

Last week the Jewish Chronicle published an interesting piece titled “Goodbye to kosher butchers if we all go vegan,” with the tagline “Going vegan is good for you and good for the planet - but what will it do for our Jewish identity.” I was surprised by the title of the article having never questioned that becoming a vegan would have an impact on one’s Jewish identity. The article goes on to explain the environmental benefits and personal health benefits of becoming vegan. However, the writer Karen David questions, “For people like me, brought up in a traditional Orthodox Jewish home, kashrut reminds us every day that we’re Jewish — from the way our cutlery and crockery are stored, to the way we prepare our food. Brought up to separate milk and meat, can I countenance marinating my chicken with non-dairy coconut yoghurt? I’m sure it would be delicious, but in my kosher kitchen, would it feel wrong? (she continues) My daughter, a fish-eating vegetarian from childhood, will never need to separate meat and milk in her kitchen. Has she lost a vital part of her heritage? If she has children, what will they learn about kashrut?”

The article had particular relevance to me as my husband became vegan 6 months ago, well we both did. But around chanukah a really beautiful looking sufganiyot, donut, was offered to me and I couldn’t resist. A few months later and I’m still, daily, trying to urge myself to become vegan again.

This article questions how our eating choices play into our identity formation and maintenance. We are a people who love our food, we have special foods for all of our holidays, aside from Yom Kippur. Those who were raised within the walls of a synagogue can recall the tunes of the prayers that they grew up with that bring them to a certain place spiritually. Similarly, though I’ve been a vegetarian for over a decade, when I smell chicken matzah ball soup that reminds me of my grandmothers I am transported back to the seder table, a young wide eyed child surrounded by family, telling the story of the Exodus.

I want to explore this question that Karen David asks, what will becoming vegan do to one's Jewish identity? But to make it wider, what does a more intentional more mindful approach to our eating do to our Jewish identity?

In the Torah portion from this morning we read a prohibition which will be repeated in our Torah two other times. "Do not cook a kid in its mother's milk". We will read this prohibition again in Exodus 34:26 and Deuteronomy 14:21.

It is from this prohibition, and this prohibition alone that the rabbinic sages developed a kashrut system that forbade mixing meat and milk together.

The rabbinic sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud develop laws of kashrut around this one specific prohibition. They ask and answer the questions of which animals this law applies to, whether there should be a waiting period between eating milk and meat, how long should that period be, does it matter if milk was eaten first or meat, are separate dishes required?

The rabbinic sages attempted to ensure that the Torah law would not be broken by developing a complicated set of rules around the separation of milk and meat. The ancient rabbinical interpreters of the Torah in order to follow God's law by the letter of the law created many additional laws that were never in the Torah. The purpose of these additional laws was to prevent Jews from doing anything that might get them close to breaking a Torah law. Our ancient sages called this building a siag, a fence around the Torah, not a physical fence but a fence of laws to keep people far away from breaking the laws of the Torah.

Was this God's intent?

Of course we don't know. And we can never know with surety.

There is a joke told about this verse of the Torah.

God says: And remember Moses, in the laws of keeping Kosher, never cook a kid in its mother's milk.

Moses responds: Ohhhhhh! So you are saying we should never eat milk and meat together.

God replies: No, what I'm saying is, never cook a kid in its mother's milk.

Moses says: Oh, God forgive my ignorance! What you are really saying is we should wait six hours after eating meat to eat milk so the two are not in our stomachs.

God says again: No, Moses, what I'm saying is, never cook a kid in its mother's milk!!!

Moses pleads: Oh, God! Please don't strike me down for my stupidity! What you mean is we should have a separate set of dishes for milk and a separate set for meat and if we make a mistake we have to bury that dish outside...

God finally gives up: Moses, do whatever you want....

This joke hits on a truth of religion, we can't actually know God's wishes. We are given clues through our texts and our rituals and prayer but the mystery of God or God's desires can never be fully known.

So what can we do? Well, we can try the best we can given the resources that we have. We can try to understand the intent of the original law and question how that intent might be met today given our modern knowledge of the world and in partnership with contemporary ethics.

As progressive Jews we are not bound by the laws set forth in the Talmud, but this does not mean we are free to thoughtlessly do as we please and pick and

choose which of our ancient laws we will follow. Rather, we take it as a sacred obligation to understand the intent of the law, the history and to think intentionally about how in our modern day we will incorporate this Jewish law to play a role in our lives.

