Re'eh | Kosher World

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Kosher dietary laws are foundational to Jewish identity. Overwhelmingly, “identified” Jews, of varying levels of religious observance, maintain some degree of *kashrut* observance. The laws of kosher are divinely installed, immutable, and never change with the passage of time. However, the experience of keeping kosher does shift, as our food culture and food production methods change, and as the layouts of our home kitchens are modified.

The specific details of *kashrut* remain one of the great mysteries of halakha. A comprehensive system of *halakhot* strictly governs which animals we eat, how the meat is processed, and how we prepare our food. Non-Jews are often astonished at the degree of complexity of the *halakhot* of *kashrut*.

Unlike many rational *mitzvot*, though, *kashrut* guidelines appear illogical and even arbitrary. Why should an animal with split hoofs be permissible, while one with uncleft feet is prohibited? Does eating an animal which chews its cud provide medicinal benefits over other forms of meat? Is mixing meat and milk toxic? In keeping kosher, we stand before Hashem, blindly submitting to these indecipherable laws which govern our most basic function of life. There is nothing more visceral than laws which regulate eating.

If the specific details of *kashrut* laws appear illogical, the overall concept of limiting our food intake is eminently reasonable and absolutely critical to a life of spirituality. Judaism doesn’t endorse ascetism or extreme self-deprivation but, instead, encourages healthy and balanced living, and responsible enjoyment of the pleasures of Hashem's world. By reciting a *berakha* before and after food we demonstrate that enjoyment of food is consistent with Hashem's will.

Though we enjoy this world we don’t overindulge in it, and we refuse to mindlessly follow our physical desires or our raging hormones. Religion demands self-discipline and healthy regulation of physical pleasure. We are larger than our physical desires and we impose our will on our stomachs. By constricting our choice of permissible foods, kosher laws provide a built-in disciplining mechanism to control our eating habits. By eating deliberately and discriminately we avoid rapacious gluttony and unrestrained gorging. If we think about *what* we eat, we also think *before* we eat.

While the specific laws of *kashrut* are mysterious, the broader notion of regulating our diet is obvious. Kosher dietary laws always forged Jewish identity.

The Culture of Food

Traditionally, keeping kosher provided an additional communal benefit. Though we don’t withdraw from general society, we are meant to preserve some degree of cultural insularity. This was true when we inhabited our homeland, and became even more important once we were evicted into exile, living amongst foreign nations. Lacking a common homeland or any other unifying cultural symbol, we relied heavily upon kosher laws to preserve national identity. Eating is always a social event and the restrictions of kosher food provided social distancing and checked against cultural erosion.

In addition, we also developed a culture of Jewish food. Each Jewish community developed its own distinctly Jewish food and these ethnic cuisines preserved Jewish identity. Today, many Jews who do not practice any kosher observance, are still drawn to kosher cuisine as a major anchor of their Jewish identity. For many, matza-ball soup and gefilte fish are more compelling than matza and lulav. Food, identity and community were always intricately intertwined.

Daniel's Stand

The impact of kosher food upon identity and Jewish culture was demonstrated by the *navi* Daniel, during his bold stand against cultural assimilation. Along with other up-and-coming young Jewish leaders, he was exiled to Babylonia, appointed to the king's court, educated in Babylonian culture, and expected to help acclimate the newly arrived Jewish refugees to their new environment. Defiantly, he refused the fancy palace meals he was served, choosing, instead, to smuggle in simple beans and seeds. Though the palace breads he was served were likely kosher, Daniel refused to consume them, reasoning correctly that food shapes identity. Facing the pressures of exile, he stoutly preserved his Jewish identity by not submitting to Babylonian food.

Based upon his precedent, Halakha expanded Biblical dietary laws to prohibit several Gentile-manufactured products. Bans against Gentile-produced bread (*pat nochri*) or Gentile-manufactured wine (*yayin setam*) were instituted to distance us from Gentile society and culture by clearly demarcating between Jewish tables and non-Jewish tables.

Traditionally, the experience of eating kosher served two functions: it helped discipline our appetite and it strengthened our communal bonds in the face of external cultural pressures.

The Shift

Over the past two centuries kosher experience has undergone radical transformations. Mass production of food has relocated *kashrut* supervision from the kitchen to large food-producing factories. *Shechita* inspections no longer take place in neighborhood butchers but in large meat processing plants. Once personal, *kashrut* supervision has now become institutionalized and industrialized. This has greatly expanded the availability of kosher food, both in Israel and in large Jewish population centers. For most Jews, *kashrut* regulations rarely limit food options. For most, their only struggle to keep kosher occurs when vacationing in non-Jewish destinations. And even then, Chabad is only a phone call away with hot kosher food.

Similar changes have altered the *kashrut* experience of our homes. Modern kitchens are spacious, offering us the luxury of separate areas for meat and milk. Separate sinks, ovens and sets of kitchen utensils have all made meat and dairy separation almost effortless.

Whereas, in past generations *kashrut* adherence was a bold sacrifice which defined Jewish identity, keeping kosher in the modern world is more seamless and therefore less identity-shaping. For most modern Jews the drama of *kashrut* adherence has subsided, as keeping kosher has become second nature. Keeping kosher is nothing more than checking *kashrut* certification and glancing at your watch as six hours (or less) count down, permitting the resumption of eating dairy.

Whereas the personal *kashrut* experience has lost much of its drama, collectivist *kashrut* experience has become more intriguing. As many Jews no longer adhere to classic *halakhic* observance, there are fewer rituals which unite us. Yet, despite this gap, many Jews still find themselves sharing kosher observance, even if their standards are different. In many Jewish cities across the diaspora the only time that Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews come into contact is in the kosher aisles of supermarkets or in kosher butcher shops. *Kashrut*, as it always did, still bonds Jewish communities. In a world in which our communities are further apart, the unifying effect of *kashrut* is even more substantial.

In Israel, national *kashrut* plays a different role. We struggle to infuse the public sector with Jewish religious spirit while not coercing secular or traditional Israelis who do not agree to all *halakhic* guidelines. Full religious coercion never ends well. Arguably, *kashrut* is the most elegant and least inconveniencing manner of introducing national religious observance. Extending basic *kashrut* across Israel rarely inconveniences the non-observant, though, admittedly, it does raise certain food prices such as kosher meats. National *kashrut* is so important that Orthodox Jews are willing to relax certain stringencies of *kashrut*, which we otherwise adopt in our own kitchens. At a national level, the compromises are well worth it, to unify our country through this basic Jewish identifier.

Modern *kashrut* is less formative for the individual but far more resonant for our communities and for our country.