

Jewish Perspectives on Food

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All living beings in the world require nourishment to continue to live and to survive. In this particular aspect, man is no different from any other living creature. However, man is unique among creatures of the world in other aspects regarding food. Man, for example, is the only being who spends so much time and effort preparing his food before ingestion. He is the only being who cooks food, seasons it and prepares it uniquely, to fit his or her own taste. Similarly, only man has tastes in food that vary greatly from meal to meal, from day to day. Unlike man, animals usually eat the very same food every day of their lives, with the same gusto, appetite and excitement each time. Finally, man is the only being who often uses nourishment as a purely social occasion. He extends invitations to guests and turns a meal into an event. Truly, man differs qualitatively from all other creatures in his approach to food.

While it is often debated if man lives to eat or eats to live, some people certainly make much more of a fuss about eating than others. Some eat and others dine. And yet, as different as people are, in general, in their approach to the topic of food, the Jewish approach to food differs even more radically from any other group of people. What is the Jewish view towards food and what makes it so unique in the world today?

The Torah gives numerous clues about its attitude toward food. The very first (negative) commandment given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden involved food. They were permitted to eat of every fruit and vegetable except from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.¹ When the serpent tempted Eve and she and then Adam ate from this tree, they were forced to leave the Garden. In addition, this act of eating changed the way man looked at the world. Immediately after eating, "their eyes were opened" and they realized they were naked.² Eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil produced a new sense of good and evil in man. Therefore, prior to eating that forbidden fruit, the association of food is with the commandment to abstain and with good and evil. Thus, food had a moral component from the very beginning -- eating either fulfilled or disobeyed G-d's commandment. Certainly, the result of the eating was a moral reaction. Eating caused Adam and Eve to have a new sense of morality, of what was right and wrong. Thus, this first Torah incident regarding food set the precedent for food in the rest of the Torah and in Judaism, in general. Food in Judaism is associated with a moral act.

The next story involving food in the Torah takes place in the next generation of Cain and Abel. Both Cain and Abel used food as an offering to G-d. G-d accepted Abel's offering of animals, and rejecting Cain's offering of crops from the ground.³ Once again, food was used for a moral purpose. The next time a specific food is mentioned was the sacrifices brought by Noah, which also demonstrates a moral act involving the use of food,⁴ followed by Noah's drinking wine and getting drunk,⁵ which created an immoral act as a result

¹ Genesis 2:16-17

² Genesis 3:7

³ Genesis 4:2-5

⁴ Genesis 8:20

of food (drink). Nimrod is referred to a hunter of food⁶ that seems to be a negative moral connotation (certainly there is an immoral connotation to this profession today). The next reference to food in the Scripture is the food served by Abraham to the three angels.⁷ Not knowing they were angels, Abraham was trying to do a mitzvah-commandment through the food by inviting strangers to his home and entertaining them in his home, in order to bring them closer to Judaism. Here we see a positive moral purpose to food. Within the context of Abraham's serving, the rabbis teach us other moral lessons. For example, Abraham promised these strangers very little but served them a very lavish feast. From this act, the rabbis learned that one should say a little but do a lot.⁸ Since Abraham left G-d's presence to serve the angels, the rabbis also learn from here that doing a mitzvah like opening one's home to strangers is even greater than being in the presence of the Almighty Himself.⁹ (See chapter about "Is Being Good the Most Important Thing" for an amplification of this idea.) Thus, food, once again, is used to teach proper moral behavior.

In the generation of Jacob and Esau, the use of food was also surrounded by some moral idea. First, Jacob will only give Esau his lentil soup when Esau "sells" him the birthright, a moral concept.¹⁰ Then, before Isaac is willing to give his blessing, he instructs Esau to go out and hunt in order to make a feast.¹¹ Once again, a blessing (a moral concept) is tied to food. Then after fighting the angel and getting injured (a battle related to morality, no matter whose interpretation is followed), Jacob and the Jewish people are instructed not to eat the sciatic nerve as a remembrance of this battle.¹² This Jewish law continues until today, tying the prohibition of eating part of the animal to the spiritual battle between Jacob and the angel. Many more examples can be cited from the Torah (such as eating the Paschal lamb, matzah, manna, etc.) that would show the same principle of tying food in Judaism to morality.

