



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

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OHR SOMAYACH תנוח טאנענבאום קאלעדזש
TANENBAUM COLLEGE
6 February 1999
Issue #225
Parshat Yisro

Dear Readers: Among the many questions that "Ask the Rabbi" receives daily, a number of them inevitably concern the laws and philosophy of keeping kosher. We therefore dedicate this week's "Ask the Rabbi" to the topic of kashrut.

SOUL FOOD THE JEWISH DIETARY LAWS

Few activities are as instinctive as eating, and few activities have such a profound impact on us physiologically, psychologically and spiritually. Many people do not give much thought to when, what and how they eat until their cardiologist tells them to lower their cholesterol or their friends begin to ask if they are pregnant (for men this question is especially disturbing). Jews who observe the dietary laws (*kashrut*) however, must make regular decisions about what they eat, when they eat it and how they prepare their food; so that for the observant Jew eating ceases to be a totally instinctive activity. The dietary laws force us to stop and think about daily activities and deter us from going through life in autopilot. In order to understand what the Torah wants us focus on, and to understand the philosophy of *kashrut*, it is necessary to be superficially familiar with the *kashrut* laws themselves. Following is a brief overview:

1. A kosher animal must be a ruminant and have split hooves — cows, sheep, goats and deer are all kosher, whereas camels and pigs (having each only one sign of *kashrut*) are not kosher. Most common fowl are kosher, like chickens, ducks and geese, but the birds of prey (hawks, eagles etc.) are not kosher. A sea creature is only kosher if it has fins and scales. So most species of fish are kosher (tuna, salmon, flounder, etc.) but all shellfish are not kosher; dolphins, whales and squids are also not kosher. Any food product of a non-kosher animal is also non-kosher. The exception to this rule is bee's honey.
2. An animal or bird must be slaughtered according to Jewish law (*shechita*). This involves cutting the animal's trachea and oesophagus (the carotid and jugular are also severed) with a surgically sharp knife. The cut must be swift, continuous and performed by an expert. This

method of slaughter reduces the blood pressure in the brain to zero immediately, so that the animal loses consciousness in a few seconds and dies in minutes.

3. The animal or bird must be free of *treifot*, which are 70 different categories of injuries, diseases or abnormalities whose presence renders the animal non-kosher.
 4. Certain fats, known as *chelev*, may not be eaten. Blood must be removed from the meat, either by soaking, salting and rinsing or by broiling. The sciatic nerve in each leg and the surrounding fat must be removed.
 5. It is forbidden to cook, eat, or benefit from milk and meat mixtures. It is also forbidden to cook or eat dairy products together with poultry.
 6. In Israel, tithes must be taken from all crops. If these tithes are not separated then the produce may not be eaten; the wheat, barley or fruit is actually not kosher until the commandments of tithing have been fulfilled.
 7. Milk products (including the rennet in cheese) must only come from kosher animals.
- The most obvious idea behind *kashrut* is self-control and discipline. Let me illustrate this with a real-life example. Most parents are familiar with the horrors of going to the supermarket with young children. The worst part of this ordeal is waiting in line at the checkout counter. You have only five items, so you wait in the "Eight-items-or-less" express line. The lady in front of you has 25 items at least, she is trying to pay with a third-party check from Paraguay in Thai baht, and is negotiating with the clerk over her expired coupons (and her mortgage). You are waiting with two children under the age of six, surrounded on both sides by four foot high walls of sugar based products. The children are becoming increasingly impatient and begging for candies, and you are becoming more and more angry and frustrated as time goes on. Of course, most children will scream, beg and embarrass their parents into buying the candy. Now for the true story. I moved with my family from Israel to Toronto for a four-year stay, and in the first week was waiting in line at the supermarket with one of my children. He asked me for a chocolate bar. I looked at the bar and told him

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Production Design: Eli Ballon

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that it was not kosher and he was silent, accepting the decision without tantrums, threats, tears or hysteria. It struck me then that my five-year-old, who has been brought up with the laws of *kashrut*, had more self-control than millions of adults in the Western world. How many people accept “no” as an answer in denial of a pleasure that they want *now*? Dangerous? I will take precautions. Unhealthy? I will stop after a few. Addictive? Not to me. Not to indulge is simply not an option.

