

Shabbat Shmini 5780 - Kashrut: Separations That Bring Us Together  
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

For all people, food feeds the body. For the Jewish People, food feeds the soul as well. Parashat Shmini outlines the rules of Kashrut, the categories and lists of foods we may and may not eat. The Torah tells us exactly why we have the Mitzvah of keeping Kosher: to be holy. Leviticus 11:44 reads, “For I the L-rd am your G-d. you shall sanctify yourselves and *be holy*, for I am holy. You shall not make yourselves impure through any swarming thing that moves upon the earth.” In other words, the food we eat can make us ritually pure or impure, closer to G-d or further, connect us to being Jewish or distance us.

Keeping Kosher heightens our awareness of distinctions. Is this a meat meal or dairy? Can I have parve dessert or dairy? Should I take out the utensils from this drawer or that drawer? Has it been three hours since I had meat or not? Is this meat Kosher or not? Does this food have a heksher (Kosher symbol) or not? We who keep Kosher always ask ourselves these questions. Jewish eating is thus a continual process of separating.

And that's what “Kadosh - holy” means. The Torah uses the word “Kadosh” frequently but never defines what holiness is. Certainly people, places, and things in close proximity to G-d are holy. But we can be more precise. If we look at how the word “Kadosh” is used throughout the Torah, we see that the best synonym is “separate/distinguished,” according to the late Professor Neil Gilman.

Here's a good prooftext: In Exodus 19, as the Israelites stand at Sinai poised to receive the Ten Commandments, G-d makes the following declaration: “Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation - *Goy Kadosh*” (Ex. 19:5,6). This verse demonstrates that to the extent the Jews keep G-d's covenant, that itself is how they will set themselves apart from the other nations, which makes them Kadosh, holy, unique.

When we keep Kosher, we do separate ourselves from the larger world in some ways. We can't eat out at restaurants during Passover. We either don't go out to non-Kosher restaurants or we do while limiting our choices on the menu. We may bring our own food to an event.

While in the 21st century we often don't want to separate ourselves in certain ways from the non-Jewish world, one can frequently compensate. I remember in college I would grab my food at the Kosher buffet and then join anybody in the cafeteria I wished.

But while keeping Kosher distances us in some ways, it really brings us closer in other ways. It's the rules of keeping Kosher that bring Jewish families together and mark a meal as a distinctively Jewish experience. Going to Kosher restaurants like Emma's leads us to sometimes bump into friends and family at the same place. Same with the Kosher aisle at the Jewel, or Shaevitz, or Hungarian.

A few years ago, while living in New Jersey, my senior rabbi and I went to a New York Mets baseball game against my favorite Cincinnati Reds. It was Passover, so we brought some Manischewitz maccaroons and cookies. Behind us happened to sit some Haredi teenage boys. When we saw them we offered them a maccaroon, and one teen turned to the other and asked, "Are these Kosher for Passover?" Yes, my friend. If I'm bringing Manischewitz to a ball game, you bet it's Kosher and Passover. Though this moment was funny, it was also really cool. We strangers were connected because we were both eating the same unique way at the same time.

Thus keeping Kosher is an act of distinction: we distinguish between our foods, and this process has the effect of setting ourselves apart for the better. But I want to go one step further. I believe that holiness is in fact an act of creation. The very action of keeping Kosher creates something critical and real in the process - a stronger Jewish identity.

Recall that holiness means separation. And think back to Genesis 1 where G-d creates the world. How did the universe come into existence? Through repeated acts of separation. Throughout the first six days of creation, G-d separates light from darkness; waters above from waters below; dry land from sea; the sun for the daytime and the moon for the nighttime. Finally, G-d separates the seventh day - Shabbat - from the first six days. That separation in time is the first moment the Torah uses our word "holy - Kadosh."

So each act of holiness makes a distinction and also activates a creation.

I believe this is true of keeping Kosher.

I know we have a lot of holidays - OK, more than a lot, especially in the fall. And we have 52 Shabbatot. Most weeks of the year, it's only Shabbat that comes with a built-in script of how to celebrate it in some Jewish way. 1 day in 7 is not enough to sustain a strong Jewish identity. Though we have daily prayers and blessings, Jews must opt in to davening.

But everybody has to eat every day. And if we can make our ordinary meals Jewish in some way, then we achieve something extraordinary: we activate everyone's Jewish identity every day. Keeping Kosher accomplishes this. The goal is not to forget that we're Jewish; nobody would do this. The goal is for being Jewish to be top of mind, and this takes daily practice. In this way, keeping Kosher creates a stronger Jewish identity because it's a daily Jewish activity. The goal is to catalyze this awareness of food categories and expand these distinctions to ethical living: what is the right thing to do here? What is the honest response here? These are the questions we should be asking every day, and *this* is how Kashrut contributes directly to ethical living.

The single act of distinguishing can itself be holy. Think of the final blessing said at the Havdalah ceremony ending Shabbat. The blessing is called *HaMavdil*, which means "separating." This is the same word as "Havdalah." In this blessing we praise G-d "for separating between *Kodesh* and *Chol* - holy and ordinary - light and darkness, Israel and the nations, Shabbat and the other days. Praised are You, Hashem, *HaMavdil Bein Kodesh LChol* - Who separates between holy and ordinary."

It is through the creative act of making distinctions that I think the rules of Kashrut and the Jewish tradition can contribute to what we are experiencing in our lives now in this Covid-19

moment. It goes without saying that people and families are now experiencing things differently from each other, but also that we have some shared experiences too. For me - and I'm guessing for many of you - things that used to be separate are blending together, and not always for the best. I used to spend my time at home and out of the house, and now it's just home. I used to have prayer experiences at Beth El and now it's at home. The weekend used to feel different from the other days of the week and now - except for Shabbat - it feels the same. I used to join extended family for special events like birthdays and now that's impossible. And all this is really hard. There are many new challenges we currently face, and the sameness of time and place is not the most pressing compared to other threats, but it is real for many of us.

I find that marking Jewish distinctions helps me get through my day. The Passover preparations were a lot of work and not fun, but the Seders were such a nice break. Shabbat dinner with its unique rituals is a welcome respite too. These Jewish moments in time are acts of separation, acts of holiness in a time when I cannot visit a holy place, like a sanctuary.

The rules of Kashrut are not an end but a means. A means of creating a stronger Jewish identity. A means of strengthening the Jewish habit of making distinctions. A means of creating holiness in a time and a world that can use more of it.

Shabbat Shalom.