

A Brave New Kosher World

Moshe Taragin

Upon first glance, the Biblical laws governing kosher food appear random. Why should animals which chew their cud be kosher, while those with more direct digestive “flows” be forbidden? Why should split-hoofed animals be kosher while straight-pawed animals be banned? Selecting birds based on the bone structure of their tiny legs seems capricious. Though the criteria determining kosher items may seem haphazard, our tradition asserts that foods forbidden by Hashem are toxic to human health and hazardous for spiritual welfare. It is highly unlikely that science will uncover medical reasons to rationalize kosher dietary norms. However, faith does not require scientific ratification and we adhere to the laws of kosher with conviction that we are not just conforming to Hashem's will, but also, cultivating a healthier lifestyle and a purer spiritual existence.

A Life of Temperance

Beyond the benefits of avoiding specific 'harmful' foods, maintaining a kosher lifestyle adjusts our overall attitude toward the experience of eating. We depend upon food for nutrition and for survival. Furthermore, we draw great physical, emotional and social benefit from the experience of eating. Hashem desires this human benefit and our recitation of blessings before and after eating validates these enjoyments.

Yet, there is a thin line between enjoying eating and obsessing over food. A quick “recall” of the 180-day long party of Shushan - complete with an endless food-orgy and induced regurgitation- is enough to remind us of the horrors of unlimited food consumption. By banning

most animals, the Torah isn't just protecting us from specific harmful species. It is also tailoring a lifestyle which balances the joy of food against the dangers of addiction or obsession.

I remember the horror which my revered Rebbe HaRav Lichtenstein expressed upon reading a newspaper article which reviewed and rated the in-flight meals of various airlines. He was so dismayed that something so trivial should warrant this type of attention and interest! Similarly, he would routinely conclude his Torah lectures a half an hour after lunch began to train us not to be enslaved to our stomachs. I vividly recall the hunger pangs I sensed as I was being trained that moral and religious commitment were more important than my appetite. Keeping kosher should lend us overall dietary discipline.

Creating Distance

The section in parshat shmini which details kosher and non-kosher animals, concludes with the instruction to live our lives as "kodesh". The word kodesh is commonly interpreted as "holy" or "pious" but, actually instructs us to be "separate" or "detached" from this world. Hashem possesses no physical attributes and is therefore the ultimate kodesh- completely different from our reality and completely separate from it. In our attempt to simulate Hashem, we are also encouraged to be partially "detached" from this physical world. Limiting our food intake, partially disconnects us from the sensual pleasures of this world.

Judaism does not venerate extreme self-deprivation or ascetism. There are built-in limits upon fasting, upon celibacy and upon other forms of self-deprivation. However, we are meant to temper our desires and to impose our will over our cravings. The restrictions upon food intake and

the strict laws of food preparation deters unbounded and unrestrained food indulgence.

Our Pesach experience is riveted by even stricter laws which limit food consumption far "beyond" the normal kosher routine. Chametz is not only forbidden to eat but cannot be owned; owning chametz may lead to inadvertently consuming chametz. Pesach commemorates our emancipation from the indignities of slavery and the genesis of a people who aspire toward spiritual nobility. The tightening of dietary restrictions during Pesach shields us from slipping back into slavery. Not just subjugation to a human tyrant but slavery to our base desires.

Kosher food limitations aren't just "targeted" laws preventing us from consuming hazardous species. These laws encourage us to calibrate our relationship with food. Eating healthy and enjoying our food are legitimate elements of physical emotional and spiritual well-being. Unlimited pursuit of food and unrestrained binging are not.

A Deliberate Life

In the concluding section of parshat Shemini, the Torah alludes to a third benefit of a kosher lifestyle: By preserving kosher laws we learn to distinguish between separate between tamei (impure) and tahor (pure) animals. Kosher laws force us to make deliberate choices about our daily routine. Keeping kosher lessons us about making decisions in life. Just as we discriminate between pure and impure animals, we also take care to distinguish between moral and immoral behavior. We filter our cultural influences rather than mindlessly succumbing to them. These questions lie far beyond the scope of kosher laws, but if we are discriminatory "eaters" we also aim to be morally and religiously discerning people.

Has it Become too Easy?

By granting unprecedented access to a broad range of kosher food, the modern world has greatly simplified the experience of 'keeping kosher'. The emergence of national and international kashrut organizations, coupled with the ability to efficiently transport kosher food across the globe has provided reasonably accessible kosher food to a broad audience. Recently, kosher food accessibility for vacationers has dramatically expanded, liberating 'kosher travel' across the globe.

In the state of Israel, we aim to provide national kosher coverage even for those who would not purposely choose kosher. As a kosher diet is fundamental to Jewish identity, we hope to provide this baseline to every Israeli citizen. In most instances, both in Israel and abroad, maintaining kosher lifestyle requires much less exertion and far less struggle than it entailed for our ancestors.

At a practical level, these developments are welcome and have popularized kosher experience across a broad range of the Jewish world. However, the ease of keeping kosher may dull us to the value of keeping kosher. In many areas, our practice of religion has become decidedly easier than in the past. Take, for example the modern experience of Shabbat, which has become significantly upgraded through electricity, home appliances and shabbat clocks. When religion becomes too 'easy' the meaning behind religion becomes obscured. Struggle lends resolution to religion while facility and ease blur that resolution. If we lose sight of the "meaning" behind religious experience, it can become dry and flaccid. Has keeping kosher become too easy? Do we find meaning in keeping kosher or has it just become part of the "background" of Jewish life in the modern world?