



## THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT

### PARSHAT SHIMINI: WHY KEEP KOSHER?

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#### SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

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- I. This week, the Torah talks about what's kosher - what animals we can and cannot eat.
  - a. This is one of the most impactful laws on the general lifestyle of the people of Israel.
    - i. Kosher food is expensive
    - ii. You can't touch the spread at the holiday party
    - iii. You always want to visit that five star restaurant when you're on vacation.
  - b. Why should we be restricted from eating certain animals?
    - i. For many, keeping kosher is just second-nature...we don't think about it.
    - ii. And even when we take a moment to consider the laws, it seems impossible to make sense of them: any animal that has true split hooves, and that chews its cud from among the animals--- that animal is kosher to eat (Leviticus 11:3)
    - iii. So it needs to have split hooves and chew its cud. That seems so arbitrary.
  - c. But the Torah isn't thoughtlessly random.
    - i. What if there were a way to think of kosher in a way that makes sense, and is even spiritually meaningful?
    - ii. Something you might even be able to explain to your coworkers?
  - d. Some claim that Kashrut has to do with health.
    - i. But while kashrut may have some health benefits, that doesn't seem to be the reason for the laws.
    - ii. For example, science doesn't say that cow meat is any more healthful than horse meat, which isn't kosher - in fact, it's quite the opposite.
    - iii. So health doesn't seem to be the reason for Kashrut.
  - e. Others point to the social impact of Kashrut, in that it separates Israel from other nations.
    - i. Or that having spiritual laws that guide even the way we eat helps us connect to God throughout our day.
    - ii. Again, Kashrut may indeed promote those things.
      1. But those explanations only address why there should be dietary restriction in general
      2. They don't attempt to explain the specific rules that the Torah delineates, like split hooves and chewing cud.
      3. If that were true, the rules could have been anything, and it would've accomplished the same thing
      4. None of the explanations really seem to hit the nail on the head.
  - f. This week, we want to try to unlock the mystery of Kashrut.
    - i. We won't be able to look at all the categories - like birds, fish, and insects - but we'll focus on animals

- ii. If we can figure out the secret of chewing cud and split hooves, it may give us a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the purpose of Kashrut in general.
- II. Before we dive in to why only some animals are kosher, there's an even bigger question that we can't ignore - Why can we eat animals at all?
  - a. We generally take that for granted - of course we can eat meat! But it's not so simple.
    - i. Way back in Genesis, God was very clear as to what was permitted for mankind: "I give you every plant upon the earth, and every fruit tree is yours for food" (Genesis 1:29)
    - ii. In the ideal world, humanity was strictly vegetarian.
  - b. But after the flood, something changed. God said to Noah: "All living animals shall be yours to eat. Just like with vegetation, I have given it all to you" (Genesis 9:3)
    - i. But why - what changed??
    - ii. The verses right before this gives us the answer: "God said in His heart, 'I will no longer curse the ground because of mankind's [sins], for the inclinations of mankind's heart are evil from his youth, and never again will I destroy the world like I just did'" (Genesis 8:21)
    - iii. In this new post-flood world, it seems that the world is much less sensitive to the evil of mankind. Or, said differently, God is much more accepting of humanity's shortcomings. God won't curse the land or destroy the world because of sin anymore.
  - c. Originally, in humanity's ideal state, mankind only ate vegetation.
    - i. Because the success of a farmer is so deeply dependent on that which he cannot control -- rain, climate, the land itself -- it's much easier for a farmer to recognize that his food comes from God.
    - ii. Eating vegetation connects us to the land, and reminds us that everything we have -- everything in the world, everything that sustains us, everything we are -- is from God.
    - iii. When we eat vegetation, our sustenance comes directly from the land.
      - 1. When we eat meat, it's still from the land, but it's one step removed
      - 2. We get our sustenance from the animal who gets its sustenance from the vegetation of the land.
    - iv. Before the flood, God asserted mankind's superiority over the living world by giving humanity dominion over animals.
      - 1. Mankind could use animals for farming and plowing.
      - 2. But, with that dominion, mankind could easily fall into the illusion that he's in control. That he's master.
      - 3. So, God included a failsafe. Yes, we could assert dominance over animals, but we couldn't eat them.
      - 4. That would show incredible insensitivity to the life force of the animal; the ability to take away life plays precisely into the illusion that mankind is the master of life.
      - 5. Instead, both mankind and animals would eat from the very same source -- natural vegetation.
      - 6. In that way, mankind would constantly remember that, regardless of its own superiority of species, the whole world is God's.
    - v. But the post-flood world is far less sensitive.

1. Now, God allows mankind to play into its natural desires to eat meat, to assert physical dominance over animals.
2. But what about the previous concern -- how can mankind ensure that it won't delude itself into forgetting God and thinking that mankind is in control?

