

D'var Torah - April 17, 2009 / 24 Nisan 5769 - Yakov Neiditch
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Kashrut

This week's Torah portion is Parashat Shemini. It includes lists of animals that are permitted to eat and prohibited to eat. It is the basis of the Jewish laws of Kashrut. Kashrut means proper or fitting. It begins, in Chapter 11, with G-d instructing Moshe and Aaron to tell the following to the Children of Israel:

“These are the living things you may eat among all the beasts that are on the earth”

The qualities of the permitted *beheimot* (animals that graze) are given, and those are hooves that are cloven and the chewing of cud. Immediately afterwards, an admonition is given regarding *beheimot* that are not to be eaten, and those animals are basically anything that does not fit the exact specifications given above. A list of animals follows: camels, badgers, hares, pigs, animals that appear to meet the specifications at least in part, but not to the letter. For example, the camel, which does chew cud, does not have cloven hooves, and the pig, which has cloven hooves, but does not chew cud. G-d, appearing to anticipate the tendency of people to stretch a point, makes it clear that these animals are completely *tameh*, or off limits. Commentary on the Torah points out the unique structuring of this passage. The quality of the animal that qualifies it as kosher is mentioned first, and the quality that disqualifies it is mentioned second. Even when the Torah is telling us that an animal is not kosher, its positive characteristic is mentioned first. Why? If G-d chooses to present a positive aspect of an animal first, how much more so should we – looking at another person with all of their mixed qualities of good and bad – make every effort to recognize their positive qualities before being bold enough to pass judgment on them. Something for a lot of us to

remember - - After all, all of G-d's creations deserve at least a little respect.

The parashah then proceeds to a different category of animals: *Micole asher ba-mayim* (all that are in the waters). Of them the parashah says, "Whatsoever has fins and scales, those you can eat."

Now let's jump **ahead** a few thousand years, when it came to pass that a certain teen-aged Jewish boy, on the verge of graduating from parochial school, was invited to the home of a teacher with whom he'd been taking art classes at the Bernard Horwich Center in the West Rogers Park. The teen-ager had been helping his teacher by painting her basement. The task now done, the teacher told her student that she wanted to reward him with a special luncheon. The young boy felt honored to be a guest at his teacher's home, for he saw her as the epitome of a cosmopolitan sensibility to which he aspired. The main course was a salad, and the young man, eager to experience any change from his mother's traditional eastern European cooking (borscht, anyone?), literally tore into it. After a minute or two, the boy noticed that some ingredient in the salad was different from anything his mother had put in her traditional iceberg lettuce and tomato mixture. This ingredient was consisted of little bits that were gummy - but not sweet like gummy bears - and with an indescribable flavor that, while not exactly unpleasant, was not like anything that he'd ever experienced before. "Joan," the teen-ager said. "There something different about this salad." And without blinking a eye, his beloved teacher replied, "It's clam".

The young man, who habitually wore a yarmulkah, was surprised and stunned by the trickery of his teacher; he began to weakly protest. The teacher interrupted, "Oh, get over it - - *Neiditch*." (For the young man was *me*.) "What are you afraid of? There are so many wonderful foods in the world. What do you

have against them? Why do you hate them? Didn't G-d make them, too?" I sat there with my brain in a knot, a myriad of disorganized thoughts flooding my head. I was ashamed and **angry**. I was **certainly** confused about how to respond. I was a **shy** 18-year old who'd always been encouraged to respect his elders. I wasn't good at thinking on the spot; I had no experience in defending the practice of mitzvot. I mean, the teachings of my rabbis had given me some inkling there *might* be days like this. But I hadn't expected that I would first be challenged by another *teacher*, a *Jewish* teacher whom I respected and looked up to. Nobody had warned me that someone employed by the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago, a person of sophistication and erudition, could now sound so much like a cross between the serpent in the Garden of Eden and Auntie Mame. **GEE - - -**

Now this all happened 31 years ago, and while I don't remember how the rest of that afternoon went, I obviously survived, and a lot of things have changed for me since then. We are now in the midst of the counting of the Omer, which reminds us of the link between Passover, which commemorates the going out of Egypt, and Shavu'ot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah. It reminds us that the redemption from slavery was not complete and the children of Israel had not yet achieved their identity until we received the Torah. During the counting of the Omer, we are in a time of transition and development, and it seems only fitting that during this time, we read a Parashah which contains a set of dietary laws which will set aside and help to make the Children of Israel unique - for thousands of years to come.

Which brings me back to Joan's question: **WHY?** Throughout Jewish history there has been a need to rationalize the dietary laws. Teachers have tried to come up with good reasons for them: it's healthier, it fosters self-discipline, and it further defines the Jewish people and helps to keep us distinct from the other nations, and so on.

Obadiah Sforno, the Italian Biblical commentator, wrote that following the laws of Kashrut is a purely spiritual act which serves to refine and purify the collective soul and character of Israel, thereby preparing them to receive the *Shechinah*. It is simply a “mitzvah”, something that is commanded, in order to help us be more aware of God who sustains and provides for all – nothing more and definitely nothing less.

If I had that moment in my life back, when I was challenged by my teacher, I would try to remember how well-meaning and concerned she was, even at her most provocative, and I think I would try to say to her, “I keep kosher because it was requested of me, even though it doesn’t make any outward sense. I know keeping kosher makes me look different to other people, but I don’t keep kosher thinking it makes make me better than other people. And as far as I know, the reason I was asked is simply because G-d wanted it that way. I am not defying the rest of the world, which G-d also created.” Obviously G-d saw the good in clams, too, even if G-d didn’t want me to eat them.

SHABAT SHALOM - - -