

# Don't Eat Too Much!

Category: Shmini, Vayikra

*Why is eating kosher so important?*

## Eating Jewish

Often people will ask me, "How can it be that the kosher restaurants in town are so filthy? Isn't the purpose of Kosher to keep our food at the top health quality?"

This week we read the laws of Kosher. All animals with these two signs, split hooves and regurgitation, the Torah categorizes as Kosher. All others are not fit for Jewish consumption.

The first and most obvious question is; why must Torah forbid the consumption of any animal? What did the Torah find unfitting about a horse, for example?

Maimonides explains this mitzvah from a medical standpoint (he was, after all, a doctor). He said that any meat that is potentially harmful to the human being, G-d, in His boundless kindness, prohibited. But looking out for our health couldn't possibly be the sole reason for this mitzvah, for a few reasons:

- a. If kosher food is supposed to be healthy, how can our some of the favorites such as latkes, schmaltz herring, cholent and chopped liver be kosher? These are certainly not great for the heart!
- b. If the point were to preserve our health, then maybe in the olden days these laws would be a great set of health guidelines, but nowadays, when technology can test any kind or amount of food to see if it's safe, the laws of kosher should be all but obsolete.
- c. Torah is not a medical document that it should go into such detail about a matter of health. Torah's handling of health issues comes in the form of this verse, "You shall carefully guard your lives." The rest He leaves to the doctors He created.

Besides, Torah doesn't even mention the many dangerous plants and herbs.

d. You tell me, who looks healthier to you, the strictly kosher meat-eating Jews or the gentiles who eat whatever they find? We Jews who blow so much money running to doctors for back pains and stomach problems all day or the non-Jews who are healthy and sturdy?

All of these reasons show that there must be more to it.

## **You Are What You Eat**

Nachmanides explains, “You are what you eat.” Therefore, if you eat a carnivore you will take on a little of the callousness it takes to kill another living creature. In other words, eating a flesh eater will cause you to become insensitive to other people’s feelings. The Torah therefore instructs Jews to only eat “vegetarian animals” — because being merciful is part of being Jewish.

There certainly is truth to this explanation; still, if it is true that kosher food is good for the body and the soul, why would Torah only command Jews to keep kosher? It would seem that G-d, who created us all, would care enough about gentiles as well to include them in the mitzvah. Didn’t we learn in the Midrash that when the angels were singing praises to G-d for splitting the Red Sea, G-d said to them, “How can you sing when my creations were just drowned?”

Just as G-d gave the gentiles the seven Noahide laws He could have told them not to eat from these ungodly animals. Perhaps if the gentiles were more sensitive, life for us Jews would have been easier over the years.

## **The Explanation**

The very first prohibition G-d placed upon Man was also about eating. G-d told Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, “You may eat of all the trees in the garden except for the Tree of Knowledge.” The Midrash explains that this was a regular tree, with no special powers, and if Adam had waited just three hours he would have been permitted to enjoy that tree as well. The purpose of prohibiting the consumption of one tree in the middle of an orchard was that this tree should serve as a reminder to Adam and Eve of their obligation to their Creator.

It was only after Adam had sinned by eating the forbidden fruit that it got the nickname “the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” It was named thus for the

outcome of the story. Before the sin, Adam had been perfectly righteous; the moment he ate from this tree he was transformed into a being that has known both good and evil.

This, then, is why some animals are forbidden while others are permitted. It is not just because the forbidden meats are harmful in some way; rather by forbidding some and not others, G-d sets a constant reminder for us about our obligation to Him whenever we sit down to eat.

The Chassidic term for this is *iskafia* or breaking oneself. When a Jew sees a kosher ice-cream and though he wants it he knows he doesn't need it, Chassidus suggests that he restrain himself from eating the ice cream, thereby weakening his evil inclination.

## **The Truest Test**

This raises one last question.

If the purpose of Torah's prohibitions is to weaken one's evil inclination, why isn't not touching the tree good enough? Why must the prohibition be specifically against eating?

Perhaps this is the answer:

With any other desire, it is possible to completely avoid contact with the object of one's desire and thus spare him from being tested. For example, if one has a burning desire for beautiful cars and ostentatious houses, he could live in a cave in the forest where he'll never see these things. But food is something we need everyday. There is no way to avoid food. And everybody loves to eat.

On the one hand, food is a necessary staple. On the other hand it is our greatest "soft spot." This is why G-d chose disciplined eating as the road to self-control. If you succeed controlling your sweet tooth, all your other temptations will be far easier to combat.