

Parashat Shmini
Rabbi Brad Bloom – April 9, 2010

Jews take food very seriously. Back in the 1870s, the rabbinical leadership at the Hebrew Union College at Cincinnati held a dinner. The ideology of Reform and its founding Patriarch Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise was that America would consist of one form of Judaism to unite all American Jews. At this dinner, as the story is told, the hosts of the Hebrew Union College prepared a beautiful meal. The only problem was that Shrimp was on the menu. At that point, a large group of more traditionally minded rabbis, outraged by the desecration of the kosher dietary laws prohibition against crustaceans, got up and left the dinner. Soon afterwards, they united and formed the Conservative movement. And so begins the story of branches of Judaism on American soil.

Jews remain sensitive about the laws of Kasher. The Torah portion for this week Shmini starts the entire enterprise of Kashruth when God begins to list the foods Israelites may eat and those which they are forbidden to consume. Needless to say we are all familiar with the outlines of separating meat from milk, prohibited foods like pork, and what products have the proper certification by rabbinical accrediting organizations.

We in the Reform movement started off the 20th century by basically abrogating any relationship to the dietary laws. The reform rabbis instructed their congregations that keeping kosher was a relic of an ancient past that had little relevancy to the world we lived in. Now here we are over a century later and we see in reform congregations all over the country the temple kitchens who like our own at Beth Yam separate milk from meat. Congregations now outline what standard their congregants must adhere to when they have B'nai Mitzvah luncheons or evening affairs or when any event occurs, there is an orientation process for outside caterers to learn the kosher standards of the congregation.

These and other aspects of the Jewish community's emphasis on food and the traditions of kashruth all evolve out of the Torah portion. Even though no one source of Judaism can offer a definitive reason for why these laws developed, we are still to varying degrees adhering to them. Why is that so? And what are the ethical issues we have to contend with today?

The answer is that Reform Jews make up a wide mix of observances so that kosher dietary standards as well as other religious practices still have a place because they draw us to our past, which overshadows the modern desire to assimilate by dropping these traditions. The answer to the second question is three fold: One, we are now adapting to a wide variety of standards of kosher practice. Two, we face concerns about how kosher businesses that prepare kosher food and rabbinical accreditation organizations conduct their businesses in an ethical and legal way. Finally, we should address the ethical issue of being judgmental about other people's religious dietary practices, which range from completely kosher to non-observance.

I remember as a rabbinical student returning home to America after spending over a year in Israel. I learned about kashrut and how to have a kosher kitchen. In Israel it was easy. When I went to my first student pulpit, one fine lady quipped to me, “Rabbi I have a Kosher heart not a kosher stomach.” And that summarized the entire discussion of reform Judaism’s attitude to the Jewish dietary laws. Like its attitude towards many ritual and religious practices, Reform focused on the ethical domain and abandoned the ritual domain.

Today we are blending, under our big tent, these rituals so that they don’t have a conservative or orthodox flavor but, instead, possess an authentic reform sense of religious practice.

We focus on the ritual and the ethical. For example, Jews who belong to reform temples usually are not completely kosher but many will buy kosher products or provide kosher style meals at holiday times. Still others go further and keep kosher in their homes only but will eat non-kosher foods outside the house. They lobby so that their temples, regardless of what they do in their private lives, will prohibit pork and shellfish products.

The reasons for why we do this stem from our deep connection to our history. The debate over why we have kosher laws in the first place occupied the medieval philosophers. They discussed medical reasons and psychological and religious-behavioral reasons for why forbidden foods would influence the way we live and how we fulfill the mitzvot of everyday living. Other rabbis taught that we keep kosher for no other reason that God tells us to live apart from the gentile nations and that to maintain our unique way of life is the reason why the Torah commands us to eat in a different way than our neighbors.

The bottom line is that whether it is Pesach, the high holy days or our daily lifestyle, ritual and memory go hand in hand. They are very much connected to food because food like recipes handed down to us by our grandparents provides an underlying taste not just to the food itself but to the people who prepared their version of the food in generations gone by. The food becomes the connectivity link to our communal past. It is not about Jewish law itself or rabbinical dictates. Instead, the longevity of kosher dietary laws is about linking us to the Torah of Scripture as well as the Torah of our lives. That is why we could never give up our relationship completely to the kosher dietary way of life.

Today we see in the public sphere how progressive groups are trying to regenerate interest in a kosher dietary lifestyle by framing kosher dietary law to the eco-kosher movement and to the vegetarian-vegan movement. We have seen most recently the controversy when the United States government entered the premiere kosher meat processing plant in Iowa, Agroprocessers, and arrested the owners for breaking every imaginable immigration law by hiring illegal aliens. There were other labor laws the observant owners allegedly violated which only added embarrassment to the Jewish community. The old commercial for Hebrew National which touted kosher hot dogs as being responsible to a higher source (like God) set a standard for

generations that kosher dogs and meats are guaranteed to be the healthiest and best quality. The recent events in Iowa challenged those time-honored standards in the Jewish world.

- Finally, there is one last dimension of diverse practices of Jewish dietary laws in a progressive congregation like our own that deserves our consideration. Kosher laws are now intertwined into the culture of the reform movement. But what is important, from an ethical perspective, is that we never fall prey to the temptation to judge others by what they do or do not do with regard to eating kosher or not. These are choices people make and everyone should be humble about their level of practice on any issue of religious observance. Not everyone is consistent who say they keep kosher inside and outside the house. But does that mean they do not have honorable intentions? It all depends upon how they handle sharing the reasons why they observe and how respectful they are before people who do not observe. The same goes the other way. For those of us who do not observe the dietary laws should we feel threatened automatically because someone we know does? Let us not immediately judge a person for doing more and presuming they think they are better than us before we even understand or talk to them about their observance.

We saw how in one evening a shrimp dinner could give rise to the birth of Conservative Judaism. Institutions and seminaries grew out of one violation of the dietary laws. We have come a long way since then in our relations to the conservative movement. We have also in Reform Judaism grown to accept more observances and tried to adapt them in a way that reform could embrace. The blessing of Reform Judaism is to tie ourselves into the flow of Jewish history. We like all other branches of Judaism own all of its history as much as any other Jew ever since Sinai. The food in our stomachs is very much tied to the words of Scripture and that while we may disagree over levels of observance may we never let what we eat be the cause of strife in our community.