

Erev Yom Kippur 5770
Congregation Beth Evergreen
Rabbi Benjamin Arnold

“The Spirit of Kasrut: A Recipe for Healthy and Hospitable Community,”
Midot: Abstinence, moderation, companionship, Kehilah Kedoshah

Last weekend, we began the year with conversations about food – how our eating habits impact not just our bodies but our very humanity, and our home life. On Rosh Hashanah, we considered ways that small shifts in our attitudes and rituals around food can have measurable, lasting effects. On Yom Kippur, we put those words into action with an unambiguous dietary practice – a communal fast. And with this fast, we consider the impact of a dietary discipline on our communal home and those with whom we share it. Tonight we ask ourselves, how food functions at CBE, and what the next course could be? We will take this question in three parts, first **rituals**, then **rules**, then **reasons**.

Part One: Our Rituals: What we do with food is actually rather impressive. We make a sincere effort, through the work of the Barbara Morris, the Mitzvah Committee, and Neshama, to deliver Mitzvah meals to those in need, feeding those recovering from illness or loss or looking to share a simcha. Our monthly potluck dinners bridge three generations with shared Shabbos meals. We pool our resources to feed the masses for an annual Rosh Hashanah luncheon, including the coordinated communal meal that leaves so little to luck we had to call it a ‘pot-love’ – a great model for large simchas like, let’s say, a bar mitzvah.

I am especially proud of the CBE culture of moderation in which we do our best to ‘keep it simple,’ even at major life-cycle events. We recite blessings of gratitude before (and occasionally after) we eat. Leah, Irv, and others often bring homemade challah to share. And we supplement those yummy loaves with challah from Alpine Pastries, an independent, family-owned and operated business in downtown Evergreen. Robert and Rebecca make their ‘braided egg-bread’ for us every week (and holiday treats for our holidays) using recipes taught to them by beloved former member, leader and teacher, Ellen Diesenhof z”l. Practices like these infuse our communal meals with values like hospitality, generosity, acts of loving-kindness, support and love, simplicity, gratitude, support of small business owners, and respect for the living and the dead. The

regulars in the mussar class will recognize the Hebrew *midot*: *hachnasat orchim, nedivut, chesed, hakarat hatov, tzedakah, kavod*. Feeding and eating in accordance with such ideals is definitely kosher. These are our *kashrut* rituals, and they are good ones, worth perpetuating and expanding.

But if someone asked us what our *kashrut* policy was, would we list these rituals? What would we say? Is there a formal CBE dietary discipline? Well, we actually do have one on record.

Part Two: The Rules. I have here a document entitled “Congregation Beth Evergreen Kashrut Policy.” As a public service, I’d like to read it to you. Oh don’t worry, this was written before you hired a full-time rabbi, so it’s not that long. As I understand it, the “**Final Recommendation** of the Ritual Committee As Approved by the Steering Committee” was adopted as this building was preparing to open its doors. Here it is:

“Congregation Beth Evergreen Kashrut Policy

Traditional Judaism holds very strict requirements regarding diet and food preparation derived from the Torah. While there are several interpretations as to why there are dietary laws, it is clear that they serve to define Jewish practice uniquely. While Congregation Beth Evergreen does not practice its Judaism in the strict manner of the Orthodox, **we believe in the spirit of Kashrut**. In that spirit, we ask all members of the Congregation bringing food or arranging catering that involves the Beth Evergreen Synagogue to observe the following rules which preserve the spirit, if not the strict laws, of Jewish diet:

1. Please exclude all pork and shellfish from the menu. This includes bacon, Bac-O’s as salad toppings, etc., Pepperoni or Sausage Pizza, and the like.
2. Please refrain from serving milk and meat in the same recipe, e.g., meat lasagnas. *In this way, members and guests who prefer to uphold the tradition of keeping milk and meat separate may do so.*”

That is it. Nice and simple: Don't bring in pork or shellfish, don't mix meat and milk – *so that those who keep that tradition may do so*. Two rules, one explanation, ...and a brief prologue that asserts two basic precepts: 1) that the traditional kosher laws define Jewish practice uniquely, and 2) that “we believe in the spirit of Kashrut.” It's these two precepts that caught my attention. We'll look more closely at the first one in the morning. Tonight, precept number two.

