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**“Is it Really Kosher?”**

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“The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, these are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth. Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat.... among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, you shall not eat these.’”

What are these rules? These are the kosher laws, or to use the Hebrew word, the rules of kashrut. Keeping kosher is to follow the laws just mentioned, plus countless others, including ones about the slaughtering, growing, selling, cleaning, preparation and eating of food.

The Torah doesn’t explicitly state the reason for most kashrut laws, but many reasons have been offered, ranging from philosophical, ethical and ritualistic, to sociological, practical and hygienic. And over the centuries, the reasons for following them have changed.

Orthodox and Conservative Judaism hold that Jews should follow the laws of kashrut as a matter of religious obligation. Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism hold that these laws are no longer binding and, until recently, Reform Judaism opposed kashrut as an archaic practice that inhibited the integration of Jews into society. Recently, some Reform Jews have chosen to follow some or all kosher laws in an effort to be more connected to Jewish traditions.

Rabbi Peter explained to me that, because Humanistic Jews reject the idea of supernatural revelation, and favor inclusion and pluralism, many of us reject practices like kashrut, which keep us separate from other people and dictate uniform behaviors. For these reasons, Humanistic Jews generally do not keep kosher.

I don’t keep kosher, but I decided to study kosher laws because they seemed foreign to me, and as a Jew, I wanted to learn more about this feature of Judaism. I was particularly interested in exploring whether two of the original reasons for Kosher laws -- hygiene and ethics -- are still relevant today. Specifically, I wanted to know if the Kosher meat industry still raises animals humanely and in a manner that insures that they’re healthy. I also wanted to know if these issues are important to people who keep Kosher today.

Many people believe that kosher meat is healthier than non-kosher meat. But is this perception true? Centuries ago, kosher animals were raised in a clean environment to insure that they remained healthy. They were raised in open meadows with fresh grass. There were no factory farms! People didn’t have to worry about whether their beef contained antibiotics or hormones or their chickens were free-range or their eggs were organic. Everything was organic!

The animals were slaughtered in accordance with strict guidelines, and the meat was examined and cleaned meticulously. The word “Kashrut” means “fit,” as in, fit to eat, and in practical terms, this means that there couldn’t be discoloration, nicks, signs of disease, or grains of dirt in the organs. Glatt, an additional requirement that lungs be free of adhesions, prevented consumption of animals infected with tuberculosis. As some of you already know, the term “glatt kosher” is used differently today, to imply a higher standard of kashrut observance.

The Torah dictates ‘tzar baalei haim,’ or the respectful treatment of animals. Rabbinic rulings have insisted on compassion for animals and reducing unnecessary suffering in their lives and in the way they’re slaughtered. Exodus even states that animals should be given the Sabbath as a day of rest. It was believed that if the animal experienced stress or discomfort, its meat would be bad.

Unfortunately, times have changed. Now, if you see an icon or symbol that says, “K, OU or P” on a package of meat, you might think, “This meat is kosher, so it must be better for me, or, these animals were treated well.” While this was probably true in the past, it’s not necessarily true now. If you see a package of kosher meat, all you can know for sure is that it was slaughtered under the supervision of a rabbi. Our growing population, with its increased demand for animal products, has made it increasingly difficult for kosher food companies to maintain traditional practices and remain profitable. As a result, many kosher meat companies no longer adhere to mandates regarding hygiene and the compassionate treatment of animals. The difference between kosher and non-kosher animals is grossly exaggerated by agri-business to enable companies to charge a premium for kosher meat. Often, animals that are slaughtered for kosher meat are raised in the same farms with the same standards of hygiene as animals that are raised for non-kosher meat.

In a notorious case, the owners of America’s largest kosher meat processing plant, Agriprocessors, were convicted of 86 criminal charges including using child laborers, mistreating workers and forcing them to work in dangerous conditions, paying illegal wages and mistreating cattle.

An organization called “Humane Kosher” explains that, “There are no standards to ensure that kosher slaughter is any less cruel than conventional slaughter and investigations have revealed that in some instances it’s much worse.” They insist that, “In the face of horrifically cruel and ecologically devastating factory farms and a kosher industry that has sanctioned even the most grisly abuse of animals, it’s difficult to see how eating animals is compatible with Jewish values.”

