

Shabbat Mishpatim

Feb 2016

Rabbi Mark Cohn

This past week, the temple's board approved unanimously a clarification of our temple's kosher policy. Some of you may not even realize we have a kosher policy. But we do. We always have and while to some it may seem obvious to others it may not. Quite coincidentally, or maybe not, it is in THIS week's Torah portion that the first and perhaps most significant kosher commandment is presented:

Lo t'vasheil g'di ba'chalev imo.

לֹא תִשְׁחַלֵּב גִּדִּי בְחֵלֶב אִמּוֹ:

3x we are commanded: don't cook a kid in its mother's milk.

Why?

And interestingly the context of laws surrounding this five-word commandment that has led to countless tomes of discussion? Giving your first fruits and tithes to the Temple (in other words, to God and the Levites ... showing thanks and humility).

So. Nu? Why?

1. No mixing. Sha'atnez. Wool/linen; ox/donkey; 2 kinds of seeds in the same row.

But: milk and meat come from the same source.

2. Medieval commentator: said that some ancient rites included sprinkling BOILED MILK on trees or fields for produce. We don't do THAT!

3. Maimonides: Anti-idolatry. No proof though.

Bedouin and Arabs are known to have created a dish of meat cooked in sour milk.

Strong anti-them food policy.

4. Sanctify life and not desecrate it!

Milk represents life and meat end of life.

5. Eating can reflect a society's norms. Pairing a mother and child in this capacity is ill-suited.

And we feel the same way when we look at extending kashrut beyond the letter of the law.

What makes an animal kosher? The right hoof and the right digestion.

What makes fowl kosher? Not predatory.

What makes fish kosher? Fins and scales. They go in schools, communally based creatures.

If food is harvested by workers who are paid meager wages, housed in unsafe conditions, would we consider that kosher? If pesticides and growth hormones are used that are toxic and detrimental to our well-being, is that kosher?

Pittsburgh Platform 1885

We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.

Early Reformers abandoned kashrut because they were opposed to something that looked antiquated and no longer was relevant to their practice. Today's Reformers see in kashrut a tie that connects us with a part of our Jewish heritage and as something to remember our distinctiveness.

What does it all mean?

In J. tradition - you cannot cook, eat, or derive benefit from the mixing of milk and meat. Milk refers to any dairy product and meat refers to any four legged kosher animal AND poultry.

For us, as a Reform Jewish and intentional community, it means not mixing milk and meat out of respect to our people's heritage and the Torah's commandments and rabbinical interpretation. Our board, with the guidance of myself and our Ritual Committee, has chosen to adhere to a stricter standard than many of us may/do practice outside this building. When we are within our synagogue and even when away but still under the temple's roof so to speak we represent, as Jews, more than just ourselves at any given moment. Additionally, our tradition informs us that to hold on communal customs and find or infuse deeper meaning can have spiritually uplifting consequences.

So tonight, as we mark not only the first kosher law of the Torah but also our first ShabbatLuck, may we feast on delicious food that leads us to living a kosher-inspired lifestyle: one that is thoughtful and engaged, Jewish and in search of meaning. May we work for the betterment not just of our lives but for all our world.