So, first, to those of you that worked on this policy, many of whom are in this room, thank you. I want to honor your efforts with some follow up questions. Not to put you on the spot...

So I'll just ask, you know, rhetorically. Now, ‘What exactly did you mean by ‘the spirit of kashrut?’ What is the spirit of kashrut? Because, to my reading this policy say anything about the spirit (the reasons) behind either the “strict laws of Jewish diet,” or the two rules that this policy recommends? I want to know, don't you want to know? No? Oh. OK then, pretend you do, that you want to understand our cultural and religious dietary legacy...hopefully by the end, you will care.

For some, it is enough to know the rules, rules that come with the authority of history and tradition, or the authority of a Divine legislator. For the rest of us, it is not enough to know the rules, we want to know why? Since the Garden of Eden, humans have been searching for the reasons behind the rules, the spirit behind the letter of the law. In Hebrew, such interpretations and rationales are called *taamei hamitzvot*. And a Hebrew detour is worth taking here, so you can join me in a little word play. (We don't play with our food, but words are fair game, right Alan?) *Taamei Hamitzvot*. As you know, the word *mitzvot* means ‘commandments’ or ‘sacred obligations.’ *Ta'amei* means ‘reasons for’ or ‘explanations of.’ But *ta'am* is also the Hebrew word for ‘taste.’ *Ta'im*, means ‘tasty’. Our tradition seems to have understood that explanations are not sufficient satisfying unless they satisfy both our appetites and our taste buds.

Part Three: Some Tasty Reasons Behind the Rules, *Taamei Hamitzvot*. Time for another quest, through the traditional Jewish dietary laws in search of the elusive ‘spirit of *kashrut* past.’ Along the way, it is up to you to decide if the *taamim* are *ta'im*, if the explanations tasty, or not? And in the process we'll put our congregational policy to the test: Is it true? Do we believe in the spirit of kashrut and its preservation?

Just so you know what is coming, here are the *taamei hamitzvot* that top my list, four reasons to observe traditional Jewish dietary laws:

- 1) to promote my moral/spiritual growth by cultivating a **reverence for all life**, strating, by the way, with my own life, my body and my appetites, flawed as they may be.
- 2) to ensure global sustainability by learning to manage our appetites
- 3) to perpetuate Jewish civilization and its ideals with rituals and regulations
- And 4), to deepen communal connection

Notice the reasons I did *not* include. I am not interested in *kashrut* as a way to be different, just to be different, to set us apart as a nation. I also don't think it's about promoting physical health or hygiene. Once upon a time, maybe, but now the FDA in on that. As Rabbi David Teutsch puts it, "it's not about sanitation, but sanctification." (From "A Guide to Jewish Practice, Kashrut")

To explain these four *taamei mitzvot*, tasty interpretations, we need to understand a little bit about the evolution of the laws of *kashrut*. Of the many stages, we'll skip through the four central ones – four major shifts in the evolution of *kashrut* that I believe highlight those four moral principal: a moral respect for life, a living civilizational legacy, global sustainability, and communal bonds of companionship.

In the beginning, Kashrut consisted of two basic rules: 1) protect and tend the garden, and 2) eat fruits and veggies ...they are all kosher, with the exception of the fruit of that one tree. According to Genesis, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and ie Gar

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when all the plant life, save an olive tree, has been destroyed, God makes a compromise with humanity. You can eat meat, BUT don't eat its blood -- honor and safeguard their lives even as you take them.