- I once read an interview with a famous politician whose motto was “A kinder, gentler America.” The interview was conducted while he was engaged in hunting grouse. No one seemed to notice the contradiction between his recreational activity and his motto. How can one derive entertainment from pursuing and killing an animal and at the same time espouse a “kinder, gentler America?” In the words of a great Rabbi “I am amazed by this activity [hunting]; we have not found hunters in the Torah except for Nimrod and Esau. This is not the way of the sons of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ... it is written ‘His [G-d’s] mercy is upon all His creatures’ ... if so how can an Israelite kill living beings, without any other need than in order to pass his time by hunting! This matter contributes to cruelty, and is forbidden....” In Jewish tradition we are allowed to use animals as food and clothing; however, we are not supposed to rejoice in this, and we are certainly not supposed to make a sport of it. Some of the laws of *kashrut* are designed to prevent us from becoming callous and cruel and to discourage hunting as a form of recreation or sustenance. The requirements of *shechita* and *treifot* virtually preclude the possibility of hunting.
- The prohibition against meat and milk also serves to remind us where our food comes from. The meat is from a dead animal, the milk from a living animal. Be aware that obtaining meat necessitates death, obtaining milk requires life. These are foods that have their origin in living creatures and keeping them separate makes us aware of their source. This is similar to the law that allows us to wear clothing of leather, but suggests that we do not wish our friend to “Wear it out,” because getting a new one involves the death of an animal.
- The Hebrew word for “charity” — “*tzedaka*” — is correctly translated as “justice.” We do not look at giving to the poor as something beyond the call of duty, we perceive it as simple justice. Hence we can understand why the Torah prohibits a Jewish farmer from eating the produce of his own field until he has given tithes to those without land of their own. He is not being asked to be extra nice, he is being commanded to be just.
- The types of animals we eat are chosen in part for their symbolism. The ruminants that have split hooves tend

to be tranquil, domesticated animals that have no natural weapons. These are animals whose characteristics we may absorb through eating. We may not eat scavengers, carnivores or birds of prey; these are not characteristics that we want to absorb at all.

- There is no question that *kashrut* has contributed to our survival as a distinct nation as well. Jews all over the world have common dietary patterns. I can be confident that the curried *hamin* of the Calcutta Jews has no milk with meat in its ingredients. When I eat kosher, French cuisine, I know that the meat is not pork and that the animals have been slaughtered according to law. Jews meet each other at the local kosher bakery, they shop at the same stores and have their own butchers. These laws are a major force in maintaining unity, act as a social barrier against assimilation, and create a feeling of community amongst the Jewish People.
- Another aspect of *kashrut* is the encouragement of aesthetic sensitivity. Judaism prohibits the consumption of animals that have died of natural causes or that are deformed and diseased; it also prohibits the consumption of insects and loathsome foods. It is possible that one idea behind this is to encourage us to view ourselves with dignity and to act with dignity. One of the best defences against immorality is a strong sense of self-esteem and dignity. Evil should be looked at as beneath our dignity, stealing is stooping too low, gossip is petty and small-minded. In order to help us achieve and maintain this level of dignity the Torah prohibits foods like carcasses and diseased animals.
- Some religions seek the path to spirituality through withdrawal from the physical world. A monastic life is glorified, celibacy and asceticism are seen as ideals. Some view the human as essentially an animal that is incapable of elevating itself beyond the struggle for survival, hence they encourage a life of hedonism and materialism. Judaism sees the human as an essentially spiritual being, clothed in a physical body. Judaism maintains that the physical is not evil, it is just not the complete view of reality. Judaism seeks to elevate the physical world, not to deny it, nor to glorify it. The laws of *kashrut* allow us to enjoy the pleasures of the physical world, but in such a way that we sanctify and elevate the pleasure through consciousness and sensitivity. *Kashrut* recognises that the essential human need is not food, drink or comfort, but meaning. Judaism, through the dietary laws, injects meaning even into something as commonplace and instinctive as eating.

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- Responsa Nodah Biyehudah, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, Yoreh Deah 10
- Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim 223:6 Rema ad loc.
- The Royal Table, Jacob Cohn

Yiddle Riddle

I have a new Yiddle Riddle for you, which I heard from my friend Avrohom Moshe Rosenwasser. When would I have to make at least 20 *berachot* because I drank one cup of orange juice?

Yochi Schnall <yochii@juno.com>

Answer next week...

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

*Comments, quibbles, and reactions
concerning previous "Ask-the-Rabbi" features*

Re: Yarmulke (Ohrnet Shmot):

When we covered this topic in Yeshiva, my Rosh Kollel, Rav N. Sauer, *shlita*, concluded, based on Rav Moshe Feinstein, *zatzal*, Rav Ovadiah Yosef, *shlita*; and Rav Shlomo Kluger *zatzal* that the position of the kippa should be in a place that it could be seen on all sides.

Rabbi Aryeh Blaut <rebbeb@juno.com>

We cover our heads to show respect and awe for G-d, the King of kings. Interestingly, a popular name for the *kippa*, is *yarmulke* a word which is made up of the two words "*yere malka*," Aramaic for "fear of the King [Hashem]."

Ravi Shahar <ravis@writemail.com>

From your sources, I see where you quoted the statements from Talmud about wearing *yarmulkas*. I am left with but one question: Where do you get your jokes?

Yaakov Dovid Hakohen, Brooklyn <ytld@juno.com>

Re: Simple as Aleph-Beis (Ohrnet Vaera):

Regarding which verse has all the letters of the *aleph-beis*: I found two such pesukim, but I found it by writing a program to search for me. Was I supposed to do it by hand? I will certainly tip my hat to anyone who found it by hand! I also found one that you didn't mention, *Devarim 4:34*.

Eli Reidler <eli@pds.1hca.com>

Ohrnet replies: Your punishment is to write 100 times "I will not cheat on the Yiddle Riddle" (you may write a computer program to do this).

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