

ETHICAL EATING

RABBI JANET BURDEN

Kashrut (כַּשְׁרוּת) is the Hebrew name for the traditional system of Jewish dietary laws. Based in Torah and developed by the rabbis, these laws, together with our observance of the Shabbat, have been the primary distinguishing ‘hallmarks’ of Jewish identity throughout much of our people’s history. Although the full system of *kashrut* laws is highly complex, its main provisions involve:

- 1) Setting out lists of creatures that were permitted or forbidden to be eaten for food
- 2) Mandating the separation of milk and meat
- 3) Specifying the acceptable method by which animals could be slaughtered and meat prepared

Of these three types of laws, only the first can be found by consulting the Torah straightforwardly. The lists of permitted and forbidden creatures appear in both Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Of the mammals, only those that have split hooves and chew the cud were deemed fit to eat, or kosher. Of the sea creatures, only those that had both fins and scales were deemed kosher. No distinguishing features are listed for kosher birds, but a detailed list is given. Over the

centuries, there have been many attempts to offer rational explanations as to why some creatures are permitted for food and others not. However, even the great medieval scholar Maimonides was forced to concede that the laws resist such analysis. Traditionally, they have been accepted as *chukkim*, laws particular to the Jewish people that are to be accepted as valid simply because they are commanded by God. Nonetheless, scholars such as Abraham Ibn Ezra (See his commentary to Ex. 23:19) and Maimonides (See *Guide to the Perplexed* 3:48) believed that the underlying purpose of some *Kashrut* legislation was to foster compassion for all creatures and an awareness of the sanctity of life.

The separation of milk and meat stems from the instruction, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk,” which appears in Exodus 23:19, 34:26 and Deuteronomy 14:21. In keeping with the principle that we should distance ourselves from any possibility of transgression, the rabbis expanded the biblical prohibition so that no meat (including fowl) should ever be prepared with milk products. Later rabbinical refinements of this law include having separate dishes for meat and milk products as well as waiting

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a set number of hours between eating milk and meat products. While some Liberal Jews find the basic principle of the separation of milk and meat meaningful, others do not.

The rules for the proper slaughtering of animals have been extrapolated from Deuteronomy 12:21, where it says, "...you shall slaughter of your cattle and your flock...." The word used for "slaughter" in the verse is actually the word for sacrifice (*v'zavachta*). Thus, in the *Sifrei* (a collection of *midrashim*) the rabbis reasoned that animals killed for food should be slaughtered by the same method as those being prepared for the Temple sacrifices. This method is called *sh'chitah*. One who carries out *sh'chitah* is called a *shochet*. The *shochet* slaughters an animal with a single, smooth stroke of a perfectly sharp blade that has been inspected for nicks or irregularities. Thus the oesophagus, trachea, jugular vein and carotid arteries are severed together, causing instant death. A side effect is that a great deal of the blood is also drained from the animal by this procedure. As Jews are forbidden to eat blood (See Leviticus 17:11-12 and Deuteronomy 12:23-25), any remaining must be removed by soaking and salting the meat. This is done after the *shochet* has examined the animal for any signs

of disease that would make the animal unfit for consumption.

In summary, a great deal of the *kashrut* legislation deals with the consumption of living creatures. As all fruits, vegetables, leafy plants and grains are permitted (based on Genesis 1:29), most Liberal Jews would accept vegetarian food as '*de facto*' kosher. However, *Halachah* (traditional Jewish law) still requires the supervision of vegetarian food to ensure how, and where, and in what, and by whom, the food is prepared. Additional prohibitions exist regarding wines produced by non-Jews, as in the ancient world such wine was often used in idolatrous worship. In our current social reality, this cannot be seen as a genuine concern, and thus Liberal Jews consider all wines to be permissible. Nonetheless, for ritual purposes, most still choose kosher wines.

Space prohibits a detailed exposition of all the particulars of the *kashrut* system, particularly the special laws that apply during the festival of *Pesach* (Passover). There are numerous books on the subject that are widely available for those who would wish to study the subject further.

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THE IMPACT OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

From the mid-18th century onwards, scholars from both the Christian and Jewish traditions began to examine scripture in a radically new way. By subjecting the Biblical text to literary and linguistic analysis, these scholars showed that, however inspired and inspiring its words, the Bible was the product of human authors, written over a long period.¹ Thus the whole idea of the dietary laws being divinely mandated was called into question. If the *kashrut* system was not commanded by God, why should anyone continue to follow it?

Early Progressive Jews were keen to drop *kashrut* observance partly as an assertion of their rational approach to religion and partly to rid themselves of an unfortunate barrier to the increased social integration that came with the granting of civil rights to the Jews. It was also an expression of their rejection of monolithic rabbinic authority. The progressive rabbinate and the laity were in full accord on this subject. While a few continued to observe *kashrut* as a demonstration of personal piety or for reasons of domestic peace, an increasing number rejected these laws outright, as a matter of principle. They

wanted to assert the primacy of the ethical dimension of Judaism over its specific ritual practices, expressing a sentiment that many Liberal Jews would still heartily commend today.

Increasingly in our own time, however, there are those who feel that while the ethical dimension must take precedence, the ritual element also has great value. Thus, a Progressive Jew who rejects the divine origin of *kashrut* may still wish to observe the Jewish dietary laws, wholly or in part, for one or more of the following reasons:

- To enhance a sense of holiness in everyday life
- To identify with the Jewish past and with contemporary Jews who observe *kashrut*
- To have a home where Orthodox Jews might eat
- To demonstrate an acceptance that we should not simply consume whatever we want, whenever we want, and however we want

KASHRUT AND ETHICS

It is difficult for many Jews to understand how various products can be labelled as 'kosher' (literally, 'fit' for

¹ For a more detailed discussion of Biblical Criticism, see our leaflet in this series by that title

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consumption), if they are produced in ways damaging to the environment, through the suffering of animals, or by the exploitation of either land or labour. The problem stems from an apparent reluctance to accept that traditional *kashrut* is a ritual system, not an ethical one. A *hechsher* (a label certifying *kashrut*) says only that the product complies with the dietary laws. Such a label is making no statement about a product's compliance with Jewish ethical principles. The following section sets out some of these, which we believe that all Jews should consider. Where possible, we have included some of the "ethical *hechsher*" marks to watch for – there are others, so please look out for them.

