

Why Dietary Laws?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The system of sacrifices expands this week (beyond blood and certain fats) to the laws of what animals, birds and fish we can and cannot eat. It's a progression that makes sense. Originally according to our tradition humans were not carnivores. Only after Noah's flood when he celebrated his survival by sacrificing animals to God, do animals feature as food for humans in the Bible. Food for the Gods, metaphorically of course, and then food for humans.

People have tried for thousands of years to explain why some animals, birds and fish are permitted and others are not. I have yet to hear a theory that works. For one or two animals perhaps, but not across the board. Pigs and bottom feeders are supposed to be dirty. Transport animals are needed for other purposes. Birds of prey eat carrion. But what about grasshoppers, or bunny rabbits?

Did this have something to do with previous taboos? Many cultures had holy animals, untouchable or sacred, cows in India, pigs were sacred in ancient Egypt, in Mesopotamia sheep were holy. Nothing fits the whole system the Torah describes.

The rules of diet in the Torah are designed to make everything holy, special, considered. They are designed to get us to stop and think before we act. The actual origins and reasons maybe lost in time. As a rule, the Torah does not give explanations. But origins matter less than how we apply them in the present. Does it matter how using a knife and fork evolved or whether they are efficient ways of getting food to our mouths in a Western society?

In theory, of course any random selection of animals might be selected to be untouchable or uneatable. What a religious culture does, is to create a system that everyone who wants to, joins in with. In sharing these rules with others, we create commonality, community and facilities. And this celebrated with a meal, Seudah, Agape, Eucharist. All similar. A meal as a religious occasion brings religious people together. That is why the Talmud regards the meal as an opportunity to study, exchange ideas as well as to enjoy God's gifts and share.

Eating therefore represents not just human growth but spiritual growth too. And it is only if we take it seriously and invest in it that we can benefit. Otherwise like everything else in life and on earth it can be taken to extremes and become destructive instead of beneficial. Just think of obesity and corrosive diets. Similarly, as with animals, their lives can be humane or cruel and inhuman. We humans must choose how we live and how much we care.

Just as we are meant to think about the origins of our food, our responsibility for producing and protecting it, so too we are meant to think about other human beings, to be sensitive and protective towards them; the poor, the stranger and the "other." Even if others do not. We must.