

Parshat Re'eh

Is Kosher Food Healthier ?

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Parshat Re'eh reviews Jewish dietary laws supplying a sweeping list of banned foods. It catalogues kosher and non-kosher animals, bans the drinking of blood, mentions the prohibition of mixing meat and milk, and also references the procedure of shechita. These comprehensive details regulate the entire experience of eating and dining. In our era, which unfortunately has witnessed a broad decline of full halachik observance, observance of kosher food regulations remains a baseline for religious identity. We often refer to those who observe Shabbat and maintain kashrut as "Orthodox" Jews even as we hope for their adopting a more augmented and expanded religious lifestyle.

At first glance, many of the laws of kashrut seem random. Admittedly, the prohibition of drinking blood, is understandable as this act seems barbaric. Likewise, many commentators have identified logical reasons for prohibiting the mixing of meat and milk. However, the actual list of kosher and non-kosher animals appears to be extremely arbitrary. Kosher species are determined by physical animal attributes which do not directly correlate to any apparent function. It is not obvious, nor has it been proven, that animals with split hoofs are healthier than their counterparts. Fins and scales don't directly reflect higher grades of fish. If the list of kosher animals feels random, then the intricate laws of shechita seems puzzling and bereft of any logical explanations. Do these kashrut rules and regulations, which so deeply permeate our experiences, possess any logical explanations?

An interesting midrash (Breishit Rabbah 44:1) does imply that shechita restrictions have no particular rhyme or reason: "Does God really care whether shechita is frontally executed (which is permitted) or performed on the back of the neck (which is improper)? Rather, the laws of shechita were installed solely to purify human behavior [through obeying God]". This Midrash may imply that there is no essential difference between

legal shechita and disqualified shechita. The process is only meant to test our obedience and build religious discipline. If religious discipline and submission to G-d are the ultimate goals, the actual content and core logic of these practices is less significant. What is significant is our ability to submit to the Divine will.

Similar impressions emerge from Rebbi Elazar Ben Azaryah's very provocative declaration (Sifra 20:26): "A person shouldn't be disinterested in forbidden foods. Rather, a person should desire forbidden items but abstain solely because of Divine decree". If forbidden foods were inherently harmful it would be absurd to encourage us to covet these toxic items. The simple interpretation of this Midrash implies that kosher food possesses no medical or health related advantage to non-kosher food. We avoid consuming these foods exclusively because of Divine command. Conceivably, God could have instructed us to consume pig while banning cows. Our compliance is purely based upon submission to the Divine decision, but not based on any other benefit or advantage.

By and large, Jewish tradition doesn't endorse this extreme but interesting perspective. We believe that every Divine command must be based on some inherent logic and must be geared to our benefit and prosperity. Every mitzvah is built upon a solid logical foundation— some reasons are revealed to human intellect whereas the logic of mitzvot such as parah adumah and sha'tnaez remain inaccessible. God doesn't command or instruct in an arbitrary fashion and, at some level, - perhaps beyond human comprehension- his mitzvot are beneficial while His prohibitions are dangerous. Many medieval authors catalogued ta'amei mitzvot or "reasons" for various mitzvot- a program which presupposes logical foundations for mitzvot. If the Rambam identified reasons for mitzvot it was because he believed that God would not just randomly issue commands. There must be some underlying logic and the Rambam determined to illuminate that logic.

The conviction that kosher food is healthier than non-kosher food may have been more compelling in an ancient world which knew less about the human body and human health. In a world of hit-or-miss medical knowledge it was easier to suspend contemporary science and assume that kosher food was medically preferable to non-kosher food. The

modern world has mapped human biology and possesses a more precise knowledge of the roots and causes of human health. As modern science hasn't proven any advantages of kosher food, our belief that kosher laws are geared to human health and prosperity is less obvious and requires critical reinforcement.

Beyond the specific details of kashrut, the more general sense of limiting the range of foods we consume, is an important concept. Limiting the types of foods which can be eaten can help lend dignity and restraint to an experience which, if left unregulated, can become animalistic and degrading. Presumably, with more limited food options, Jews are less prone to gluttony, drunkenness and many other forms of vulgar behavior which can stem from overindulgence in eating. If the Torah is meant to help us even slightly dislodge from the sway of the flesh, laws governing our eating habits are central to that goal. Interestingly, the modern changes in the availability of kosher food have dramatically altered the equation and diminished this particular function of kashrut. Overwhelmingly, Jews enjoy almost unlimited access to kosher food and obtaining kosher food often requires few serious compromises. The national spread of kosher food in Israel as well as the burgeoning of kosher supervision in the broader Jewish world have created almost unlimited availability of kosher food. Though this development is welcome and enables a broader spread of kashrut observance, this change also lessens the potentially healthy impact of curbing excessive food indulgence.

Secondly, kosher food establishes an important socio-cultural barrier between Jew and non-Jew. Because food and dining is such a central element of cultural experience, kashrut regulations create distinct cultural identity and, to a degree, reinforce separation of the Jew. Throughout the generations, our Masorah installed additional food-related prohibitions to more fully enforce these essential cultural barriers. Laws banning wine which was handled by a Gentile or kosher bread manufactured in non-Jewish settings, further delimited Jewish cultural experience. A separate Jewish diet is intended to demarcate a separate Jewish cultural identity. The kashrut 'cultural barrier' continues to influence Jewish public experience even in the world of modern kashrut.

Though the specific details of kashrut seem arbitrary they possess profound logic, as God banned us from consuming hazardous items while allowing beneficial foods. Modern science hasn't yet traced human health and well-being to kashrut laws but we still trust that this system isn't random. In a broader sense, limiting us to kosher foods is a method of curbing against the potential imbalances of unlimited food consumption. Secondly, kashrut experience erects vital cultural barriers intended to safeguard our unique Jewish identity. As the patterns of kosher food change it is important to revisit these seminal principles.