This is the first stage in the evolution of *kashrut*, from vegetarian to meat eater. (Remember, this is survey of the evolution of *kashrut*, not the evolution of humankind and its eating habits.) And so, what do we learn this first paradigm shift? The original, ideal Biblical diet is a vegetarian one. But under the circumstances, there was a compromise. Meat-eating is not banned altogether, nor is it open season. With an expansion of items on the menu comes an expansion of our responsibility.

So what is the ethical insight, the spirit behind the letter of the new laws? In consuming life, we run the risk of taking it for granted, of diminishing our respect for life, for the sparks of God in all things planted and mobile. In recording this shift, Torah recognizes that our moral and spiritual development (like God's BTW) depends on our ability to find a *shvil hazahav*, a middle way guided by moderation, compromise, *kvod habriyot*, a healthy respect for all life, and *tzaar baalei chaim*, concern for the suffering of animals, especially lives that sustain our own. What do you think? *Ta'im?* How's that one taste? Yea, one problem: once you make a compromise, it is difficult to backtrack.

The most obvious evidence a second major shift in *kashrut* is found in the Book of Leviticus. In the wilderness between the land of oppression and the land of promise, God comes up with a new code of consumer conduct, introducing a lot more than two new laws to a nascent nation. Here the Hebrews are introduced to the prohibitions against the consumption of pork and shellfish mentioned in rule #1 of our congregational policy. As biblical biology gets better, the menu now gets dramatically smaller, but the guiding principles remain in tact. Among land animals, Israel is instructed to eat only those that have cloven hoofs and chew their cud; among the creatures of the sea, only those with fins and scales; and among the winged beasts, a list that seems to exclude birds of prey and insects, except for a few locusts.

The Bible (and later *kashrut*) is primarily concerned about our consumption of animals, but even the vegans have new rules. The permitted produce of the land should come only from fields whose fruits have been tithed, whose corners and second-gleanings

have been left for the needy, and whose soil has been granted a Sabbath of rest every seven years.

Some suggest we should not seek reasons for these mitzvot, lest the practices be dropped when the reasons are found wanting. But, when viewed together, rules for consumption, animal and vegetable, it is not difficult to deduce a solid moral foundation rationale for these dietary restraints. **Essentially, the diet proposed in Moshe Rabeynu's New Deal is a corrective against our propensity for self-absorption and indifference to the lives of others, two and four legged.** Hoping to improve our capacity for compassion, kindness, and respect, God wants to revise the compromise by introducing the concept of holiness. *Now*, if you are going to eat meat, avoid eating meat-eaters, carnivores and scavengers. Beasts with hooves rather than claws, and second stomachs designed exclusively for digesting the 'herbs of the field,' these are good to go. Fish with fins and scales are less likely to be bottom-dweller scavengers than shell fish, and those that swimmers that are [bottom-dweller scavengers], like catfish, are off the menu too. Birds and beasts that kill for food are now on the 'not-kosher' list.

Why? Two reasons. The first goes back to that basic principal that eating has ethical implications, that meat consumption is a moral concession, and that if we are going to eat meat, lets do all we can to balance the taking of life with affirmations of life. It is the same reason to avoid eating the blood -- *kvod habriyot*, respect for life.

But there is a second motive at play here as well. Moses is charged with two responsibilities, ensuring the survival of a 'mixed multitude' of refugees from Egypt, and forging among them a national identity to perpetuate the ideals for which they we set free. The off-road field trip through the desert of Sinai is part of that, but according to Rabbi Kaplan, food and dietary rituals are indispensable vehicles for promoting a shared identity and transmitting cultural values from one generation to another. These new dietary restrictions are still rooted in moral ideals, promoting respect, and gratitude, and an ability to manage our appetites along a middle path, a golden mean. But they also serve to ground those virtues in customs that promote group identification, a sense of belonging, and the likelihood of continuity, the survival of Jewish civilization. Ok. How about that one? Tasty? Or are you still craving a shrimp cocktail, or a pepperoni pizza. Speaking of...

