

The (Kosher) Salt Wars, and a ‘New’ Understanding of the Jewish Dietary Tradition
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Cooking shows are undoubtedly one of the hottest television markets today. The sheer number of TV chefs cooking up recipes, competing in culinary challenges, and marketing their recipes attests to the popularity of this genre. One of the fans of cooking shows is Joe Godlewski. Joe is a retired barber who lives in Cresaptown, MD, about 2 hours west of Baltimore. One of his favorite retirement past-times is watching cooking shows. But the more he watched, the more something just got under his skin...He kept hearing chefs refer to “kosher salt.” “What the heck’s the matter with Christian salt?” Godlewski asked, and in an effort to “keep Christianity on the table, in the household, however I can,” he invented, you guessed it, “*Christian salt*.” Joe had his salt bottled in jars under the brand name “Blessed Christian Salt.” They have large red crosses on the labels and each grain is blessed by an Episcopal priest. The funny thing is—if all this wasn’t funny enough—that when I went to the Gourmet Seasonings page of Ingredient Corporation of America—the company producing Blessed Christian Salt—the following appeared on the website: “All ingredients are **kosher certified** and FDA approved.”

The ignorance in this country barber is staggering...kosher salt is not a conspiracy to take over the spice and seasoning world; it is a coarse grained salt that was originally applied to meat in order to absorb blood in the koshering process (the instructions are still on the box!). Since the Torah prohibits the ingestion of animal blood, this salt is a very helpful, natural leaching substance. Chefs like it today, and it remains a popular purchase, primarily because of its...CRUNCH!

Now our barber friend is not malicious...in fact he is quoted as saying “I’m not an anti-Semite. I love Jesus Christ and he was a Jew!” He is, like many people, misinformed about kashrut. And to give the guy the benefit of the doubt, kashrut is not the easiest Jewish practice to comprehend. The parasha this morning introduces us to one of the Torah’s first comprehensive lists of kosher and non-kosher animals. In a stunning

progression from land animals to sea creatures to birds to carcasses, the Torah elaborates a detailed taxonomy of what this Israelite nation, newly inducted into a covenantal relationship with God at Mount Sinai, should and should not eat. And while there are myriad details about winged creatures, jointed legs, cuds, and chameleons, what is lacking is any reason for abominating some, and enjoying the flesh of others. For example, the Gyco Gecko, who is annoying enough that you might consider eating him if it would end those irritating commercials once and for all...not kosher. Israel's national bird, the hoopoe, known as the *duchifat* in Hebrew, is also not kosher, which is the least the Torah could do for the national bird of the Jewish state. On the other hand, the next time those crickets get a little too loud at night, you might consider tossing some in your frying pan and having them for a midnight snack, because the Torah says in our parasha, any variety of cricket you have an appetite for are 100% kosher. Same goes for grasshoppers and locust.

I remember as a kid when I first learned about rudimentary kashrut that the teachers would say all kinds of things to try to make kashrut understandable and rational. The most popular Hebrew school answer was of course that kosher food is healthier. Well let me tell you about the last week or so of my life...On Passover, when even people who never keep kosher typically keep a little bit kosher, and people who always keep kosher keep hyper-kosher...I calculated I ate about a dozen, maybe 18 eggs. The recommended weekly egg intake is 3-7 max., for healthy people. Every year my mother-in-law makes one of my favorite dishes—chopped liver—only this year it was from chicken livers, not beef livers. I like the beef better, but I wasn't complaining. I had untold pounds of brisket, chicken, gefilte fish; my wife made incredible desserts...all strictly kosher. And all full of fat, calories, cholesterol, and sugar. The argument that kosher food is healthier just doesn't add up. You can be punctiliously kosher and still dangerously unhealthy.

I also heard that kosher slaughter is more humane than the non-kosher system. And on some level, this is probably true, notwithstanding this year's debacle at the Rubashkin's plant in Iowa. The knives are meticulously sharpened, and the precise place

of slaughter is determined to cause minimal pain. But the truth is, slaughter isn't pretty no matter what the particulars. There's a lot of blood, a lot of writhing, and enough gore that if people had a glimpse of it, there would be a surge in vegetarianism. Even God allows meat eating only as a concession to human appetite...you will recall that the original menu of the Garden of Eden, the closest form of paradise ever known, featured an exclusively vegetarian menu. It's only after the flood that God acquiesces, but only in a limited way, to meat eating.

