

## Re'eh 5774 - Keeping Kosher is Part of Conservative Judaism

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Imagine that you lived some 3,200 years ago and your parents had been slaves in Egypt. Your whole life you have spent wandering around in the Sinai desert, trying to avoid the snakes, always worried if there would be enough potable water to drink and enough of that sticky, gooey stuff everyone called “manna” to eat. And now you and 2 million of your closest relatives are standing on the border of the Land that God Himself had promised to y’all as a homeland. You are all standing on the Eastern banks of the Jordan River, and listening to the final parting sermons of this very old man named Moses who has been your people’s leader since before you were born.

You can sense the excitement, the anticipation of entering this new land that everyone said was flowing with milk and honey. Imagine all the wonders you will enjoy. No more wandering. No more pitching tents and taking them down. No more wondering where you will put your head down for the night. And no more of this awful diet of water and this sticky gooey stuff. Finally, you will be able to plant *real* crops, and eat *real* fruit, and vegetables, and grain! God will bring forth bread out of the ground! You can raise animals for meat, and milk. Think of the feasts! Think of the banquets!

And then, one day, that Old Man Moses starts to talk about animals in one of his sermons. What was that? Wait, wait, say that again? Hold on. You mean we are *not* going to be able to eat anything that walks on the earth, slithers on the ground, frolics in the sea, or flutters in the air? I thought snakes were going to be another kind of “tube steak”!<sup>1</sup> I wanted to eat peanut butter and jellyfish. Why *can't* I bring home the bacon?

Some people around you are muttering that this must be some kind of health food diet. We can eat low fat cows but not high fat pigs. We are going to salt our meat to preserve it from spoiling. And so on. But you are listening closely to this Old Man, and here is what that Old Man Moses said: “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God. The LORD has chosen you to be for Him a treasured people from all the people on the face of the earth. You shall not eat anything that is abhorrent.” (Deut. 14:2-3)

This is about being a holy people, a treasured people. The LORD has taken you out of slavery in Egypt. Your parents spoke of the horror of those days. The LORD has preserved you and guarded you for 40 years in the desert. Yeah, that sticky gooey stuff got boring after awhile: morning, noon and night. But you *survived*. There was nothing else you could have eaten. It is really a miracle that everyone made it this far at all.

And now you will be able to eat real food. Perhaps you owe it to the *Ribono Shel Olam* (Master of the Universe) to restrict your diet a little given all that He has done for you. The LORD wants you to be *His* treasured people. Imagine that! Out of all the people in the world. And all you have to do is follow this diet, keep the holidays He is giving you, and do your best to be nice to other people.

OK, you say to yourself, so what are the restrictions exactly? What can I eat? And Moses continues to lay out the rules. There are three kinds of animals in the world: those that live on land, those that live in the water, and those that fly in the air. Land animals must chew their cud – that is, they must have multiple stomachs to digest their food – and they must have split hoofs.

Predatory animals with claws and teeth that tear are not permitted. Animals that live in the water must have fins and scales. No shell fish, no eels, and no jellyfish to go with your peanut butter. But also no whales, no dolphins and no porpoises. Animals that fly in the air, well, Moses gives a long list of forbidden birds, many (but not all) of them are predatory. And finally, you are not allowed to boil a baby goat in its mother's milk.

That was the scene in today's Torah portion.

Now, imagine that you are a Jew living some 3,000 years later. It is the 1870's and you are living somewhere in the Midwest (or the Wild West) of the United States. Over the past 3,000 years, our people have developed the laws of keeping kosher a great deal. Your parents or grandparents moved to the United States to escape religious persecution in Europe. They had lived in Jewish ghettos where the only food available was kosher. The local butcher was a *shochet* – a kosher slaughterer. The grocer carried only kosher foods on his shelves. The baker used only dairy and vegetable oils, no lard or animal fat. You would have to be crazy to even *want* to go out of the ghetto to buy some of that *treifah* food the non-Jews ate. *Who* would do such a thing? Why would they *want* to do it?

But here in America, there were no ghetto walls keeping the Jews isolated. There was antisemitism, to be sure. But many Jews felt that perhaps antisemitism was inspired – at least in part – by our being so different. Maybe if we cut off the side curls of our hair, worshipped on Sundays instead of Saturdays, used English in our prayers instead of Hebrew, and ate the foods that our neighbors ate, we would fit in better and there would be less prejudice against us. Besides, aren't these quaint Jewish customs out-dated, old-fashioned, left-overs from an age long ago – before the Age of Enlightenment? These Jews wanted to be “modern,” “sophisticated,” and thoroughly American.