This idea of adjusting the law in order to fit with our understanding of ethics is not new to progressive Judaism. This same idea was expressed in the haftorah portion read today and in countless other places in our ancient sacred literature, our faith must be an ethical one, God calls us to live ethical lives and to not engage in ritual if it questions our ethics.

Let's go back to the idea of Kashrut.

We have the text read today prohibiting boiling a kid in its mother's milk. Later in the Torah we receive more laws on kashrut: Animals with cloven hooves and that chew their cuds are kosher. Fish with fins and scales are kosher. Birds that eat grain and vegetables, and that can fly, are kosher. Most Insects, shellfish and reptiles are not.

Our elaborate laws around eating are developed in order to make eating a spiritual ritual. By blessing our food before we eat we are offering gratitude for the earth's bounty. By separating milk and meat and not eating unkosher animals we are acknowledging our respect for and commitment to God, by making recipes passed down from generation to generation we connect ourselves to the shoulders that we stand on and to those who will come after us.

But is this enough?

In our modern world we know undoubtedly that we are making a choice any time we choose to purchase food. Eating is not a passive act but is in many ways a way we share our ethics in this world.

For example, the Torah prohibits the mistreatment of workers. Leviticus 19:13 shares "'Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. "'Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.'" Or Deuteronomy 24:14 "Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns." In following these commandments within our Torah we would want to make sure as much as possible that our food is being ethically sourced, grown and produced by workers who are financially supported. For some, focusing on the treatment of those who produce their food might be their form of keeping kosher.

Tzar Baalei chayim, the ethical treatment of animals is a theme throughout our sacred literature. Animals are given the shabbat as a day of rest and our liturgy blesses God for mercy shown to all creatures. For some, being vegan or vegetarian might be their form of kashrut.

Others are aware of our tradition and commitment to our natural resources and our obligation to act as God's partner in protecting our natural resources. For some, being mindful of the environmental impact of their food choices might be their form of keeping kashrut.

It's complicated. As we develop our own sense of what kashrut means to us there are many different frameworks to juggle, the simple act of choosing what to eat can become daunting when we factor in all of the interplaying ethical questions. And yet, we must eat, and sometimes we have the time and the resources to think mindfully about the ethics of our food and other times we have minimal time, maximum appetite and we can't afford to engage in the hard work of being ethical and mindful in our food choices.

Well known journalist Ezra Klein had a conversation with American social psychologist and author Dr. Melanie Joy on his podcast titled The Green Pill, this episode focused on veganism. Nearing the end of this podcast Dr. Joy spoke about the potential damage of being too rigid, in her words:

“You can feel like you are walking a tightrope a lot of the time but in some ways it forces us to do the difficult and important work of developing ourselves...We all need to learn to live with contradictions, we need to be able to embrace nuance we need to be able to be careful not to get into this rigid mind set, this black and white, you're with us you're against us, you're part of the solution you're part of the problem...”

She argues that rather than becoming overwhelmed by trying to focus on all issues at any given moment when it comes to the ethics of our eating, we should see ourselves on a number of spectrums, the spectrum of animal welfare, the spectrum of fair trade, the spectrum of environmental mindfulness and we should be trying to move ourselves along each spectrum.

Some of us might choose more ethical eating as our new form of kashrut and others might see the ethics in maintaining our traditional dietary laws, in passing on traditions from one generation to the next, in eating in a way that connects us with other Jews around the world.

The blessing we say before eating the challah is a fascinating one, *baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech haolam hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz*. Blessed are you adonai our god master of the world who brings forth bread from the earth. We do not bless the wheat or the yeast that comes from the earth, no we bless God for bringing bread from the earth, a food that requires human involvement in the baking. We offer gratitude to God for the bounty of this earth but even in our most common prayer blessing God for food we acknowledge human action in the food that we eat.

I encourage all of us to think about how our Judaism informs what we eat. How we can make sure that our food choices are a reflection of our beliefs, our religious beliefs and ethical beliefs.

I return to Karen David's question from the Jewish chronicle:

“Going vegan is good for you and good for the planet - but what will it do for our Jewish identity?”

Or to shift it ever so slightly- What will further incorporating our ethics into our food choices do for our Jewish identity?

My answer? It might further connect us with our world, our community and our God.

Shabbat Shalom