

Judaism

History, Belief and Practice

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CHAPTER 87

Dietary Laws



Figure 87 Rabbinic certificate of *kashrut* on boxes of matzos from a Jewish delicatessen. Copyright David Rose, London.

According to the Jewish tradition, food must be ritually fit (*kasher*) if it is to be eaten. The Bible declares that laws of *kashrut* (dietary laws) were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai: thus Jews are obligated to follow this legislation because of its divine origin. Nonetheless, various reasons have been adduced for observing these prescriptions. Allegedly forbidden foods are unhealthy; that is why they are forbidden. Another justification is that those who refrain from eating particular kinds of food serve God even while eating, and thereby attain an elevated spiritual state.

Indeed, some of these laws – such as refraining from eating pork – have gained such symbolic significance that Jews were prepared to sacrifice their lives rather than violate God's decree. In this way these martyrs demonstrated their devotion to the Jewish faith.

The laws concerning which animals, birds and fish may be eaten are contained in Leviticus Chapter 11 and Deuteronomy 14:3–21. According to Scripture, only those animals which both chew the cud and have split hooves may be eaten. Such animals include domestic animals like cows and sheep. No similar

formula is stated concerning which birds may be consumed; rather a list is given of forbidden birds such as the eagle, the owl and the raven. Although no reasons are given to explain these choices, it has been suggested that forbidden birds are in fact birds of prey; by not eating them human beings are able to express their abhorrence of cruelty as well as the exploitation of the weak over the strong. Regarding fish, the law states that only fish which have both fins and scales are allowed. Again, no reason is given to support this distinction; however, various explanations have been proposed, such as the argument that fish that do not have fins and scales frequently live in the depths of the sea, which was regarded as the abode of the gods of chaos – on this basis the law constitutes a protest against idolatry.

A further category of *kashrut* deals with the method of killing animals for food (*shehitah*). Although the Torah does not offer details of this procedure, the *Talmud* states that this method has divine authority because it was explained by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. According to tradition, the act of slaughter must be done with a sharpened knife without a single notch, since that might tear the animal's food pipe or windpipe.

Numerous other laws govern this procedure, and a person must be trained in the law if he is to be a *shohet* (slaughterer). According to scholars such as Maimonides (twelfth century), the central idea underlying the laws of ritual slaughter is to give the animal as painless a death as possible. Judaism does not require that the devout become vegetarians, but when animals are killed for food this must be done so as to cause the least amount of suffering possible.

Another feature of ritual slaughter is the concern that no animal is eaten if it has a defect; in such cases it is referred to as '*terefah*' (meaning 'torn'). The prohibition against *terefah* is based on Exodus 22:31: 'You shall be men consecrated to me; therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs'. This prescription is elaborated in the *Mishnah* where the rabbis decree that *terefah* refers not only to the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts, but to any serious defect in an animal or bird's organs. In this section of the *Mishnah* such defects are listed in detail. On the basis of this law, the *shohet* is obliged to examine the lungs of an animal after

it has been slaughtered to ensure that no defect is found. Similarly, if any irregularity is found in an animal which has been slaughtered, it should be taken to a rabbi to determine if it is *kosher*. In the preparation of meat, it is important that adequate salting takes place. This prescription is based on the Biblical prohibition against blood. Although it is theoretically possible to extract a large quantity of blood from meat, the process can be aided by salting it. While being salted, meat is soaked in cold water for half an hour – this softens the texture of the meat and makes it easier for salt to extract the blood. The meat is then put on a sloping draining board so that the water drains away. Subsequently salt is placed on the meat and left for an hour. The meat is then rinsed in water three or four times.

Another restriction concerning ritual food is the prohibition against eating milk and meat together. This stipulation is based on Exodus 23:19: 'Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother's milk'. According to the rabbis, this rule refers not only to the act of boiling a kid in its mother's milk, but to any combination of meat and milk. Tradition stipulates that it is forbidden to cook meat and milk together. Later, this prohibition was expanded to eating milk and meat products at the same time. Eventually the law was introduced that dairy dishes should not be eaten after a meal until a stipulated period of time had passed. The required amount of time has varied according to local custom: some Jews wait three hours; others six. Meat, on the other hand, may be eaten after dairy products; nonetheless, it is usual to wash the mouth out beforehand.

A number of explanations have been given to account for this prohibition. According to Maimonides, it is because a mixture of milk and meat cannot be digested easily; in addition, the practice of cooking meat in milk was a pagan practice which was forbidden to the Israelites. Another explanation is that meat represents death whereas milk symbolizes life: life and death must be kept apart. Others maintain that this prohibition serves as a reminder to make distinctions in life – in this way the thinking of a Jew is sharpened.

Not only should milk and meat products not be consumed at the same time, dairy food should not be cooked in meat utensils, and vice versa. Thus it is the usual practice for Jewish households to have two sets of dishes and cutlery reserved for milk and meat.

Meat dishes are known in Yiddish as *fleishig*; milk dishes are *milchig* (milky). Food as well as utensils that are neither *fleishig* nor *milchig* are referred to as *parave*. A pot in which forbidden (*terefah*) food has been cooked should not be used for cooking *kosher* food until it is thoroughly scoured. Here the principle is that the taste of the forbidden food remains in the pot itself, but the pot can be made *kosher* by boiling water in it. If a utensil has been used for forbidden food on a naked flame or in a fire, it can be made *kosher* by heating it over a fire. China, however, cannot be made *kosher* since it is so thoroughly absorbent that the *terefah* cannot be eliminated; on the other hand, a number of contemporary authorities argue that Pyrex dishes can be made ritually fit.