So why *do* some Jews keep kosher? To find out, I interviewed several people who either keep kosher now or used to keep kosher. First, I interviewed my dad. When he was growing up, his family kept kosher because his parents had both been raised in kosher households. But today, to him, kashrut means a group of ancient dietary laws that have no relevance in the present day. When the laws originated, since there was no refrigeration, there was a great risk of becoming sick or dying from eating meat that wasn’t very carefully handled. Refrigeration and other modern innovations have made it much safer to eat meat. Moreover, many diseases that infected animals during biblical times are either nonexistent now or are very rare. Modern society has rendered obsolete many of the laws which were designed to insure that people didn’t get sick.

I interviewed four more people, Asya, Tsipe, Alexander and Natalie, all of whom keep kosher simply because they see it as an obligation as observant Jews, because it is commanded by God, and to feel connected to their community.

**However** - when I questioned them about the relationship between kashrut, health and hygiene – well -- do you know the joke that goes something like “*4 Jews lived in a village, how many synagogues were there?-- Five.*” Well, these four kashrut observers seem to have about 5 or 6 opinions about the issue of kashrut and hygiene.

See if you can follow this: -- Asya and Alexander believe that kosher laws are partly based on health and cleanliness. Asya thinks that kosher meat is cleaner than non-kosher meat but Alexander thinks it isn't. **But**, he thinks that other people believe it is. Natalie doesn't think kashrut used to have anything to do with health or cleanliness--- **but**---she thinks kosher meat has recently become healthier than non-kosher meat. And **Tsipe** has never considered whether kosher laws were created to insure that meat is healthy, or whether it is indeed, healthier. So, four Jews, five opinions, but there was one thing they agreed on. None of them believe that kosher meat comes from animals that are raised humanely.

I also interviewed Jonathan Safran Foer, the author of Eating Animals, a book that examines present-day practices in the animal food industry. He became a vegetarian when he learned of the inhumane ways in which animals are raised and slaughtered for human consumption. Jonathan has witnessed the inhumane treatment of animals in kosher slaughterhouses. He asserts that the inhumane treatment of animals is largely the result of factory farming and has concluded that there is no humane way of raising animals for mass consumption.

Much of the kosher meat industry is clearly disregarding kosher laws regarding the health and humane treatment of animals. And although I only interviewed a few people who keep kosher, none were concerned about the quality of kosher meat or the humane treatment of animals. It seems that some of the original interpretations of Kashrut may no longer be relevant.

Perhaps because of these changes, several organizations are now bringing attention to the widespread violation of kosher principles and absence of standards for ensuring that kosher meat is raised and slaughtered humanely. In addition to Humane Kosher, which I quoted earlier, Hazon, an American- Israeli joint venture, is also trying to revive the humane intentions of the kosher laws as well as create a healthier and more sustainable Jewish community. I interviewed the assistant director, Liore Milgrom-Elcott, who keeps kosher and is a vegetarian. She told me that although the Torah instructs Jews to treat animals respectfully, it doesn't offer specific instructions, and since it was written when farming practices were vastly different from how they are now, we must decide how this command should be applied to contemporary animal farming practices. (Humane Kosher and Hazon contend that factory farming violates this command and because of the terrible conditions in factory farms, kosher meat is often not any cleaner or healthier than non-kosher meat.)

Liore sees Hazon as the “new kosher” because it interprets kosher rules for modern society. Hazon insists that the application of Kosher rules includes implementing sustainable practices for the environment and all living creatures, and that the most respectful and healthiest way to raise animals is on a free- range farm with a natural diet. Hazon encourages people to learn how the meat they eat was raised and slaughtered.

When I chose kashrut as my essay topic, I thought it was very strange that I knew so little about it. Then, as I did research about its original purposes, I was pleased to learn that some of the laws were based on the moral treatment of animals and being environmentally sustainable. However, as I did more research about kashrut's interpretations and peoples' reasons to follow the rules, I was disappointed to discover that many of these laws are being discarded and people who keep kosher don't necessarily care about these values. When I finally heard about Hazon and how they are reintroducing these values, I felt proud as a Jew, and pleased that Hazon and other organizations will continue to work towards a better kashrut for the world. I am very glad I chose to write my main project about kashrut, it was a learning opportunity that I will remember for the rest of my life.