

What Does the New Kosher Certification Have to Do with Jewish Ethics?

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In response to the shameless mistreatment of both workers and animals at Agriprocessors, Rabbi Morris Allen and several of his Conservative colleagues have begun an alternative, non-Orthodox program of kosher certification that goes beyond the traditional food production criteria to include standards of social justice. Called Heksher Tzedek, literally "Certification of Justice," this bold, new initiative expands the requirements for the seal of contemporary kosher certification to include fair wages and benefits, safe working conditions, humane animal treatment, corporate integrity, and environmental protection policies.

The focus of my teaching tonight is what does the new Kosher Certification have to do with Jewish ethics?

Most of us have been taught that the Jewish dietary laws have nothing to do with ethics. We were taught that the dietary laws were an early form of health and hygiene. As a result, most liberal Jews believe that the dietary laws outlived their usefulness long ago. They say that keeping kosher is obsolete.

Now I must tell you that this health and hygiene rationale for keeping kosher is a myth. Actually, it is a rationalization after the fact. It was promoted by Jews who no longer wanted to keep kosher, but had to come up with a rationalization that would help them not feel so guilty about it. The laws of keeping kosher (the Hebrew term is *Kashrut*) come from the Torah. So what does the Torah say about its purposes?

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).

What is the purpose of *kashrut*? The purpose of keeping kosher has to do with becoming holy. Since God is holy, keeping kosher is supposed to help human beings become more Godlike. So let's explore how *kashrut* helps us to become more Godlike.

What is rule number one of keeping kosher?

One may not eat blood. Blood is the symbol of life. Not eating the blood demonstrates reverence for life. It is an act of sensitivity that a life that has been sacrificed so that we may live. Kashrut makes us think about how animals are treated before slaughter, and that they are slaughtered in the most painless possible way. That sensitivity to life and death makes us more Godlike.

Another feature of keeping kosher is the categorization of foods into what is permitted and what is prohibited, that which is kosher and that which is *treyf*. In one of our sacred texts called *Midrash tanhuma* we find a fascinating statement about the purpose of *kashru*: “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? ... so you learn that the commandments were given only to refine God’s creatures ...”

What can we learn from this text? This text proposes that there is no inherent reason why lobster is *treyf* and veal is kosher. It’s all about self-discipline. Our sages believed that *kashrut* cultivates self-discipline. And by exercising self-discipline over what we put in our mouths, we extend self-discipline to every other area of our lives. Our capacity to be in control of who we are and what we do at all times makes us more Godlike.

According to the Torah and our Rabbinic sages, the overarching purpose of *kashrut* is to help us to raise ourselves to a higher level of moral conduct and sensitivity. Classic Reform Judaism taught that keeping kosher is an outdated, empty ritual practice, without any redeeming value. Contemporary Reform Judaism teaches that *kashrut* should not be so quickly or summarily dismissed. Reform Judaism today teaches that *kashrut* can be a highly meaningful, moral, and humanitarian practice. Modern Reform Judaism’s ethics-centered approach to *kashrut* expands upon the traditional criteria of keeping kosher to include Jewish ethical values surrounding the exploitation of human labor, the prevention of cruelty to animals, and ecological sustainability.

Reform Judaism’s new approach is described well by Rabbi Richard Levy, one of my most beloved seminary professors and a past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in an article he wrote for Reform Judaism magazine:

“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.”

Reform Judaism’s ethics-centered approach to *kashrut* is fully consistent with, our contemporary interest in vegetarianism and concern for animal welfare in the forms of dolphin-safe tuna, cage-free hens, sustainably farmed salmon, and so forth. 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. But the

unique value of Reform Judaism's contemporary take on *kashrut* goes one step further than the trends taking place in the broader culture.

This additional dimension came into focus last summer when United States Immigration authorities raided the Agriprocessors Corporation in Postville, Iowa. Agriprocessors is the largest kosher meat-packing plant in the United States. The authorities discovered that, in addition to employing hundreds of undocumented workers, Agriprocessors was mistreating and abusing them. The widespread allegations include the hiring of under-age workers, physical abuse of employees, forced overtime, shorted pay, and extortion of employees, frequent accidents and unsafe working conditions.

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Whether or not we keep kosher, isn't Heksher Tzedek certification something we should all look into? In fact, I would encourage everyone to take another look at the place of *kashrut* in your life. It is easy to see Reform Judaism's contemporary approach to *kashrut* would add moral meaning and ethical sensitivity to our lives.

The dietary laws and Jewish ethics

- 1) 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 the I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be mine

Leviticus 20: 25-26

- 2) For I the Eternal am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy.

Leviticus 11:44

- 3) What does God care whether a man slaughters 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? ... so you learn that the commandments were given only to refine God's creatures

Midrash tanhuma (Shemini 15b)

- 4) 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.

Rabbi Richard Levy, "Is it time to chart a new course for Reform Judaism," Reform Judaism (Winter, 1998).