In formulating these regulations, the principle of neutralization is that *terefah* food becomes neutralized in a ratio of one to sixty. Thus if a piece of *terefah* meat is cooked in a pot of *kosher* meat and can no longer be identified, it is *kosher* as long as there is sixty times as much *kosher* meat as *terefah*. Another rule maintains that if food is cooked in a utensil that was used for *terefah* more than twenty-four hours previously, the food is *kosher*. Here the principle is that when *terefah* food has been in a utensil for twenty-four hours or longer its taste becomes flawed and cannot contaminate food later cooked in that object.

Although the Bible does not attempt to explain the origin of these various dietary laws, it does associate them with holiness in three passages: (1) Exodus 22:31: 'You shall be consecrated to me: therefore you shall not eat any flesh torn by beasts in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs'; (2) Leviticus 11:44–45: 'For I am the Lord your God: consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls upon the earth. For I am the Lord who brought you up out from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for

I am holy'; (3) Deuteronomy 14:21: 'You shall not eat anything that has died of itself; you may give it to the alien who is within your towns, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner; for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.'

Similarly, the rabbis of the *Talmud* and *midrash* explored the rationale of the system of *kashrut*. Generally they believed that observance of such laws aids the development of self-discipline and moral conduct. Maimonides argued in *The Guide for the Perplexed* that the laws of *kashrut* teach mastery of the appetites as well as discipline. In addition, he feels that all forbidden foods are unwholesome. Subsequently, other writers have suggested that there is a humanitarian basis to these laws as reflected in the revulsion to blood, the requirement that an animal be killed painlessly, and the rule that only herbivorous animals be eaten.

Until modern times the rules of *kashrut* were universally practised by Jewry. Yet in the nineteenth century the Reform movement in Germany broke with tradition, decreeing that the dietary laws were connected with Temple ritual and thus not integral to the Jewish tradition. On this basis the Pittsburgh Conference of the Reform movement declared in its statement of principles that the laws of *kashrut* 'fail to impress the modern Jew with the spirit of holiness . . . their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation'. For this reason, most Reform Jews have largely ignored the prescriptions of the dietary system. Conservative Judaism, however, adheres to the laws of *kashrut*, although allowance is made for personal selectivity. Orthodox Judaism, on the other hand, strictly follows the tradition, and in recent years the observance of the dietary laws has undergone a revival in various Jewish communities, particularly in the State of Israel.

SOURCES

Prohibitions

The *Shulchan Arukh* specifies the wide range of forbidden foods:

1. Blood which is found in eggs is prohibited. Furthermore, at times, the entire egg may be prohibited. Therefore, eggs should be checked before being used for cooking.

2. The blood of fish is permitted. However, it is forbidden if it is collected in a receptacle, lest it create a wrong impression. Since this is the reason for the prohibition, if the blood is clearly recognizable as coming from fish – e.g. it is served with scales – it is permitted to be used.

3. (Once blood leaves a person's body, it is forbidden. Therefore, if a person with bleeding gums) bites into a loaf of bread and some blood is left on the bread, the portion with the blood must be cut off and disposed of. However, during the week, one is allowed to suck the blood from the gums, since it has not left the body.

4. Sometimes blood will be discovered together with milk – i.e. when the animal was milked, blood came out together with the milk. A competent rabbinic authority should be consulted concerning this matter.

5. Meat and milk are forbidden to be cooked together; we are prohibited both to eat and to benefit from the combination. Therefore, if an entity (i.e. a pot, dish, or food) becomes forbidden because of a mixture of milk and meat, a rabbinic authority must be consulted. At times, it may be forbidden to benefit from the object, while at times benefit may be permitted.

6. Two Jews who are familiar with each other may not eat at the same table if one is eating meat and the other dairy products, unless they make a clear thing of distinction – e.g. each will eat only on his individual table mat or they place an article which would not usually be placed on the table between them (for the purpose of separation). They should take care not to drink from the same vessel, because particles of food may become stuck to it. This prohibition applies even if the two (are feuding and) are careful not to use the other's property.

7. Surely, precautions should be taken not to eat from one loaf of bread for both dairy and meat meals. Similarly, separate dishes should be set aside for salt; one for salt that is used together with meat meals, and another for dairy meals. At times, food is dipped into the salt and small particles remain.

8. It is customary to mark the knives used for milk products and, similarly, other utensils for dairy, so they do not become interchanged (with those used for meat).

9. A person who eats meat or a dish cooked with meat may not eat dairy products for six hours.

10. One may eat dairy products after eating food which contains neither meat nor fat from meat, but was cooked in a pot used to cook meat. This applies even if the pot was not thoroughly clean.

11. It is permitted to eat meat immediately after eating dairy products, as part of a second meal. However, one must wash one's hands or check to see that none of the dairy products are stuck to them. Similarly, one must clean one's teeth and wash one's mouth.

12. A person who wants to eat meat after eating dairy products must remove all pieces of bread that were eaten together with the dairy products from the table. It is forbidden to eat dairy products on the same tablecloth upon which meat was eaten. The converse also applies.

(Shulchan Arukh, in KSO, pp. 201–203)

DISCUSSION

1. What was the purpose of the dietary laws?
2. Is the system of *kashrut* spiritually significant in the modern world?

FURTHER READING

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