

Keeping Ourselves Kosher

Category: Emor, Vayikra

One of the most common Jewish observances is the avoidance of pork. What is it about this rule that makes it so popular? And what lesson can it teach us?

The Jew Who Refused Pork

Good Shabbos!

Today I'd like to tell the story of a Holocaust survivor, Mordechai Fefferblatt.

Mordechai Fefferblatt was in Auschwitz for no less than three years. He related that one night in fall of 1944, a young man named Leon joined his block. Leon's health was very poor—he slept next to Mordechai on the wooden bunkbeds, white as a corpse, eyes bulging from starvation.

Leon told Mordechai that he had no assigned workplace in the camp, so Mordechai advised him to stick with him and work near him. At the time, Mordechai's job was washing the soup pots of the SS kitchen—not your typical job, even by Auschwitz standards.

So Mordechai would spend his days scraping out the insides of the pots with pieces of cardboard—with one eye on the kitchen around him and other eye inside the pot, so to speak. This would allow him to eat whatever food and soup remnants the cardboard brought up.

As such, he got more nutrition than his fellow Jewish Auschwitz inmates—and as such, he could actually afford to not eat the one bowl of soup that the Nazis gave to the inmates each day. Instead, he would discreetly pass it on to his friends—and, of course, his new friend Leon benefited tremendously from that.

Well, one not-so-fine day, an SS officer named Lauzmann showed up during the daily soup distribution. This Lauzmann noticed that Mordechai gave his soup to Leon. He marched over quickly and barked at Mordechai, "Hey, you! What did he give you for your soup?" Nothing, Mordechai answered. Leon was also challenged, asked what he paid Mordechai for the soup. He answered the same.

“Why did you do it?” Lauzmann continued interrogating Mordechai. “I had a stomachache and I couldn’t eat,” Mordechai said, “but tomorrow, he’ll give me back my portion.”

Upon hearing that answer, the Nazi burst out in wild laughter. He said, “You think this guy’s gonna be alive by tomorrow?! Here, fathers don’t give their sons free soup—and even brothers don’t give each other free food!”

The Nazi noticed a heavy rock lying around the area, and ordered Mordechai to lift it and hold it high over his head while standing on his tiptoes. The Nazi even stood next to him for the rest of the day until the afternoon break, to make sure that Mordechai’s punishment wasn’t interrupted.

Then the Nazi said to him: “You’ve been in Auschwitz for a long time already. I can tell by your number. So now, you’re going to get another job—one much more interesting.” The Nazi took Mordechai to a place where they were building a power station and handed him over to a Kapo he didn’t recognize. The Kapo gave him the tough job of carrying up dirt from a deep pit.

But with the evacuation of Auschwitz in January of 1945, during the death march, Mordechai managed to flee together with a small group of prisoners. They got to a village that was going up in flames after taking a direct hit from heavy Allied bombing.

The first thing they did was look for something to eat—when a number of Polish prisoners in the group found a “treasure”: inside one building, they heard the oinking of a pig. In a matter of seconds, the group burst into the house and overpowered the poor animal. They subdued it with a few blows from a stray piece of wood, and then slaughtered it using a shard of broken glass as a knife.

The men then nailed up pieces of raw pig meat on the burning wall, and within minutes, they had fresh barbecued pork, which they proceeded to pass around among themselves.

Well, when one man tried to offer Mordechai a piece of pork, he refused to participate in the repulsive feast. He explained to his fellow escapees that never in his life had he eaten anything like that.

Mordechai then walked around the village himself a bit until he stumbled upon a

sack of potatoes. In the villages, farmers would bury sacks of potatoes in the ground over the summer and cover them with hay, and take them out in the winter. But now, a crater from a bomb had exposed the sack of potatoes, and so Mordechai grabbed it, roasted a few potatoes against a burning wall, and shortly ate them.

After satisfying himself, Mordechai had some time to take a closer look at his fellow escapees— and he suddenly noticed Leon! The two of them were thrilled that both had managed to escape. Leon thanked Mordechai profusely for helping him and for giving him a workplace where he was able to gather some strength. The two then parted ways.

Mordechai ended up making Aliyah to Israel.

