



We Are What We Don't Eat

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*One of twelve essays of the book *Travels on the Private Zodiac* that try to explain Judaism and Jewish life in contemporary Christian society.*

We Are What We Don't Eat

Whenever I host classes from one of the local senior high schools at the synagogue, the first question they ask almost always has to do with the dietary laws. Sometimes they know the word kosher and sometimes, most of the time, they don't. But they all know that Jews aren't supposed to eat bacon with their eggs and they always want to know why. (Members of my own congregation, by comparison, almost never ask me to explain the kosher laws to them — the ones with unkosher homes don't want to hear an explanation that will make them feel guilty and the ones with kosher homes are afraid they'll hear one that will make them feel foolish.) Anyway, I speak to high school groups quite often and when I ask for questions from the floor, the first one is usually why Jews hate pigs.

So after all these years, you'd think I'd have my answer straight. I do have an answer I usually offer, but just lately I've been asking myself if my answer is as totally honest as I wish it to be. Or, to put it a bit more charitably, I know two answers and I'm not as sure as I once thought I was which one is the right one.

Part of me thinks that the dietary laws are merely part of some Biblical effort at organizing the world. The Torah, after all, is fairly obsessed with the idea of honouring the Creator by showing respect for the intangible rubrics of creation. What that means in less fancy language is that the pious Israelite was expected to spend a lot of time drawing lines to separate things that are not supposed to be together. Maybe it's all practice for the really important task of dividing down the world into its godly and ungodly elements, the better to place oneself afterwards in the domain of the godly, or maybe the idea is just to show respect for the way the world was created by its Creator, but whatever — the Israelites spent a lot of time separating milk from meat, pure from impure, holy from profane, good from evil, Jewish from heathen, leavened from unleavened, tithed from untithed, workaday from sabbatical, licit from illicit and kosher from unkosher. They were very involved with the idea of establishing the precise boundaries of the Holy Land, but the Torah is equally concerned with the establishment of correct boundaries between neighbouring fields and between the different kinds of crops planted on any individual farmer's land.

In this context, the dietary laws are merely one more effort to divide the world down into godlike and godless domains. The kosher animals are the ones, then, that honour the ideals of the original plan — the mammals who chew their cud and have cloven hooves, for example, or the fish with fins and scales. The animals that don't fall squarely into one pre-conceived category or another — the camels who chew their cud but who don't have cloven hooves or the pigs whose hooves are okay but who don't chew their cud—somehow offend the whole system by merely existing. (Don't muddy the waters by insisting that God made the little piggies as well as the little lambs. Maybe it's a test.) Anyway, the animals that fall outside the original taxonomy are impure, unkosher, unfit for consumption — not tasteless or poisonous, only outside the sphere of zoological perfection. So people are given this task: to

establish their fealty to the perfect God by ingesting only that which is perfect in His creation. The rest of the things you could conceivably eat — bats and camels and eels and turtles and snails — are for those who haven't figured out that the way to the Creator is via His creation.

But that's only what part of me thinks. Actually, I even think that this great exercise in dividing down the world into mutually exclusive, distinct domains probably is the correct framework for understanding the dietary laws as they appear in Scripture. But it isn't what makes them work for me personally and I don't think it's what makes them work for most people who observe them. I can't prove it — although I might have something to lean on in that the Biblical terminology, according to which animals, fish, insects and birds are either pure or impure, has been more or less totally dropped by Jewish people today in favour of the ubiquitous designation of food as being kosher or unkosher, words with no Biblical cachet or pedigree. (The word "kosher" only appears in the Bible one single time and it doesn't have anything to do with forbidden foods or dietary restrictions.)

The other reason I like the explanation I'm about to give you is that it also explains why so many Jewish people resist observing these laws with such perverse tenacity.

