

Shabbat Parashat Shmini 5786
Rabbi David Englander
We Are What We Eat

A man goes to a Jewish friend's house and sees five sets of dishes. He says, "I get dairy every day, meat every day, dairy for Passover, meat for Passover. That is four. Why five?" His friend says, "The fifth is for Chinese."

If you are like me and have just schlepped dishes back to their resting place for the rest of the year, or have a memory of doing so, that joke may feel a little more relevant today than it otherwise would.

Coming right on the heels of Passover, it leaves us still thinking about food in a very Jewish way. Not only as nourishment, and certainly not only as taste, but as identity, memory, practice, discipline, and, yes, sometimes complication. Which makes this a fitting week for Parashat Shmini. Because after its opening dramatic and painful episode, the Torah turns to something much more ordinary and much more constant: what we eat, what we do not eat, and why any of that matters.

I knew that Benji would be speaking about the part of the parashah that deals with the tragic mistake of Aaron's sons. That remains one of the most intense sections in the Torah, so intense that its aftermath is read every Yom Kippur. But as he knows, and as you may know as well, that leaves the balance of the parashah, which may be less dramatic but is certainly part of our everyday lived existence. Because it details the land animals that would become permissible in Jewish tradition, and lists some of those, especially among birds and other creatures, that would never attain the status of kosher.

Maybe it is especially on my mind just after Passover, with its own unmistakable food focus. I will not ask for a show of hands about who brought matzah sandwiches to school, to work, or even to an early season baseball game. But that too is a powerful Jewish identifier. Being willing to live our food practices out in the world says something important about Jewish life itself.

And that brings us to the deeper question beneath the laws of kashrut. They are not really about health. They are not about taste. They are not even simply about what once could or could not be sacrificed on the altar. So what are they about? Why does God seem to care about what we eat? Or maybe better, what values might these commands be trying to place into Jewish life?

Over the centuries, Jewish thinkers have offered different answers. This morning I want to suggest three of the most compelling. One is that people who eat together build community together, and kashrut has helped preserve Jewish community and Jewish distinctiveness across generations. Another is that kashrut is meant to awaken moral consciousness, reminding us that food is never just fuel and that what we consume should never be separated from questions of cruelty, dignity, responsibility, and environmental impact. And a third is that kashrut is a discipline of holiness, a way of saying that not every human appetite gets the final word. Even eating can become a spiritual practice.

The first approach is communal. People who eat together tend to spend time together, trust one another, marry one another, and build communities together. Judaism has lived through whole eras in which not fully blending in at the table was not incidental. It was necessary for survival. And even today, when the boundaries are more open and our interactions more fluid, there is still something powerful in practices that keep Jewish community strong, visible, and intact. Kashrut has often functioned that way. Not as a rejection of the world, but as a way of making sure Jewish life does not slowly fade into the background.

The second approach is ethical. We often think of kashrut in narrow terms, as a matter of what is technically permitted and what is not. But there is a larger moral question behind all food. How are animals treated? How are workers treated? What is the environmental cost of the way our food is produced? And in an age when so much of our eating is rushed, packaged, delivered, and barely thought about, how do we recover even a little consciousness about what we are putting into our bodies and bringing into our homes? In that sense, what people now call ethical kashrut is not a departure from

tradition so much as a serious extension of it. If the laws of food do not make us more morally alert, then something essential has been missed. The kashrut industry, like much of the food industry, still has a long way to go. As many of you know, I am a vegetarian, though the Torah clearly permits meat-eating. But whether one eats meat or not, surely one of the values here is that eating should never become mindless, and certainly never cruel.

And then there is a third approach, which may be the deepest of all. Kashrut is about holiness through restraint. A little later in this section the Torah says, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” That is an extraordinary, and at first glance even surprising, thing to connect to food. Holiness is not only found in prayer, or in the sanctuary, or on Yom Kippur. It is tested in the kitchen, at the table, in the grocery store, in the private choices no one else sees. Kashrut teaches that just because something can be eaten does not mean it should be. Just because we want something does not mean desire gets the final word. That may be an especially important message in a culture that keeps telling us that if we want something, that is reason enough. To be human, in Torah, is not simply to have appetites. It is to shape them. To elevate them. To let covenant enter even there.

So why does God seem to care about what we eat? Perhaps because what we eat is never only about food. It is about who we are when no one is looking. It is about whether community matters enough to be practiced, whether ethics matter enough to inconvenience us, and whether holiness can reach all the way into ordinary life. Most of us, once we leave the kosher confines of Beth El, make our own choices along a spectrum of Jewish observance. But even then these laws still ask something enduring of us: build a Jewish life sturdy enough to last, eat with moral awareness, and remember that holiness begins not only in grand moments of elevation, but in the daily act of deciding what kind of person you want to be.

Shabbat shalom.