

New Reform Perspectives on Jewish Dietary Laws

February 21, 2014

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One Purim, years ago, I saw a kid in a funny costume that I could not identify. I asked him who he was. He told me that he was a teenager from the 1970s. Boy, did I feel old.

You remember the 1970s? Bell-bottoms, disco music and Jimmy Carter were all the rage. The favorite food was quiche. In fact, at my Bar Mitzvah, in 1976, Quiche Lorraine was one of the main dishes at the luncheon. That's right, Quiche Lorraine, with bacon.

Not only was bacon served at my Bar Mitzvah, in the Temple, but nobody thought anything of it. Absolutely no form of kosher dietary laws was observed in those days at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston, or at many other Reform temples, for that matter. Among Reform Jews, keeping kosher was out.

Apparently, times had changed little in the ninety years that had passed since early American Reform Rabbis wrote the Pittsburgh Platform in 1885. They declared that Jewish dietary laws "originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state." The Reform Rabbis taught that there was no longer any purpose for keeping kosher. They wrote that the dietary laws "fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness." As if that weren't enough, these early leaders of our Movement actually discouraged observance of the dietary laws, saying that "their observance in our day is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation."

In the 19th Century, the kosher laws were widely believed to have been originally adopted for health reasons. For example, in ages past, eating pork could cause trichinosis. Scholars in the 1800s believed that the kosher laws were an ancient version of our Food and Drug Administration, protecting public health by preventing the consumption of unhealthy foods. However, with modern food preparation techniques, these kosher laws were no longer needed for health purposes. Therefore, the Jewish dietary restrictions were declared invalid.

However, today's Bible scholars are convinced that the dietary laws had nothing at all to do with physical health. Instead, their purpose was to maintain spiritual purity. We can no longer argue with integrity that the dietary laws are invalid, on the grounds that they were enacted for a health reason that no longer exists. That claim is simply false.

And yet, our Reform founders also discarded the kosher laws for an important and strongly principled reason. They taught that Jews have a sacred duty to repair the world, to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. These early Reform Rabbis feared that Jews who kept kosher would think that they had already done what God wants of them. Perhaps these kosher Jews would not feel the need to pursue the supreme Jewish imperative to strive for social justice.

This point is much older than 1885, but it remains valid to this day. Our ancient prophets, Isaiah above all, blasted Israelite kings and priests who faithfully brought animal sacrifices and observed days of fasting, while they abused the poor. We all know people who claim to be pious in their religious faith, attending church or synagogue at least once a week, but who are unethical and immoral in their business or personal lives. Careful attention to the details of ritual does not always go along with truly righteous living. The fact that a person keeps kosher is no guarantee that he or she will work for social justice.

On the other hand, all of us also know individuals who are righteous, ethically as well as ritually. In our society, there is a popular tendency to accuse religious people of hypocrisy. And yet, many people who attend church or synagogue regularly also are charitable and moral, kind and caring. One of the goals of our rituals is to lead to social activism, to inspire the building of a better world. It should go without saying that a person who keeps kosher may also be punctilious in the observance of Judaism's ethical ordinances. Perhaps the dietary laws may even heighten our moral awareness.

In the beginning, God tells Adam and Eve that they must be vegetarians, eating only fruits, vegetables, and grains. God's ideal seems to be that we should not kill for food. And yet, God's world is far from perfect. Soon, humans indulged their taste for animals so ravenously that they would tear limbs from living animals. After the flood, God is ready to compromise. God tells Noah that humans may eat meat, but that they must kill the animals first, to avoid cruelty to animals. Later, God makes a more restrictive compromise with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, indicating that, even with proper slaughtering, not just any animals may be eaten. Eventually, though, the prophets describe the messianic future, when God's ideal of vegetarianism will be reestablished. Even the lion will lie down with the lamb, rather than eating it. If lions will lie down with lambs, then surely humans will not kill cows for hamburgers.

Perhaps, then, keeping kosher may actually be a path to heightening our moral consciousness, rather than a hindrance to it. Those who observe the dietary laws may become more sensitive to animals. Some have argued that, if nobody ate meat, and we therefore did not feed so much of our grain to livestock, then there would easily be enough food for every man, woman and child on Earth. Others point out the environmental problems caused by raising animals for food. Many have suggested that veal be declared non-kosher, because of the essentially inhumane way in which calves are raised for consumption as veal. Based on these ideals, some Jews have adopted various forms of vegetarianism as a way of working toward messianic redemption, while also observing the fundamental principles of Jewish the dietary laws.

In recent years, keeping kosher has increasingly been a topic of conversation in our Reform Movement. The Pittsburgh Platform, which sought to eradicate dietary laws from Reform Judaism, is a significant and honored part of our history, but is no longer the primary guide post for our Movement. When Reform Judaism's latest Statement of Principles was adopted in 1999, the dietary laws were an important part of the discussion. Times have changed.

Pork and shellfish are not permitted within the precincts of Congregation B'nai Israel. If you were hoping for Quiche Lorraine at the next Temple Bar or Bat Mitzvah luncheon, forget it.

Attending a Reform Jewish convention, one will almost never find meat and milk served at the same meal. In fact, the main course is almost always fish or vegetarian, as close to kosher as possible. One also finds increased attention to "ethical *kashrut*," to dietary practice that is conscious of all the costs of eating: to farm and food service workers, to animals, and to the environment. This development brings the dietary laws right into line with Reform Jewish emphasis on social justice.

The rise in kosher consciousness in Reform Judaism today is entirely appropriate and fully Reform. A Reform Jew who observes the Jewish dietary laws, in whole or in part, may be making an informed, thoughtful, and moral choice.

Reform Jews who keep kosher at home, but not elsewhere, may intend to make their home welcoming to any Jew. Another, adopting the same practice, may do so to make their home a Jewish sanctuary, as our ancient rabbis intended. Reform Jews who avoid pork, but otherwise don't keep

kosher, may be expressing solidarity with our people. Reform Jews who observe the dietary laws may be mindful of the ethical preference for vegetarianism.

Individual autonomy is a hallmark of Reform Judaism. In 1976, Reform Rabbis adopted a platform in San Francisco. They called on each Reform Jew to study their observance carefully, “choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.” I pray that Reform Jews will continue to assert our responsibility to study, choose, and create. If we are serious Reform Jews, we will study the dietary laws. In keeping with our commitment to our Judaism, let us choose a practice that elevates our spirits and moves us to ethical action. Let us not criticize our fellow Jews, who also study and make decisions, even if their choices and their practice are very different from our own. And, above all, may we renew our commitment to making the world a better place, whatever we do or don’t eat.

Amen.