III. One solution may be Kashrut.

- a. The new permission to eat meat isn't a blank check.
  - i. God gives laws that restrict how and what we can eat.
  - ii. They're laws that are specifically meant to help us refocus ourselves, so that even when we eat meat, we can avoid the illusion of control.
  - iii. We can eat in a state of spiritual sensitivity.
- b. The first Kashrut restriction is given to Noah immediately following the new permission to eat meat: "However, you must not eat flesh with its blood in it" (Genesis 9:4) - Why not?
  - i. Well, what is blood? Later in Leviticus, the verse says: "For the life force of a creature is its blood" (Leviticus 17:11)
  - ii. Blood is the most poignant reminder of life and mortality.
  - iii. There's a mitzvah of Kisui Hadam - when we kill an animal, we must pour the blood on the ground and cover it with dirt.
    1. Seeing its blood reminds us that this animal is not merely an object, not just vegetation.
    2. We have to be sensitive to remember that this animal was alive! This was God's creature!
    3. When we return the animal's blood to the earth, it reminds us that as dominant and as powerful as we are, we recognize that the animal's life, and that our life, comes from the land. We cannot forget our dependence on God.
- c. And now, in Parshat Shemini, we have more expansive Kashrut laws that are meant to promote that sensitivity as well. And to understand how they accomplish that, we need to understand why kosher animals must chew their cud and have split hooves.

IV. So let's start with מעלת גרה - chewing cud.

- a. What does it mean to chew cud?
  - i. It's time a for quick science lesson.
  - ii. Cud-chewing animals are called ruminants, and ruminants have four sections to their stomachs.
  - iii. When a ruminant eats, at first, it barely chews the food at all.
  - iv. The food enters the 1st compartment, where it's broken down.
  - v. In the second compartment, the food mixes with saliva and becomes cud -- That cud comes back up and the animal chews it to further break it down.
  - vi. Then it enters the third compartment, where the water is absorbed out of the food, and finally it enters into the last section which digests the food, much like our own stomachs.
- b. Okay, so chewing cud is an elaborate process of breaking down food in order to make digestible. But why? Why do ruminants need to break down their food so rigorously?
  - i. It has to do with what they eat.

- ii. Ruminants are herbivores - plant eaters, but they're a very specific type of herbivore.
  - iii. Unlike many vegetarian animals who eat seeds, grains, and nuts, ruminants primarily eat raw leaves and grasses -- and those cellulose-rich plants are extremely difficult to digest.
  - iv. Try eating leaves or grass yourself - you wouldn't do too well.
  - v. Humans lack the proper enzymes to digest them. But that's where ruminants excel
  - vi. Their four compartment stomachs and cud-chewing are all done to break down and digest their grassy and leafy food.
- c. Before we explain why that's significant, let's turn to the second characteristic of Kosher animals: What's the function of split hooves?
- i. Well, first, a hoof is the tip of an animal's toe that's covered by a thick, hard keratin coat.
    1. That heavy-duty hoof allows animals to stand and travel for long periods of time.
    2. Split hooves go a step further: they provide extra traction when running or jumping on a whole variety of terrains - like flatlands, grassy pastures, and mountains.
  - ii. Aside from pigs, which are omnivores, all hooved animals are herbivores.
    1. Hooves allow them to graze in pastures for long periods of time.
    2. But especially for grass and leaf eaters, grazing in the wide open fields makes them vulnerable to predators.
    3. Split hooves give animals the dexterity to escape capture across any terrain.
- d. So, both of these traits -- chewing cud and having split hooves -- together are elements that point to a particular type of animal: grass and leaf eating vegetarians.
- i. In fact, the Talmud itself seems to have figured this out as well.
    1. In Chulin 59a, the Sages say that there's another way of determining whether an animal is kosher: if it does not have upper incisors - then you know undoubtedly that it chews its cud and has split hooves.
    2. You don't even have to check, and it's kosher.
    3. Why should that be true?
    4. Upper incisors are sharp teeth used to rip through tough materials like nuts or animal flesh.
    5. If an animal doesn't have them, it's because its diet consists of things that don't need them -- in other words, grasses and leaves.
    6. The Sages came to the same conclusion that we have: chewing cud and split hooves are not values unto themselves - they just indicate a certain type of animal: grass eating herbivores.
    7. So, if there's a different indicator of that same thing -- like not having upper incisors -- you can assume the animal is kosher.

V. So now let's make sense of this.

- a. Why is it important for the animals we eat to be grass eating vegetarians?
  - i. Why are carnivorous animals off-limits?
  - ii. And how is kashrut meant to promote sensitivity and spirituality?
- b. The animals we eat are all grass-eaters.

- i. By eating vegetation in its rawest form, they remain deeply connected to the land, connected to Source.
  - ii. These grass-eaters are the last relics of the world's ideal state.
  - iii. God says that even when we consume meat, even when we assert our dominance over animals, we must do it in a way that keeps us connected and sensitizes us to the Ultimate Source.
  - iv. It may not be ideal to eat animals, and we might forget that as far up the food chain as we go, all of our nourishment really comes from the land.
  - v. We're all really dependent on God for our sustenance.
- c. The rules of Kashrut aren't meant to make our lives difficult.
  - i. They're meant to make our lives more meaningful.
  - ii. When we eat kosher animals, we are being deeply sensitive to maintain our connection to the land.
  - iii. If, by eating animals, we choose not to be sustained directly from the land, we cannot move more than one degree of separation from it.
  - iv. The animals we eat perfectly reflect the source of their nourishment.
  - v. As such, we imbue ourselves with the humility and faith of the farmer, raising our eyes to the heavens, knowing that it is God who provides for us.