The Rambam, a rabbi and a physician, suggested in his code a medieval version of "you are what you eat," and eating filthy animals like swine is deleterious to the soul. But as much as I appreciate the rational approach the Rambam seeks, no one looks at a chicken and says, *now that's a clean animal*. I suppose in comparison to the pig, which lies in mud all day, it's possible, but chicken coops are not a pantheon of cleanliness either.

The Ramban, a kabbalistic interpreter who is relatively contemporaneous with the Rambam, notes that the kosher animals detailed in our parasha are strikingly all non-predators. Taking a metaphysical approach, he too argues that humans should not be predators, and we therefore ingest foods that are reflective of our ethical/religious compass. A beautiful *derasha* indeed.

Anthropologists, historians, Bible scholars, and philosophers have all tried their hand at penetrating why the Torah permits some animals for our consumption and prohibits others. All are plagued by the same perplexing fact that the Torah simply doesn't elaborate on the details.

Interestingly, the one source that seems to really understand kashrut in its essence, is a text we Jews don't typically turn to for our own religious enlightenment. Nevertheless it would make Joe the Barber proud to know that a rabbi in Texas was citing the New Testament to explain the Jewish dietary laws. In an enlightening article in the Israeli journal of Jewish thought *Azure*, Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik identifies the book of

Acts, chapter 10 as a monumental text for understanding kashrut. In this text, the apostle Peter, one of the original 12 disciples, experiences a vision—the heavens opens up, and a table descends before him with all kinds of animals, and birds, and creeping things. A heavenly voice commands him “kill and eat” what’s on the table, kosher and non-kosher foods alike. But Peter demurs, insisting that he can’t eat the treif. But the heavenly voice declares that these designations of kosher and un-kosher are no longer binding and he should eat it all...which he does. When Peter teaches about this experience to other Christians, who at that time were still also practicing Jewish rituals, he announces that the covenant made at Sinai with the Jewish people is no longer binding, and such rituals that distinguish Jews from Gentiles are heretofore abrogated. Eating non-kosher food for Peter and the early church was a theological statement that the Jewish covenant had been superseded by the Christian one, and that the Jewish people’s treasured status in God’s economy had been forfeited. While we may be rattled by the implications of Peter’s vision and his message, he nevertheless gets to the core of what kashrut is all about. In Leviticus 20, God says to the Jewish people: *v’avdil* (like *havdalah*)—*avdil*, I have separated *etchem min ha’amim*, I have separated you, made you different from other nations...**through mitzvot**, including the mitzvot of kashrut.

While the idea of being different and set apart may not seem initially so appealing...I think there is a powerfully modern, relevant issue at stake. The question is *how do we make it known to ourselves, to our children, within our households, in our daily existence that we are Jews*—with all the religious, ethical, and traditional values that encompasses? Especially in a place like Dallas, which is truly a growing, vibrant Jewish community of nearly 60,000 Jews...**and 6 million non-Jews**. With all our activities in the professional world, our hobbies, our various associations, the sports teams we play on or coach or watch, the business trips, the mah jong games, the poker nights, the meetings...how do we do all that with a Jewish consciousness? Judaism was never meant to be a weekend only faith or a tradition practiced anecdotally or irregularly. Judaism is a *zeitgeist*, a state of mind, an ethical paradigm, a way of understanding and engaging in the world every day. What is it that reminds us that we are Jews in the midst of everything else? Do we agree with Saint Peter that all the distinctions between Jews

and Gentiles have evaporated? Do we gravitate toward his revelation that the Torah's ideas of a unique Jewish existence have been usurped by other trends and world views...or do we embrace the Torah's opportunity to create a Jewish event every time we eat a meal or a snack? A small reminder throughout our busy days that God is in my life, and Torah is in my heart? I think that the busier we get, the more we need rituals and lifestyles like kashrut. For some that might mean ordering fish instead of chicken at a business lunch; For others it may mean requesting the chef salad without the meat, or ordering the sushi without the eel; Others still might gravitate toward kosher or vegetarian restaurants, or buying kosher deli meat instead of Oscar Meyer. Creating some kind of kosher consciousness in your home kitchen helps kids and families understand that they live in a Jewish home, similar to how mezuzot, Jewish books, art, music, and ceremonial items help accomplish that. Whatever the contours of these choices, and I think they are all valid choices, by engaging with kashrut we participate in a daily encounter with God, holiness, and the very special experience of living every day with Jewish sensibilities. By the way, to burst one final bubble for Joe the Barber, no kosher foods are blessed by a rabbi...even though he insists that his Christian salt be blessed by a priest. The blessing in kosher food is eating it and feeling connected to our people and our ancestral faith. To that blessing, I enthusiastically respond: Amen.