

Shemini 5781

What We Eat

Here we are back on track in the Torah cycle. And while the first part of parashat Shemini has considerable human interest, by the end of the parashah we are once again back in the familiar territory of Vayikra - patterns.

This time, the patterns are about what the Israelites can and can't eat. And the rules that the Rabbis of our tradition derived from this passage and the parallel one in the book of Devarim still apply to Jews all over the world today. Parashat Shemini is the beginning of kashrut - keeping kosher. We know how this works: when Jews dine out, we'll often see that people have personal practices about what they will and won't order. It's one of the things that reminds us of our Judaism on a daily basis.

But this initial statement of the laws of kashrut, here in today's parashah, doesn't seem to make much sense. The Rabbis recognize this. Rather than being *mishpatim*, laws that can be rationalized for ethical moral or social reasons, the Rabbis term them *hukkim* - the kind of laws that are 'just because' - like the obligation to wear tzitzit, or the use of the ashes of a red heifer to purify from death. As my sister teaches the tune of the end of a Torah reading, the reason is, *because I am God...and I say so!*

But we human beings look for meaning. In just the same way as when humans for millenia have looked at the night sky and seen, not random stars but specific arrangements that portray animals or nature or mythical beings, we can look at these *hukkim* and ask: can we see a pattern in these rules?

Just as a quick recap:

We can only eat animals that *both* chew the cud and have cloven feet;

We can only eat birds that are not birds of prey;

We can only eat fish if they have *both* fins and scales

...and we can't really eat insects at all (though theoretically there is one type of kosher locust).

Maybe the pattern is that we can only eat animals that are vegetarian? Kosher animals eat grass; non-kosher animals eat just about anything (I vividly remember a murder mystery where the body disappeared and the murderer kept a pigpen). Kosher birds eat insects and berries; non-kosher birds eat other birds and small animals. Fish...well, monkfish, which is the one with the alarming jaws and the dangly light thing to entice other fish in (remember *Watching Nemo?*), isn't kosher, and nor are shellfish, that keep themselves nourished by eating what's on the river or sea bed.

So maybe the Torah is teaching us that even though we are permitted to eat meat, it can only be meat that is made of...well, vegetables? A kind of second-hand vegetarianism? Sort of?

Or perhaps these rules are a first pass at distinguishing the Israelites from their neighbors. It seems that Philistines were rather fond of eating pig.

But if we look more closely, we get to interesting places. The anthropologist Mary Douglas, who has written both about *Vayikra* and about *Bamidbar*, had a theory that *Vayikra* is all about clear categories and boundaries (remember those broken rules at the start of this parashah and their consequences). Creatures that are maimed or blemished are prohibited; fields cannot be sown with different kinds of seed. Keeping the categories clear was a way of keeping order and since cattle and sheep were familiar to people, anything unlike them was considered disorderly. Thus, pigs, camels and other animals were impure, and so were creatures that can't easily be categorized. Winged creatures that aren't birds? Not pure. Water creatures that don't swim along? Not pure. And so on.

My favorite theory is the one created by Amos Wittenberg, son of Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, who I taught many years ago for his Bar Mitzvah. He noticed that kosher animals are less complex than non-kosher ones - it's harder to design a heron than a chicken - and so we should not eat the animals that God had to work on the hardest, out of respect for the thought and design that went into them.

And finally, there is the idea that animals represent ethical traits. Rabbi Dr Tzvi Hersh Weinreib points out that a stork is not kosher. This despite the fact that its Hebrew name - *hasidah* - comes from the same root as *hesed* and hints at kindness (maybe that's the beginning of the idea that storks bring babies - though of course we all know that babies come from Touro!). But it turns out the stork's kindness has limits. Storks are kind - but only to their own species. As Rabbi Weintreib writes,

"...to others who are not her friends but belong to a different species, she is indifferent and often even cruel. Being kind in a discriminatory fashion is a negative character trait. Hence the stork is *traif*, forbidden."¹

Rabbi Weintreib notes that the next bird listed is the *anafá*, a kind of heron - and herons are associated with anger (yes - they are the original angry bird). And once again, herons are not kosher.

And perhaps this is the understanding that is the most compelling. We say 'we are what we eat' without really considering what that means. But if we ingest unkindness, won't we ourselves become unkind? There's a connection to be made here between the rise in vegetarianism/veganism in Jewish communities. They represent the original Garden of Eden diet - and they make "standard" kashrut infinitely easier.

So we've come a long way from just a list that seems to make no sense.

Whenever I teach kashrut to students who are converting, we always end up in a conversation about it. It is such a fundamental marker of Jewish identity that I design my class in stages so as to actively invite them to up their kashrut game gradually. I'm always glad to see what happens.

Maybe as we come out of the pandemic our own kashrut will change too? Maybe "New Orleans Kosher" is about to be redefined?

We'll have to wait and see.

¹ *The Person in the Parashah*, Rabbi Dr Tzvi Hersh Weinreib, p. 303