

“Is it Kosher? Affirming Life through Food”
by Rabbi Jamie Arnold of Congregation Beth Evergreen

The stereotype is not entirely unfounded: Jews are obsessed with food. We come by it honestly. From forbidden fruits in the Garden of Eden to unleavened bread at Passover, from prohibitions of pork and shellfish to manna in the desert and chicken soup for body and soul. Within the Jewish community we quip: “It is not a Jewish event unless there is food;” or “Every Jewish holiday boils down to this – ‘They tried to kill us, we survived, *let’s eat!*’”

Over the generations, sages have struggled to interpret the teachings of the Hebrew Bible in search of the perfect diet, an approach to food worthy of a people with mandate from the Divine. The result: the Kosher diet, or more accurately, an evolving system called *Kashrut*. It’s an intricate *fitness* program [*kosher* actually means, ‘fit’] worthy of the questions, what, why and how. Here’s a taste.

What is kosher? According to Genesis, human consumption of meat is a compromise offered to us after the flood of Noah’s generation. In the Garden of Eden, Adam names the animals, he does not eat them. The Bible implies that the ideal human diet is a vegetarian one. Short of the ideal, there is a backup plan. After the flood, humans are given permission to eat animal flesh, but we must not consume its blood, its life-force. Generations later, the Israelites receive further restrictions on their meat-eating cravings. Of land animals, only those that chew the cud and are clawless are permitted; of sea creatures only those with fins and scales are allowed; and of winged creatures an odd prescription excludes most scavengers but includes certain species of locusts. Generally speaking, if we are going carnivorous, we should at least avoid eating other carnivores.

The other condition extrapolated from the Bible, is that one must not cook, serve or eat meat with milk.

Why? The answers hinge on the very meaning and purpose of human existence on earth. According to many faith traditions, we are here to “steward and protect, to till and to tend,” to continue the work of creation and perpetuate life and love on earth. To fulfill this sacred mission we must learn and relearn a reverence for life, we must become *conscientious consumers*. This is why there are so many restrictions on meat consumption. As an example, the separation of milk (a symbol of life for all mammals) and meat (which required death by the spilling of blood) is a way of reinforcing this respect for life. Even the eating of fruits and vegetables are curbed by the obligations to tithe and leave the corners of one’s harvest for the sake of less fortunate lives. Why? “Choose life that you may live.”

How? Besides a disciplined, life-affirming diet, the task of protecting and perpetuating life is also served by what comes out of our mouths in the form of a blessing or grace recited over meals. Words of gratitude honor the lives and labors that made each morsel possible. What is keeping kosher all about? It is about making mealtime an opportunity for living mindfully, gratefully, joyfully, and morally for the sake of all life on earth. And it is an aspiration we can apply not only to what we eat, but how we grow, knead/need, bake, and spend our dough. Limit meat consumption, buy local, honor life with each calorie, sing out thanks, share the bounty, minimize the waste -- now that’s an eco-friendly plan I can sink my teeth into.