MORALITY WITH FOOD TODAY

If it is now understood that the Torah looks at food in a moral context, how is that idea reflected in the daily existence of the Jew? If a person merely thinks about what the implications of Jewish observance are regarding food today, the moral perspective will become clear. Each and every time the traditional Jew eats, he, too, turns the ingestion of nourishment into a moral act. Since each type of food requires a specific blessing, then each time a Jew recites a blessing he converts eating food into something moral. How? The blessing itself acknowledges the origin of the food. Most people believe the food belonged to the supermarket before he or she bought it. The supermarket bought it from the merchant who bought it from the farmer, the original owner. But that is not necessarily true. How did the farmer get his land? If he did not claim it to be his own, then he bought it from someone who did or originally staked the claim himself. But how could that first person claim the land to be his, when all land actually belongs to G-d?¹³ In reality, therefore, everything belongs to G-d, but He allows us to use this world. The condition for using the food

⁵ Genesis 9:20-24

⁶ Genesis 10:9

⁷ Genesis 18:2-8

⁸ Avot 1:15

⁹ Shevuot 35b

¹⁰ Genesis 25:29-33

¹¹ Genesis 27:2-4

¹² Genesis 32:33

¹³ Psalms 24:1

that man has produced with the help of G-d (i.e. rain in its proper time and appropriate temperatures) is that man must acknowledge the source of the food. That is the blessing. Without it, it is stealing from G-d, according to the Talmud.¹⁴ Thus, each blessing is a very strong moral statement. In addition, by delaying the eating when a person is really hungry just a few seconds extra (to pronounce the blessing), this person is also saying that I am not an animal who cannot control his or her desire to ingest nourishment. The ability to control desires is also a moral statement.

The most obvious manner (to the outside world) that an observant Jew shows the moral aspect of what he eats is by choosing not to eat certain foods based on the Torah's laws about keeping kosher. Just the desire to keep these laws shows a basic acceptance of G-d and His commandments. The specifics also demonstrate a certain level of morality, in that the animals eaten are all slaughtered kosher, the least painful way to kill an animal.¹⁵ (A recent study demonstrated that in comparison with all the other methods used to kill animals for food, *shechita*, ritual slaughter, mandates an extremely sharp knife, and was the least painful method of killing the animal. The level of adrenaline was measured in each dead animal, and the lowest level consistently was in animals killed by *shechita*, indicating that the least pain and anxiety experienced by the animal at the time of death.) The blood must be thoroughly drained and not eaten, because the blood represents the "soul" of the animal.¹⁶ Each of these details has an element of morality involved with it.

In Judaism, each holiday (except Yom Kippur) has food associated with it. Although some are Biblical and some are "merely" a custom developed much later in Jewish history, all also have a moral idea. The symbols of Passover are obvious in their moral content. The maror and charoset are symbols that remind us of the bitter slavery, and the matzah connotes both freedom and slavery, etc. On Sukkot, the main activity in the sukkah (the one over which a Jew recites a blessing) is the eating of the meal. By leaving one's home to eat in a temporary dwelling, the Jew acknowledges how temporary his existence really is, and how much the Jew must rely on G-d, and appreciate what he really has. Even on Shavuot, where no Biblical injunction is mandated, the custom of eating dairy is tied to a Midrash. While it is true that the specific type of dairy food differs from Jewish culture to Jewish culture, the idea of eating dairy is based on a moral reason. The same is true on Chanukah. Everyone has a custom to eat a dish made with oil to remind the people of the miracle though the oil, a moral act. The specific food containing oil differs from Jewish culture to culture, but the connection between the food and the concept related to this and every holiday is always present.

There is a general rule that all Jewish religious functions are tied to a meal, not merely because Jews like to eat, but because there is a principle that a *simcha*, a joyous Jewish event, is tied to eating.¹⁷ This is the idea of a *seudat mitzvah*, a festive meal that helps to celebrate a commandment. Thus, the big feasts at a wedding, Bar Mitzvah, Brit Milah (circumcision), Pidyon Haben (redemption of first born ceremony) or even the completion of learning a Talmud tractate are not merely a Jewish excuse to "throw an affair." Rather, they are tied to the performance of a mitzvah, a moral act. All of these ideas point again and again to the concept that Judaism associates all types of eating with morality.

