



Does God care about what we eat?

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Fresh from my post-Pesach hametz buzz of bagels, pizza and tuna melts, I opened up this week's Torah portion, Shmini, and found myself face to face once again with the laws of Kashrut - a stark reminder that a significant piece of Jewish law and tradition tells me what I am allowed to and not allowed to eat. I have news for you, Laws of Kashrut, people on television, the internet, radio books and magazine are all trying to tell us what we should and should not be eating. Moreover, there are so many reasons to eat or not eat something nowadays.

For example, I might avoid a particular food item because it is unhealthy for me - too many calories, too much fat, too much sugar, and too many carbs and so on. I might be a vegan who avoids eating anything from an animal, for either health or ethical concerns. I might avoid eating certain foods because of the unethical treatment of the workers from that factory or field. I also might avoid eating certain foods based on my social setting - avoiding certain foods because my present company might find my choice of food disturbing.

Each of these has its opposite as well. I could choose to eat a particular food based on health, ethical or environmental concerns, or for social reasons.

So what is the reason for the laws of Kashrut? According to Maimonides, in the Guide for the Perplexed, the reason to avoid non-kosher food is that it is unhealthy. However, I have one word for you that will put to rest the idea that kosher = healthy: Entenmann's. An all Entenmann's diet is kosher, but not very healthy. So is kosher eating ethical eating? Sadly no. A couple of years ago, the country's largest kosher meat processor Agriprocessors was found to be in violation of dozens of Federal labor and immigration laws. What about the environment? There is no one to one correlation between kosher food and food from sustainable sources that protect the environment.

So why keep kosher? The Torah itself has an answer to this question at the end of verses about which animals we may and may not eat:

“For I the Lord am the One who brought you up from Egypt to be your God: you shall be holy, for I am holy.” (Vayikra 11:45)

The Rabbis have a number of interpretations for this verse. Rashi comments that God “brought you up from Egypt for the purpose of receiving My commandments.” In other words, because of what God did for us by taking us out of Egypt, we should obey God's

laws, no matter what they say. This point of view sees holiness as simple adherences to God's laws. This works for some people, but not everyone.

Gersonides, a medieval rabbi and philosopher, has another approach. For Gersonides, God is an immaterial force in the universe. Since God is telling us to be more like God, to be holy means to be distinct from the material world. One might think of this as the "eat to live" approach to life as opposed to the "live to eat" approach.

Abarbanel, the 15th century Spanish Torah commentator, connects Kashrut with idolatry: "In those days, the animals are forbidden to eat were connected with idolatry. Even [in his day], Maimonides notes, in India it is forbidden to eat cattle or sheep; in other lands, they specifically eat some of the foods forbidden to us as part of their idolatrous rituals." Kashrut was a way to keep Israel socially distinct from its idolatrous neighbors and to avoid practices that looked idolatrous.

Looking back at this verse from Vayikra, I find myself focused on the word "brought up", which in Hebrew is from same root as the word "Aliyah" which means to go up. Kashrut can make us more like God. Just as God elevated us from the physical and mental status of slaves, when we observe the laws of Kashrut, we elevate ourselves. We elevate ourselves as free people, since we make choices about what we eat. Slaves do not make choice; free people do. We elevate ourselves as humans as we become more conscious of the foods we purchase, prepare and eat. We become more mindful and aware of what we choose to put into our bodies.

You know, on second thought, maybe Kashrut is all about health, ethics and social behavior. Perhaps we have been too lenient in giving certain foods a kosher certification. Maybe unhealthy foods should be unkosher. Perhaps a factory that produces kosher foods should consider how they treat their workers. The fixation on the finest points of this ingredient and that process might be getting in the way of the bigger idea that what we put into our mouths makes a statement about the way that the world should be. Some say what we eat makes a political statement. I think it also makes a profound religious statement. Does God care what we eat? I have no idea, but it makes me more fully human when I do.

Shabbat Shalom,
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AS A FAMILY:

- Talk about what kinds of foods do you like to eat?
 - Do you know where these foods come from?
 - Which kinds of foods makes you feel good when you eat them?
 - Why is it important to eat together with your family?
 - What is the value of applying discipline to what we eat?

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION [SHMINI](#), ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. The people of Israel were required to sacrifice a male goat as a sin offering. What was Aaron required to sacrifice as a sin offering?

2. Why were the priests required to make these various sacrifices on the eighth day of the Tabernacle's consecration?
3. Two of Aaron's sons were killed by God. Who were they?
4. Why were two of Aaron's sons killed?
5. Moses gave Aaron certain instructions concerning the death of his two sons. What were they?
6. Moses told two of Aaron's cousins to carry the bodies of Nadav and Abihu outside of the camp. Why didn't their surviving brothers carry them out?
7. Who were Aaron's two surviving sons?
8. Moses became very upset with Eleazar and Ithamar. Why?
9. It would seem that Eleazar and Ithamar might have been killed by God in the same manner and for similar reasons as Avihu and Nadav. Why were they not killed?
10. God describes to Moses the two characteristics of an animal that make it acceptable for eating. What are they?
11. If someone touched an unclean animal, how long would this person be considered "unclean"?