Some of your Jewish friends were doing just these things. They would have bacon with their eggs. They would enjoy shrimp cocktails and crab cakes. They would go to clam bakes and eat lobster. The world was their oyster. Or at least their *food* world *included* oyster. And they *did* seem to fit in pretty well with other Americans.

Your parents, though, continued to keep kosher as did their friends. They were annoyed with those Jews who abandoned Jewish customs and traditions just to be “more American,” or to feel more “hip.” And you are now 18, going on 19 and about to leave your parents' home, get married, and build your own home. What are *you* going to do?

This is the scene in which the Conservative Movement was born.

In response to the Age of Enlightenment, Jews reacted in one of two ways. As they were accepted into universities and interacted with their non-Jewish neighbors, the Jews had to either reject the Enlightenment altogether and maintain the traditions and beliefs they had held for thousands of years, or find ways to adapt Judaism to the modern ways of thinking. Those who wanted to adapt Judaism the most were part of a wide spectrum of Reformers. Some of these Reformers felt that in the modern world, Jewish rituals were now obsolete. It was no longer necessary to observe ancient dietary rules. They were now *passé*. They kept us from integrating into the non-Jewish world, made us seem strange, and even backward to our neighbors. Why bother?

Similarly, it was not necessary to observe the Sabbath so strictly. These laws were outdated and irrelevant. We did not need to pray in Hebrew anymore. Who understood the

language anyway? We should just pray in the language we speak – English. And we don't need all those prayers our tradition provided for us. They make the service too long. We'll just do a "short form" for the Sabbath morning service – one hour and we're done. Better yet, we'll do just a late Friday night service when it is more convenient for people to come.

What was *important* about Judaism for this wing of the Reformers? The prophetic call of Judaism to do justice, to help the poor and afflicted, to improve the world. That was the main message of Judaism. The rest was all but irrelevant.

Others in the Reform movement wanted to *keep* the rituals of Judaism. It was important for them to keep kosher, to observe the Sabbath, to pray in Hebrew, to maintain the basic structure of the prayers, and so on, because these are the things that define the Jewish community. The morals and values of Judaism, while important – **and they certainly represent the essence of Judaism** – are not unique to Jews. We may have influenced Western Civilization to recognize these moral values, but they are now part of the fabric of Western culture. What makes us special *as Jews*, what defines our community, are the specifically *Jewish* rituals. If we want to preserve our identity as Jews, and have something to pass on to our children, it can only happen through our rituals of prayer, diet, calendar, life cycle events and the study of our sacred texts.

I should mention that there was also a large third group of Jews who were neither Orthodox, nor Reformers of any sort. They simply assimilated into the general population and abandoned Judaism altogether. I mention this group because some people today unfairly charge Reform (and even Conservative) Judaism as being the *cause* of Jewish assimilation. **Nothing could be further from the truth.** Both of our movements are expressions of Judaism that recognize modern scientific and historical developments in the world around us. They therefore serve to make Judaism **meaningful** to modern Jews who – if given a choice between Orthodoxy or *no* Judaism – **would** abandon Judaism altogether. In other words Reform and Conservative Judaism have preserved Jewish identity for the large percentage of Jews who accept modern scientific discoveries and ways of looking at the world and its history.

In America, the Jewish communities had for some time relied on the Orthodox yeshivas of Europe to supply them with rabbis. But with this new way of practicing Judaism – whether in the liberal wing of the Reformers or in the more traditional wing – the Jewish leaders in America decided they needed a school to train *American* rabbis – rabbis who could relate to the American way of life and adapt the Jewish religion for Enlightened American Jewish minds.

And so the Hebrew Union College was founded in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1875, to train American Reform rabbis. In 1883, the first class of graduating rabbis was to be ordained. Naturally at such a special occasion, you had to have a big banquet to celebrate. Well, the liberal end of this Reform movement planned the banquet which was to be held at a posh restaurant. The menu included an appetizer of Little neck clams, non-kosher beef and mushrooms, soft shell crabs, shrimp salad, sweet breads, non kosher chicken, frog's legs, with crême sauce (violating the requirement of separating meat and milk), not to mention ice cream and various cheeses for dessert. Needless to say the more traditional minded Reformers were highly offended by the menu. They got up from their tables and left the banquet. Two years later, the position of the liberal reformers was formalized in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 which expressly rejected Kashrut as part of its interpretation of modern Judaism.