Judaism is a million paths to a single goal and that goal is the establishment of a relationship of deep, spiritual communion between each individual Jew and the God of Israel. Indeed, all of our rituals have as the common thread that binds them together the fact that they are all designed to inculcate some specific aspect of the faith in God we wish to develop in the people who undertake to perform them. So any nation can develop a myth about the creation of the world, but what is peculiarly Jewish about the creation story in the Torah is not its detail so much as its aftermath: we don't just tell the story, we live it (or better, we live inside of it), imitating its six plus one rhythm over the years and decades of a lifetime. And it works — after years of working six days and resting on the seventh, working six days and resting on the seventh, working six days and resting on the seventh, the idea that God made the world becomes part of us, part of who we are, part of how we see the world in which we live. It's a strange method, but it's very effective — and we Jews are not only keeping the Sabbath from week to week, but doing all the commandments as well. And, since each of them has a different aspect of the faith in God we wish to develop at its own generative care, we are constantly involved in the development of scores of different aspects of this faith in God we wish to have. It's sort of like being in a cocoon of faith that is constantly becoming more enveloping more protective, more substantive and more substantial from day to day as we live our lives.

The cardinal thing about the dietary laws, I think, is their apparent arbitrariness. The Torah wants us to think of the world as God's home and of ourselves as guests in that home. Just as in our own day, that relationship, the one between guest and host, is governed by all the most specific rules of etiquette and good conduct — but the most important rule (always!) is that the guest show deference to the host by accepting his choices. Of menu. Of wine. Of company. Of table conversation. In other words, the guest in any culture shows subservience and gratitude to his host by gratefully accepting what is served for dinner without whining or moaning or sputtering about it — and certainly without asking if the hosts would mind cooking something else for dinner aside from what they had already chosen to serve. So it's the same way with the kosher laws — the Torah wants us to think of ourselves as guests in God's house and to behave like we mean it. The whole point of being a good guest lies in accepting (and then ignoring) the fact that the host's choices for the meal he is serving are completely arbitrary. The arbitrariness isn't at all a bad thing — the whole point of being a guest in the first place is that you trade in your prerogative to choose your own meal for the pleasure of having somebody else shop for it, pay for it, cook it, serve it to you and clean up afterwards. Hosts and guests do not have a relationship of equality in any culture; indeed the whole idea of being a guest implies subservience and gracious good-naturedness about

eating whatever slop your host thinks he'd like to eat for dinner on the night you're invited. You don't like it? Tough luck — and not only do you have to eat it, you have to insist you love it and (unless you really think you'll be sick) you have to ask for seconds after you've cleaned your plate. The whole point is that the guest is supposed to set his own feelings aside out of deference to the host; the relationship rests on the fact that the host calls the shots and the guest gratefully and graciously accepts the inequality of the situation as the price for a free meal.

So that's how I think the dietary laws are supposed to work, or at least how they do work for most of us. This world is God's house and we are all guests in it. Don't like what's for dinner? So make your own world and eat there. But as long as you're staying on in this world, you'll have to accept what its Host has chosen for dinner even if you do believe you'd like the pork chops more. Now there isn't anything wrong with pork chops — the whole point is that there's nothing wrong with any unkosher food — they're just not on the menu tonight. This isn't a police state we're talking about here; the whole point of behaving well as a guest rests in the fact that you don't have to. The idea is to rein yourself in willingly as a sign of gratitude to your hosts even if you do know more about menu planning than they do. (And no, this has nothing at all to do with the fact that the Bible so often likes to refer to God as the Lord of Hosts.)

I actually like observing the kosher laws. I suppose I do have some curiosity about foods our faith forbids to us. And I'm more than ready to accept that there's something weird about living in North America and never eating at MacDonald's or Burger King. But what can I say? I'm a guest at somebody else's table and I'm hoping to eat there for such a very long time that it's well worth the effort to try not to offend my Host ...

Note: This essay is taken from the book by Rabbi Dr. Martin Samuel Cohen, *Travels on the Private Zodiac: Reflections on Jewish Life, Ritual, and Spirituality*, with kind permission of the author and the publisher:

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