¹⁴ Berachot 35a

¹⁵ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 451

¹⁶ Leviticus 7:26-27 and Deuteronomy 12:23

¹⁷ Moed Katan 9a

REACHING G-D THROUGH ONE'S STOMACH

As strange as it sounds, the Jew can reach G-d through the food that he or she consumes. The verse¹⁸ in the Psalms says that Jews do G-d's will through the Torah that is in "my stomach." The commentaries explain that Jews can reach G-d through what they eat and advance in Torah by what they consume. Even though it says in the Torah that the sin in the Garden of Eden involved a fruit tree, one Midrash insists and proves that the actual fruit eaten was wheat¹⁹ (unlike the apple which is the Christian tradition). Why is this so significant? The numerical value of the Hebrew word for wheat – *CHITAH* – is 22, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The mystical ARI explains that there is a clear connection by the food that Adam and Eve ate illicitly and the absorption of the Torah written in the 22 letters.²⁰ The Ohr HaChaim writes that the 22 letters consumed in the stomach by the first man symbolize the consumption of the Torah.²¹ By not eating certain foods, we raise our spirituality and overcome the first sin of Adam and Eve. And then he quotes the verse that we achieve spirituality and in Torah through our stomachs.

The Torah itself seems to say²² that Jews can reach holiness by what they eat. Holiness is achieved by separation.²³ Jews, thus, achieve separateness-holiness from animals and also from other human beings by what they eat. Maimonides wrote his famous book of Jewish Law called Mishne Torah, which is divided into 14 smaller books. Only one of the 14 books is called the Book of Holiness. Thus, Maimonides is telling us that by observing the laws in the Book of Holiness, Jews can reach holiness. And what laws are contained in this special book? Not the laws of Shabbat or Yom Kippur. These are important but do not attain true holiness according to Maimonides. Only the laws of kosher and non-kosher foods and the laws of proper and improper sexual relationships are written in the Book of Holiness. Thus, Maimonides is telling Jews that holiness in Judaism is achieved by satisfying the bodily needs for gratification of food as well as sexual gratification, but only if done in a Jewish way according to Jewish law.

THE MORAL IDEAS BEHIND THE KASHRUT LAWS

Although the basis of kashrut observance, like any other commandment, is simply because of G-d commanded the Jewish people in the Torah, like all of the other mitzvot, Jews have speculated about the reasons in order to add to the meaning of the performance (see chapter on "Mitzvot" for a full examination of this concept). The desire to find meaning in the laws of kashrut has particularly interested Jewish scholars for generations. All the "reasons" will, once again, tie the eating of kosher food to morality.

The one Jewish law that every non-Jew in the world seems to know is that a Jew is not allowed to eat ham, pork or anything that comes from a pig. Why is it this so? There is nothing in the Torah that seems to make this prohibition more stringent than others. In fact, there is no difference in Judaism between eating pork or camel meat or horsemeat or shellfish. Yet, the non-Jewish world has singled out the prohibition against pig. Why? Even in the Jewish world, there is no differentiation (in level of punishment)

¹⁸ Psalms 40:9

¹⁹ Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 16:7

²⁰ The Writings of the Ari, Shaar HaKavanot, Kriat Shema, Drush 8

²¹ Ohr HaChaim commentary on Leviticus 18:2

²² Leviticus 11:46-47

²³ Rashi commentary on Leviticus 19:2

between the prohibition against eating pork and the prohibition against wearing a garment with wool and linen in it. Yet, many Jews who keep the laws of kashrut do not keep or have never even learned about shatnez, wool and linen in a garment. Why is it that even among Jews the distaste for pork has outweighed other commandments?