The third stage finds expression in the thrice repeated verse, “Thou shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” From the placement of this verse in Deuteronomy, the rabbis deduce a prohibition against, as our policy says, the “mixing of meat and milk.” Why? as Rami Shapiro puts it, in Jewish tradition, matter matters,. Milk is more than a liquid; it is a symbol of life, the first sustainer of life for all mammals. Mixing this symbol and substance of life with the flesh of an animal that involuntarily sacrificed its life for our own, according to this world-view, this is blurring a moral line. Or maybe it’s a random rule that just happens to work, reigning in out constant cravings

The course of these three stages in the evolution of *kashrut* spans more than a thousand years of biblical and early rabbinic history and at each transition we find the rules and regulations imbued with the spirit of life, a living concern for the sustainability of our moral selves, our religious civilization, and life on earth.

But enough history. Stage four is happening right now! Our generation is bearing witness yet another major paradigm shift as Reb Zalman calls it. We are in the process of redefining *Kashrut* as a core, Jewish spiritual practice with a global, moral consciousness. And it is happening across the spectrum of Jewish civilization. Orthodox groups are boycotting “kosher” companies like Agriprocessors and Rebuskin, and endorsing a new kosher organic certification for fresh produce. Ten years ago, the Reform Movement has published a new Pittsburg Platform that backtracks on century-old precedent, and encourages Reform Jews to study anew ritual traditions like *kashrut* that were once rejected, citing “the unique context of our times.” And many are doing it and revising their policies. Reconstructionist and Renewal communities all over are talking about and creating eco-kashrut policies for congregations and movements. And the Conservative movement has launched a bold and ambitious new initiative called Magen Tzedek – creating guidelines and a supervisory committee to introduce a new kosher label to the market, a new *hekhsher* that balances ritual concerns with a renewed emphasis on moral righteousness -- factoring in the ethical treatment of workers, the use of pesticides and chemical pollutants, the carbon footprint of the food production, the recyclability of the packaging, and others, as well as the treatment of animals. Magen Tzedek, a shield or guardian of Justice. We are part of a New Jewish Food Movement.

This is an opportunity not only to deepen a meaningful spiritual (and physical) practice as a community, it is an opportunity to shape Jewish civilization for the next generation. Our generation has the chance to shape a Judaism with compelling *taamei hamitzvot*, rituals, rules, and compelling reasons that leave a loving, lasting, and delicious taste in our mouths.

And we are already on the right track. So I'll close with a simple recommendation of my own – a community-building exercise. Let's revisit our congregational *kashrut* policy. Let's pool our collective wisdom, experience, and moral priorities as consumers. Let's probe the lessons to be gleaned from the traditional kosher laws. Tonight, I offered a taste, but let's really explore the spirit of *kashrut*. Let's see what we can create together, not just a policy but a way of life we can strive for.

The New Jewish Food Movement urges congregations like ours to make a seven-year plan to formulate and implement a new ethic of conscious consumption ...of food and other natural resources – water, oil, and gas, sun and wind, paper and plastic, coal and clothing. A good place to start.

One last question: Do you know the origins of the word “companion?” Literally, a companion is someone with whom you share bread, com-pan-ion.¹ The same holds true for those that fast together.

We need food, but ‘man cannot live by bread alone.’ We also need companionship. We know the power of a meal to foster friendships and a sense of community. We need the ritual meals. And lest our appetites get the better of us, we also need to update our rules and ideals. And as we do, we need to revisit the reasons that give those guidelines meaning and longevity. This year let's build community – by reconstructing and integrating what, how and why we collectively consume. This is my recipe for creating *Kehilah Kedoshah*, a congregation that is holier today than yesterday, yet freed from any trace of ‘holier than Thou,’ a congregation that seeks the Holy Oneness of Blessing in the what, how and why we eat, a congregation where companionship abounds.

Keyn Yehi Ratzon. So may it be.

¹ I learned this from Marti Arnold who learned it from the AJ Jacobs Book she was reading, “The Know It All.”