

“Balancing Lifestyle & Diet”
Parashat Sh’mini 5766
Rabbi Adam J. Raskin
Congregation Beth Torah

It is amazing to consider, particularly in the wake of eight days of Passover, how much food defines Jewish life and celebration. For every holiday, it is possible to list a traditional Jewish delicacy, and during Pesach, food becomes the very medium of education, of memory, and of storytelling. Notwithstanding the hundreds of insipid jokes about Jews and food, I think there is something rather sublime about our affinity for food. Judaism is a very economical faith system. Our tradition makes use of the most basic, accessible raw materials in order to construct a lifestyle of meaning. What more intrinsic, fundamental building block of life is there than food and water? The very substances we imbibe become vehicles for God’s transcendence every bit as much as a prayer from the siddur, or a sophisticated ritual. It is this very subject matter that the second half of our Parasha contends with today.

I want to admit to you that I have a difficult time explaining Kashrut. I simply do not know why chicken is acceptable to God while pig is verboten. Of course pigs wallow in mud and grime, but let’s face it, a chicken is no pretty bird either. From my limited experience on the farm, I never left with the impression that chickens are overly preoccupied by personal hygiene. Neither can I imagine why *arbeh*, locusts (if you recall the biblical plague) are edible, while eel is not. In my mind the winged creature is no more appetizing than the slithery one. Yet one the Torah permits, while the other it explicitly forbids.

When I was in Hebrew school I recall being taught that kosher food is healthier than non-Kosher food. But that too seems easily debunked by a whole host of kosher gourmet: chopped liver, *gribbenes* (crip bits of poultry skin, fried up with onions), *schmaltz* schmearred on challah, *kishkeh* (beef intestine). While all of these foods might be classified as ‘divine,’ they are surely not healthy. Glatt kosher indeed, but potentially fatal in large quantities. Indeed a recent study by Dr. Fred Rosner—the famed professor of medicine at Mt. Sinai Medical School in New York—suggested that the expansion of processed, high fat and sugar-filled snack foods with kosher certifications has led to an increase in obesity within the kosher-consuming Jewish community. While some of our

sages may have seen the horrifying affects of trichinosis and other diseases carried by non-kosher animals, these too have largely been eliminated in our regulatory culture.

Anthropologists have taken their stab at kashrut as well. Mary Douglas, the respected symbolic anthropologist from University College in London, surmised that the animals that the Torah considers acceptable are the ideal creatures within their taxonomic categories. The model marine life, for example, is one that is propelled by fins and scales. Any marine life lacking one or both, such as a bottom crawler, is deemed less than ideal and therefore not kosher. While these theories are intellectually stimulating, they seem arbitrary and not particularly inspiring.

If we place kashrut in its biblical context, there is no corresponding explanation other than, “*Vi-hitem kedoshim, ki kadosh Ani,*” “By following this diet,” says the Lord, “you will be holy, just like Me.” Now, believe it or not, “holy” is something I think I have some grasp of. Let’s consider some of the other things that make us Jews holy, as expressed in the Torah:

Pursuing justice; caring for the poor, the widow, and the orphan; loving the stranger and extending sensitivity and compassion to all life; Ensuring that justice is meted out equally to the rich and the poor; rising in deference to the elderly; freeing those who are enslaved; recognizing that every single human being is made in the image of God, and treating them accordingly; protecting and cultivating the natural world; respecting the two people, our parents, who gave us life; caring for the health of our bodies, and striving to allow only healthy words come out of our mouths; not taking advantage of someone’s ignorance; being fair and honest in our testimonies and business transactions...the list goes on and on. Each of these aspects of life is governed by our Torah, and each do their part to create an infrastructure of holiness in the world. It is that very same Torah that commands us to make distinctions about what we put into our mouths; about what we order from the menu; about what we consume, when and with what else we consume it. The very same Torah that commands me to give *tzedakah*, commands me not to eat cheeseburgers. The same Torah that instructs me to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, instructs me to refrain from shrimp and lobster. The same Torah that induces me to visit the sick and comfort the mourner, induces me to eat meat that is killed in a specific manner, and not to mix it with milk, the liquid of life. I

understand these ideas not to be separate universes—one a social contract, the other a complex web of ritual; rather I see these ideas existing in tandem with one another. I believe that God constructed ritual as a boon to our behavior. Rituals like kashrut train us to think and therefore to act Jewishly all the time, rather than some of the time. Kashrut reminds me that my relationship with God, in all its forms, is a full time occupation.

I think that ritual observance is a casualty of modern, liberal Jewish values which I often feel downgrades ritual practice in favor of just “being a good person.” But let’s face it: it’s hard to be the nice guy all the time. Our world and our circumstances are filled with temptations and values that undermine goodness. Turning the microscope upon myself, I know that I need all the help I can get to overcome what our tradition calls the *yetzer ha’ra*—the inclination to put my own needs above those of others; the preoccupation with greed or material possessions; the placing of myself at the center of the universe. I need God’s help to rise above the sphere of myself to become something that even remotely comes close to “holy.” And I testify to you today, that kashrut helps me do that. When I think of kashrut as all part of that great package of holiness that includes how I treat others, how I speak, how compassionate I am, and how I care for those in need, kashrut seems a lot less primitive and a lot more radically modern.

Connie Guttersen, the author of one of the latest weight loss best sellers, *The Sonoma Diet*, described effective dieting as a sensible, long term approach that balances lifestyle and diet. I think that’s a great tag-line for kashrut...*a long term approach that balances lifestyle and diet*. Kashrut is a process. It may take a long term approach to implement it in our lives. But the effect it exerts on our *lifestyle* is unmistakable. I pray this morning, my friends, that we may all be open to the ways God’s Torah touches both our spiritual lives, as well as our physical lives; and how those two parts of who we are intersect and intertwine. Amen.