Based on the Torah itself, there is only one unique aspect to the pig. The Torah's two signs for a kosher animal are that the animal must both chew its cud and have split hooves.²⁴ Almost all animals in the world have either both symbols and are kosher or neither of the symbols and are not kosher. But the Torah says that there are only four exceptions that have one symbol, not the other²⁵ (until today, scientists have never found a fifth exception in the entire planet). Three of the exceptions, the camel, the rabbit and the fox chew its cud but have no split hooves. Only the pig (of all the animals on earth) has split hooves but does not chew its cud. Why is that so detestable to the Jew (more than other animals)? It has been suggested that this symbol of the pig is the only animal in the world that is has the outward symbol of being kosher and not the inward symbol. Thus, the pig symbolizes the animal (and person) which is kosher on the outside but not on he inside. Someone who appears righteous to the world but who, in reality, is not righteous, is indeed detestable to the Jew. This type of hypocrisy, "saying one thing (positive) but thinking another (negative)" is one of the categories of people that G-d detests.²⁶ A student whose inside did not match his outside was not permitted into the Beit Midrash (study hall).²⁷ The Talmud²⁸ analyzes why the Megillah of Eicha that describes the Temple's destruction is in alphabetical acrostic order except for the letter *Pe* and the letter *Ayin*, which are reversed. It says that unlike the alphabet, when the spies in the desert put their mouths (*pe*) before what their eyes (*ayin*) had seen, they reported that the land should not be entered. It was for that sin, saying what they did not really see, that the Jews were not allowed entry to the land until that generation was wiped out and a new generation would be able to enter the land of Israel. Therefore, the degree of reprehensibility of a hypocrite, a person who acts in private differently than he acts or speaks in front of others, is reflected symbolically in the pig that looks kosher on the outside but not on the inside. It is possible that it is for this moral reason that the pig is universally viewed as reprehensible to the Jew.

Most of the reasons for the mitzvot in the Torah are open for speculation because the Torah does not provide explanations. Regarding kashrut, the Torah clearly states a purpose: to be holy and separate between pure and impure.²⁹ Can eating make someone holy? Yes. Judaism believes that a person can become holy by doing an action that seems very mundane and physical like eating, an action which is shared with every other creature in the world. To properly understand this, one must understand the Jewish definition of holiness, which is a discussed in a separate chapter. (Please refer to the chapter on "Holiness").

Numerous commentaries have gone beyond the simple meaning of the Biblical verse and have given other reasons to explain the meaning of kashrut. Many people today still believe that kashrut laws are

²⁴ Leviticus 11:3

²⁵ Leviticus 11:4-7

²⁶ Pesachim 113b

²⁷ Berachot 28a

²⁸ Sanhedrin 104b

²⁹ Leviticus 11:46-47

designed as a health measure, but this would contradict the Torah itself that describes kashrut as a path to holiness. It would also confute all the examples cited above, connecting food to a moral principle. Others say that kashrut keeps the Jewish community intact and prevents assimilation. If one cannot eat in the homes of non-Jews, the chances of socializing with non-Jews and the possibility of marrying their children are vastly reduced. The rabbis, in addition to the Torah's kashrut laws, enacted specific prohibitions (such as not drinking any wine touched by a non-Jews) to further insure that Jews and non-Jews would not mix socially. Still another opinion believes that kashrut was instituted to help the Jew remind himself that G-d is above. Since eating is an activity that takes place many times daily, the Jew, by saying a blessing and understanding the origin of the food he is eating, will be reminded of G-d each time he eats.

The nineteenth century rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, put forth an interesting theory.³⁰ He believed literally in the saying "A person is what he eats." Since all the kashrut laws train a Jew to be less violent, he or she will become less violent. How does this work? Hirsch says the least violent food is vegetables. Therefore, all produce from the ground is Kosher. The animals that eat vegetables and not other animals will be less violent animals, and, thus, a person who eats these animals, will, in turn, be less violent. Similarly, animals that cannot run far and quickly will be domesticated animals, and will be far less violent than wild animals. Therefore, only animals that chew their cud (all are herbivorous) and those that have split hooves that prevent them from running away, are kosher. These domestic animals are less violent and are thus permitted to be eaten. Although there is no specific Biblical formula for kosher and non-kosher birds (the Torah just lists which are kosher and which are not³¹), the Mishna³² discusses a case where someone is in the desert and does not have his kosher list with him. How can he know if a bird is kosher? The Talmud answers that, although no rule is stated in the Torah for birds as by animals, all non-kosher birds attack other birds. Therefore, if the birds "seize their prey," the person can know that it is not kosher. There is an argument what this signifies. One opinion³³ says this means these birds grab them in their beaks and begin eating them, while still in flight. Kosher birds at least wait until the prey has hit the ground. Other opinions³⁴ say this means the birds hold down their prey in their claws while the prey is eaten. Still another opinion³⁵ says that these birds eat their prey while still alive. Whichever opinion is followed, and this is codified in Shulchan Aruch,³⁶ every one of these acts by birds is certainly quite violent. Thus, kosher birds are less violent than non-kosher birds. By eating less violent birds, Jews will be less violent.