Over a decade later, in the summer of 1957, Mordechai came home from work only to find his wife at waiting for him at the front door with a huge smile on her face. She said to him: “Mordechai, you’ll never guess what guest is waiting for you in the house.”

Well, Mordechai walked in and sure enough, who did he find? Leon! Leon fell upon him and hugged him tight, saying, “This man saved me from death! How can I ever repay him?”

The two old friends sat on the couch, and Leon began regaling Mordechai’s wife with the tale of how her husband had saved his life. At the end of the visit, Leon informed them that he was now living in Jerusalem. He provided them with his address and asked Mordechai to come visit him.

So later that year, Mordechai found himself walking down a Jerusalem street.

It soon became clear to him that Leon lived on a street that was right next to the wall of the Old City—and after scanning the street, he realized that there were no private residences on it. It only had churches and monasteries.

Mordechai realized that Leon must live in the monastery bordering the Polish embassy.

What’s going on here? Mordechai asked himself. It all seems mysterious and inexplicable. Mordechai rang the doorbell, and the door was shortly opened by Leon himself. Leon offered his hand and pulled Mordechai in. After a long walk

down a narrow corridor, they got to Leon's room, a tiny chamber under a sloped ceiling. Leon seated his friend on a sofa and began telling him his story.

"You remember what happened after we escaped?" Leon began. "How we got to that burning village? Do you remember how the Polish men with us managed to find a live pig and roast it on the burning walls?" he continued.

"Everyone got a piece—but only you, Mordechai, didn't want to eat. You were wise!"

"We all left after stuffing ourselves with pork—and hardly a few hours had gone by when I was overtaken by terrible stomach pain. Somebody put me on a train to Cracow and brought me to a local hospital."

"It turned out that this hospital was a branch of a church, and the monks treated me there with great care. They saved me from death. My condition improved very slowly, and every night, they would repeatedly talk to me and tell me that I had to repay them by converting to their religion which had been so good to me. And in order to turn up the pressure, the head priest himself showed up one day—and what happened, happened..."

After some time, Leon was sent to a seminar in Poland to study and to make good on his agreement to repay his benefactors. Ultimately, he became a priest, and when he completed his studies, he went back to Cracow and began serving as a priest. He later transferred to a monastery in Jerusalem.

Mordechai Fefferblatt concluded the story by saying: "Leon, the Jew who—by his own testimony—was saved by me in Auschwitz, well before the monks, still chose to follow their path, not mine."

Needless to say, Mordechai did not keep up his relationship with Leon.

Why No Pork?

The Torah prohibition of eating pork falls under the category of a Chok (rule)—one of the three categories of mitzvos, and the one that we keep simply because G-d said so. Most if not all of the Chukim make no sense to us; they have no logical human reason to them. We only do them because we bow our mind and our powers of reason to G-d, who is above mind and reason.

Along with that, it's appropriate to point out that this particular animal is seen as eliciting revulsion. As a matter of fact, according to Maimonides, it is this fact that is the reason that the pig is prohibited to be eaten. As he explains in the *Guide to the Perplexed* (3:48), "The Torah reviles the eating of pig because of its excessive dirtiness and the fact that it sustains itself from the dirt—and you already know that the Torah was particular against even seeing dirt, even in the camp in the desert, and how much more so in cities. And so, if we were to raise pigs for food, they would make the marketplaces and even the houses dirtier than even an outhouse."

And indeed, the fact is that the word "pig," and related words like "pig-headed," are commonly used in English as derogatory slurs for disgusting people and dirty, repulsive and offensive displays and behaviors. As a matter of fact, the Yiddish words "chazer" and "chazerei" not only refer to such people and things, but are in common usage in most European languages, too.

As such, eating pork has traditionally been viewed in the Jewish imagination as one of the worst sin ever.

As a result, there are—and have been—many Jews who are absolutely strict when it comes to not eating pork, even though the very same Jews are not particular at all when it comes to other mitzvos which are much more serious. Even from a non-Jewish perspective, the refusal to eat pork is one of the definitions of being Jewish.

So it's no wonder that as far back as the Second Temple Era, during the Greek Empire's occupation of the Holy Land and the decrees of King Antiochus (you know, as in Chanukah), when the Temple was turned into a shrine to Zeus, Antiochus decreed that non-kosher sacrifices be brought up on the Temple's altar specifically of pigs.