These two developments, the Trefah Banquet and the Pittsburgh Platform, are specifically what drove the more traditional end of the Reforming movement to break away and form their own movement: the Conservative Movement. It was called “Conservative,” because the goal was to “Conserve” Jewish traditions and rituals, even as it recognized the historical *development* of the tradition, and the need for *continuing* change and development of the tradition to meet the needs of modern times. (I should add, by the way, that much has changed in the past 130 years. The Reform Movement is now reincorporating many rituals that it had originally abandoned – wearing head-coverings and prayer shawls at services, more Hebrew in the prayers, and even keeping some form of kosher dietary laws.)

So what would you have chosen to do if you lived in the 1880’s in America? Would you have been with the more radical reformers? Or would you have split from them and joined the Conservative Movement?

The ironic fact is that today, a large majority of Conservative Jews do *not* keep kosher. Does that mean that Conservative Jews no longer believe that keeping kosher is ideally part of living a full Jewish life? I am not so sure. Because even for Conservative Jews who do not **themselves** keep kosher, the majority of them recognize that their **rabbis** do, and even **expect** their rabbis to keep kosher. Moreover, they expect their **synagogue** to be kosher. You won’t find crab cakes or shrimp cocktails out in the reception this morning.

Unlike the early Reform Movement, we have always felt that keeping kosher is still relevant to Jews living in the modern world. Perhaps it is more relevant now than ever before. What makes us a “Treasured People” for God, as our Torah portion this morning tells us, is based on the specifically Jewish rituals that constitute our contract or agreement with God – and that includes keeping kosher. Moreover, by limiting our diet of meat, we are subliminally recognizing the sanctity of life – even animal life. By excluding predatory animals from our diet – among others – we indicate our abhorrence of such violent behavior. The kosher means of slaughtering the animal is specifically designed to cause as little pain as possible to the animal. The blood of the animal symbolizes its life force, and we therefore remove as much blood as possible before we eat the meat. The separation of meat and dairy foods reflects our distaste at mixing the ultimate life-giving source of nourishment – milk – with the flesh of a dead animal. Every time we choose to eat kosher food – and we eat several times a day – we are acknowledging all of these things, as well as the covenant our people has with God.

Finally, Kashrut is an essential element that defines us as a people. Think about it this way, if Italians did not speak the Italian language, did not share a special cuisine (Italian food), did not share a national history and literature, what would make them particularly Italian? Similarly, if we Jews did not have a special language (Hebrew), did not share a special diet (Kashrut), did not share a common history and literature (the Bible and Talmud and all of Rabbinic literature) what would make us particularly Jewish? Kashrut is part of what links us to our ancestors for thousands of years, part of what links us to Jews all over the world – whether they eat Italian, French or Mexican food.

In short, Kashrut is **absolutely** relevant today, perhaps more so today than in days gone by – when Jews *knew* they were Jews because they lived in ghettos and were not welcomed into the non-Jewish world. Now that we *are* welcomed into society, we **need** dietary laws to remind us of who we are. In our high-tech, fast-paced and demanding world, where we buy packaged meat in the supermarket without having to think about the fact that an animal was killed so we

could enjoy its meat, we **need** Kashrut laws to remind us of the sanctity of life, and to bring holiness into **our** lives.

But if keeping kosher is still considered the ideal for a Jewish community in our movement, why don't we find a greater observance of kashrut among Conservative Jews? My guess is that many Conservative Jews do not keep kosher because they are daunted by what they perceive as the complexity of all the laws, and they feel restricted by the diet. Perhaps there is a particular food they feel they cannot give up: shrimp, lobster or maybe even MacDonald's. If this describes you, my suggestion is to start somewhere – anywhere. Cut out some non kosher animals first, then others, then separate meat from dairy, and so on.

Our movement actually has a **twelve step plan** for recovering *treifaholics*. Each month you cut out another food or add another level of observance. By the end of the year – in twelve months – you will find you are keeping kosher and it seems almost natural.

It worked for me. I used to eat **anything** when I was a freshman in college. But in my sophomore year, I shared an apartment with some Conservative Jews who kept kosher and I learned to buy only kosher meat and to keep separate dishes for meat and dairy foods. Of course, I still ate at Macdonald's when I went out, or ate whatever else I wanted to when I was out of the house, but eventually I gave that up too. Today, I follow a widely practiced compromise of kosher-observant Conservative Jews: I keep kosher at home, and I eat dairy and fish dishes out at restaurants even if they are not supervised.

If you have been thinking about keeping kosher, I would be happy to discuss how to go about doing it – and so would Rabbis Rosen and Strauss. As my colleague Rabbi Samuel Dresner put it succinctly: “Other people engage in diets for their bodies. We have created a diet for the soul. If the first is understandable, why not the second?” Shabbat Shalom.

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<sup>1</sup> W.C. Fields used to call hotdogs “tube steaks.”