Tza-ar Ba-alei Chayyim (צַעַר בְּעַלֵּי חַיִּים) The Prohibition of Cruelty to Animals



In *Parashat Noach*, we learn that God's covenant of protection and concern extended not only to human beings, but also to "every living creature." (Gen. 9:10) From this idea, and other verses in the Torah (Ex. 23:5, Deut. 5:14, and by some interpretations also Deut. 22:6-7, 10), the rabbis deduced the *halachic* principle of *Tza-ar Ba-alei Chayyim* (Baba Metzia, 31a-32b). This

is discussed at length in the Liberal Judaism leaflet on 'Animal Welfare.' We must recognise that in a market driven purely by economics, there is little consideration given to well-being of livestock. The best way in which we can ensure that we are not complicit in the unnecessary suffering of animals is to purchase from the increasing number of small farms who operate free-range and organic systems. In major supermarkets, the best option is to look for animal products with the 'freedom food' label, monitored by the RSPCA.

Bal Tashchit (בַּל תִּשְׁחִית) The Prohibition Against Waste



The phrase *Bal Tashchit* literally means 'Do not destroy,' and is rabbinic shorthand for the principle of limiting waste, based on a verse in Deuteronomy (20:19) that forbids the cutting down of fruit trees in a siege. Maimonides, in his *Mishneh Torah (Hilchot M'lachim 6:8, 10)* explains how the Biblical prohibition was extended to include any wanton destruction. The examples he gives are clear: smashing utensils, tearing

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clothing, and so on. With the exception of wasting food, however, everything on his list requires a conscious, deliberately destructive act. Very few of us go around committing such wilful acts; nonetheless, most of us are still guilty of transgressing the prohibition of *Bal Tashchit*. We forget about the huge, and often unnecessary, amounts of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and fossil fuels that are used to produce and transport food by standard commercial means. We can reduce the toxins in our air and soil by purchasing organic foods and by becoming aware of 'food miles' (i.e. the distance food travels to reach us). It takes up to 2.2 litres of kerosene to air-freight one pound of fruit or vegetables across the world. We cannot afford food that might 'cost us the earth.'

Also in keeping with the principle of *Bal Tashchit*, over-packaged food should be avoided. About 25% of the household rubbish that goes into our landfills each day consists of plastic and paper packaging, most of which is totally unnecessary. Where possible, buy from local markets and producers or choose loose produce rather than pre-packaged – and bring your own bags to the store rather than using disposable plastic ones.

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof (צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוֹף)
Justice, justice you shall pursue
Deut. 16:20



If you sell anything to your neighbour, or buy anything from your neighbour's hand, you shall not wrong one another.
Leviticus 25:14

Agricultural workers in developing countries receive but a tiny fraction of the wealth drawn from their own land or created by their own labour. A coffee grower, for example, receives only seven or eight percent of the total price you pay at the supermarket for a jar of instant coffee. Those who raise sugar cane or grow cocoa don't fare much better. Market economics prioritise efficiency over ethics, but should we? An increasing number of Jews from across the religious spectrum are saying no, and are seeking out food products bearing the Fairtrade label. This mark guarantees a better deal for the producers and their communities who are often

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struggling to survive. Through buying these goods, we are also attaining the highest of Maimonides' "Eight Degrees of *Tzedakah*," helping a poor person by strengthening his hand (לְחַזֵּק אֶת יָדוֹ).

A FINAL CONSIDERATION

Perhaps the simplest, and yet the most profound, thing we can do to add meaning to the act of eating is to remember the Source from whom all things come. For millennia, Jews have done this through the discipline of saying blessings over anything that we enjoy, particularly over food. You will find a selection of the traditional blessings on p. 545 of *Siddur Lev Chadash*.

Tov L'Hodot Ladonai (טוב להודות ליהוה)
It is good to give thanks to the Eternal One (Psalm 92).

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Fairtrade Foundation

Room 204
16 Baldwin Gardens
London
EC1N 7RJ

T: 020 7405 5942
E: mail@fairtrade.org.uk
W: www.fairtrade.org.uk

Organic Food Federation

31 Turbine Way
Eco Tech Business Park
Swaffham
Norfolk
PE37 7XD

E: info@orgfoodfed.com
W: www.orgfoodfed.com

Freedom Food

Contact through RSPCA
W: www.rspca.org.uk
(where you can also find your local RSPCA)

Cruelty line
T: 0870 555 5999

Soil Association

Bristol House
40-56 Victoria Street
Bristol
BS1 6BY

T: 0117 314 5000
E: info@soilassociation.org
W: www.soilassociation.org

Organic Farmers & Growers

Elim Centre
Lancaster Road
Shrewsbury
Shropshire
SY1 3LE

E: info@organicfarmers.org.uk
W: www.organicfarmers.org.uk

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Liberal Judaism in Practice Liberal Judaism and Jewish Identity

Liberal Judaism in Practice The Role of Women

Liberal Judaism

The Montagu Centre

21 Maple Street London W1T 4BE

T: 020 7580 1663

F: 020 7631 9838

E: montagu@liberaljudaism.org

W: www.liberaljudaism.org

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