Finally, the fish. According to Hirsch, the kosher fish that have to have both fins and scales give them the means to swim closer to the bottom of the ocean and eat from the ocean's vegetation, rather than eat other fish. Thus, kosher fish are less violent than non-kosher fish, and eating them will make a person less violent. While one may argue with the theory, one fact seems to be true. Sociologists have shown that during most of history, although Jews have (unfortunately) been involved in many types of crime, they have exhibited conspicuously much less violent crime (rape, murder, armed robbery, etc.) than other sociological groups. It has not been proven whether the reason Jews have been less violent is because

³⁰ Horeb, Vol. 2, Chap. 68. Trans. From the original German by Dayan Grunfeld (London: Soncino Press, 1962)

³¹ Leviticus 11:13-19 and Deuteronomy 14:11-20

³² Chullin 59a

³³ Rabbeinu Gershom commentary on Chullin 59a

³⁴ Rashi commentary on Chullin 59a

³⁵ Tosafot commentary on Chullin 59a

³⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 82:2

they observed kashrut, but it is an interesting fact, in view of Hirsch's theory.

Like all mitzvot, there is no "one" reason or explanation for kashrut, and each Jew at each stage of life, should try to make kashrut and any other mitzvah meaningful for him or her (see chapter on "mitzvot"). But eating food does have a moral quality for the Jew and keeping kosher properly will lead to holiness.

KOSHER CAN SYMBOLIZE A GENERAL OUTLOOK ON LIFE

There is a very interesting comparison in Jewish tradition between certain nations or cultures, and specific animals. Jacob or the Jewish people are compared to a lamb,³⁷ Eisav is compared to a pig,³⁸ while Yishmael is compared to a camel.³⁹ Even in the Talmud, immediately following the description of a dream about Yishmael is a description of a dream about a camel.⁴⁰

An argument can be made that these three personalities in the Torah also represent three of the main cultures of the world today: the Jewish culture represented by Israel, the Western culture of today by Eisav (originated by Rome, also often compared to Eisav), and the Arab or Middle Eastern culture, symbolized by Yishmael. It is interesting to note that these animals also happen to be the staple meat foods of these respective cultures. Observant Jews eat lamb but not pig nor camel. The observant Moslem world does not eat pig, but eats camel. The main meat food of the western world is, by and large, pork (in addition to the cow). How, then are these animal symbols of each culture related to their outlooks in life?

As noted above, lambs and all kosher animal have both attributes of chewing their cud and a split hoof. Pigs have split hooves but do not chew their cud, while camels chew their cuds but do not have slit hooves. The hooves of an animal symbolize its forward movement, its future. Chewing its cud symbolizes bringing back the action that already has taken place, or returning to the past. The Western Culture of today is constantly looking to move forward. New technology makes many of the advances of the past (even by a few years) already obsolete. Western culture seeks change and rarely has respect for the past, especially with the theory of evolution that newer is better. This is the symbol of the split hoof without chewing its cud.

Chewing the cud is a regurgitation of the past. The Middle Eastern world generally glorifies its past and looks back on the success of its history as the pinnacle of its accomplishments. The Arab world seeks to return the world to the days of the past, when Arab culture led the way and dominated. This is the symbol of chewing the cud but not having split hooves.

The sheep and other kosher animals both chew their cud and have split-hooves. The Jewish culture is manifested by both aspects of life and aspirations. There is a deep respect and reverence for the past: Jewish tradition believes that the closer the generation was to Sinai, the more holy it was. And yet, Judaism is always looking forward and moving forward at the same time. It wishes to use the rich culture of the past to change the present and bring the future. Thus, it is the kosher animals, with both

³⁷ Midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 4:6

³⁸ Rashi commentary on Genesis 26:34

³⁹ Midrash Aseret Melachim, Midrash Pitaron torah, Parshat Shmini.

⁴⁰ Berachot 56b

the past and future, that are the symbols of the Jewish people.

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