

# What Do the Dietary Laws Have to Do with Jewish Ethics?

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By Rabbi Stuart Weinberg Gershon  
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*Abstract: The ethical purpose of kashrut (keeping kosher) is to tame the 'killer' instinct within human nature by not eating blood, to promote human self-control by placing restrictions on what one can and cannot eat, and to demonstrate sensitivity for the taking of animal life through the institution of the most humane procedures of slaughter. As my colleague, Rabbi Simeon Maslin observes, "All Jews, kosher or not, should be concerned about taking animal life for food and the way animals are treated before slaughter."*

The focus of my teaching tonight is: What do the dietary laws have to do with Jewish ethics?

For some of us, our initial response to that question might be: the dietary laws have nothing to do with Jewish ethics. After all, in antiquity, didn't the dietary laws serve as a rudimentary form of hygienic protection over what people ate? But now that we have modern techniques of sanitary food production the dietary laws have outlived their usefulness. Keeping kosher is obsolete.

This health and hygiene oriented interpretation of keeping kosher is not historical. It is a myth. Actually, it is a rationalization after the fact. It was promoted by Jews who no longer wanted to be kosher and had to come up with a way to subvert it.

The laws of *kashrut* come from the Torah. What does the Torah itself say about its purpose? In connection with the dietary laws, we read in Leviticus, chapter 20: "So you shall set apart the clean beast from the unclean, the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through beast or bird or anything with which the ground is alive, which I have set apart for you to treat as unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be mine." (Leviticus 20:25-26) This same rationale is cited in Leviticus, chapter 11, where the kosher laws are enumerated in detail: "For I the Eternal am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy." (11:44)

The purpose of keeping kosher has to do with becoming holy. But what does that mean? Well, since God is holy, keeping kosher has some connection with helping human beings become more godly. The issue is not hygiene, but godliness.

What is the principal rule of keeping kosher? One may not eat blood. Blood is the symbol of life. Not eating the blood demonstrates some reverence for life, for the life that has been sacrificed so that we may live. The ancients also believed that you are what you eat. If you eat blood, you will crave more of it. The ancients feared that the eating of blood would transform human beings into blood-thirsty creatures.

Another feature of keeping kosher is the categorization of foods into what is permitted and what is prohibited. While candidly acknowledging that these categories may be arbitrary, Jewish tradition teaches that a specific focus on what food is okay and what is not misses the whole point. We read in a text called *Midrash tanhuma*: “What does God care whether a man kills an animal in the proper way and eats it, or whether he strangles the animal and eats it? Will the one way benefit him or the other injure him? Or what does God care whether a man eats non-kosher or kosher animals? ... [S]o you learn that the commandments were given only to refine God’s creatures...”

Our sages believed that *kashrut* served the very important purpose of cultivating self-discipline. And by exercising self-discipline over what one puts in his/her mouth, keeping kosher teaches you how to extend self-control to every other area of your life.

So what do the dietary laws have to do with Jewish ethics? Hopefully, all of us can now see that the underlying purpose of *kashrut* is human moral development. This development is achieved through dietary discipline and concern to prohibit cruelty to animals. *Kashrut*’s ethical purpose is to tame the “killer” instinct within human nature by not eating blood, to promote human-self control by placing restrictions on what one can and cannot eat, and when, and to demonstrate sensitivity for the taking of animal life through the institution of the most humane procedures of slaughter.

As my colleague Rabbi Simeon Maslin observes: “All Jews, kosher or not, should be concerned about taking animal life for food and the way animals are treated before slaughter.” Indeed, Reform Judaism’s emphasis on ethics has led to the emergence of the “*eco-kashrut*” movement, which significantly broadens the meaning of keeping kosher beyond its traditional definitions.

One of the most beloved teachers at my seminary, Rabbi Richard Levy, describes this new philosophy of *eco-kashrut*. He writes: “Keeping kosher ... (is not) restricted to the separating of milk and meat, refraining from biblical *treif*, and accepting only traditional methods of *shechita* (slaughter). A reform approach to *kashrut* should also encourage concern for *tzar ba-alei chayim*, the pain of living creatures cruelly penned in and fattened. Similarly, a Reform embrace of *kashrut* might well ban veal as well as biblical *treif*, and might prohibit fruits and vegetables grown with pesticides or harvested under inhuman conditions.”

The *eco-kashrut* movement sees vegetarianism as the highest expression of keeping kosher and expands the concept of *kashrut* to include related Jewish ethical values surrounding the prevention of cruelty to animals, ecological sustainability, and the exploitation of human labor.

Most Reform Jews mistakenly believe that keeping kosher is an outdated, empty ritual practice, without any redeeming value. What I hope you have learned tonight is that nothing could be further from the truth. Keeping kosher is not antiquated. What is antiquated are the assumptions by which we summarily dismiss it. Indeed, *kashrut*’s ethical dimensions, and *eco-kashrut*’s new definitions of what it means to keep kosher, could not be more contemporary. More and more individuals, families, restaurants, and grocery chains are voicing concerns about the standards of animal welfare, and taking a new look at how we treat what we eat. Most notably, Wolfgang Puck, the celebrated chef, has directed his companies to buy and to use only seafood whose

harvest does not deplete stocks, eggs from chickens not confined to small cages; veal and pork from farms where animals are not confined to crates, and poultry meat from farmers using higher animal welfare standards than those of the nation's largest chicken and turkey producers.

While observing *kashrut* may not be totally compelling to all of us, it would be difficult to argue that keeping kosher in some form would not add meaning, spiritual connection, and ethical sensitivity to our lives. Equipped with informed knowledge, it behooves all of us to take another look at the place of this observance in our lives.