In other words, eating meat can only be done in the context of a Jewish home – your house or the house of a fellow Jew. We can share a meal with someone who is not Jewish as long as we're not eating meat.

Kashrut still has a lot of work to do because keeping kosher is not just about the ritual dimension; it also has to do with humane treatment of animals and labor laws. I have touched upon the humane treatment of animals, but we can always improve in that area. Of course, the cost will be the cost, the price of the meat.

Regarding labor laws, sometimes we find in the manufacture of meat that those who work at the slaughterhouses are not treated in ways that are consistent with the Torah's vision for employment. That is why our definition of kashrut must expand beyond the ritual and encompass the moral. This is what Conservative Judaism can bring to the discussion of Kashrut. We can advocate for a broader concept of kashrut that takes into account our commitment as a people to ethics.

Keeping kosher has been one of the best decisions in my life. It has introduced innumerable obstacles, but each of those obstacles has simultaneously created opportunities for an experience of the sacred, the holy. Keeping kosher has brought me closer to other Jews and enhanced my

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connection to the Jewish people. My fear that keeping kosher would impair my ability to interact with non-Jews was unfounded. Sharing meals with non-Jews in their homes or at restaurants continues to be part of my practice. Eating vegetarian in these contexts has allowed me to fulfill part of the motivation that brought me to vegetarianism in my college years. Vegetarianism stands as the ideal, and kashrut serves as a concession made by the Holy One Blessed Be He to this ideal. The Torah works with human nature; it doesn't seek to eradicate it. Kashrut is one of the best examples of how the Torah does this. I hope you will consider bringing more kashrut into your life.