Just how far eating pork symbolizes the rejection Jewish values can be seen in the following story.

One of the leading sages of the Chanukah era was named Elazar. At the time of the story, he was already 90 years old. The Greek soldiers wanted to make an example of him, and tried to force him to eat pork. But when he refused to do so, they suggested that they'd give him kosher meat to eat—but tell everyone that it was pork that he had eaten.

But Elazar rejected their advice because he was worried about the faith of the youth—and so the soldiers got angry and beat him to death.

Compassion

But perhaps we can say that there's another reason why eating pork is prohibited. In the Jewish Nation, there is something we call "rachmonus"—Hebrew (and Yiddish) for "mercy" or "compassion." It is one of the reasons why the Torah tells us to slaughter animals in a specific way so as to minimize the animal's suffering as much as possible.

But the mercy that Jews have traditionally had towards animals doesn't just apply to the moment of slaughter, but also to the level of intelligence of the animal being led to the slaughter. It seems that the Torah permitted us to eat only those animals that are the most simple-minded and innocent in all of nature—meaning, those animals that will sense the least amount of suffering and perception while being slaughtered.

Now, the pig is actually a pretty intelligent animal. As a matter of fact, do a Google search for "list of the most intelligent animals," and guess what'll pop up?

Actually, the top four search results are: the octopus, the elephant, the rat, and the pig. Anyone notice what they all have in common?

That's right: they're all not kosher.

But anyways, with the pig being pretty high up there (according to another list, it's the 10th most intelligent animal, but still, it's an intelligent animal), the pig has a pretty good sense of captivity—and will understand good and well when it's being led to the slaughter. As a result, this animal will psychologically suffer during that process, the same way a dog or cat would. So it seems that just like the Torah prohibits us to eat intelligent animals like dogs and monkeys, so too does the Torah prohibit us to eat intelligent animals like pigs.

Maimonides explains in his *Guide to the Perplexed* that the real intention of the Torah regarding its many mitzvos dealing with animals is to teach Jews the character quality of mercy. This means that from a psychological and spiritual standpoint, the fact that we only slaughter innocent-minded and non-aware

animals removes from us the character trait of cruelty that is common among other cultures.

As such, it's no coincidence that animals like cats, dogs and monkeys, all animals that possess some level of perception and awareness, are the animals that the Torah prohibits us to eat— because they are the animals that with eyes that see, understand, look and perceive.

In Detail

Let's break this down further and take a closer look at some of the non-kosher animals the Torah prohibits from eating.

In the land-animal category, you've got your dogs, cats, primates, and horses—all animals that can get a pretty good idea of what you're up to.

In the water-animal category, you've got your dolphins, sea lions, whales and, as mentioned, octopuses also pretty smart animals.

And in the flying-animal category, you've got your songbirds, your birds of prey like eagles, and, of course, your parrots—all also fairly clever creatures that know what they're doing.

By contrast, those few animals that the Torah does allow us to eat turn out to be animals with staring, indifferent, dreamy and unfocused eyes, animals without intelligence.

It's no coincidence that the Torah allows us to eat only those animals that are the most innocent and perception-free of all: the sheep, the chicken, the cow, and the goat—all animals that by nature cluster together in flocks, and stay in the same place for days, weeks or even months without getting bored at all. Even in the water-animal kingdom, the Torah only allows us to eat the most primitive fish of all—those that have scales, and not any other living sea creature.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In the Parshah of Emor, the Torah says, "An ox and a sheep, you shall not slaughter it and its son on one day" (Vayikra 22:28). And in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides explains the reason for the prohibition: "It's in the form of

a limit and buffer against possibly slaughtering the child next to its mother—something that gives animals great pain in which there is no difference between human pain and animal pain” (Guide to the Perplexed, 3:48). And Nachmanides (the Ramban) adds to that, saying, “It’s all about distance—and the more, the better, so that you don’t become cruel” (Ramban, Devarim 22:6).

To People Too

What all that means is that the entire prohibition against non-kosher animals is to root out cruelty within us and establish the character quality of mercy in us.

The Rebbe adds to that, saying that if animal pain is prohibited by the Torah, how much more so is human pain prohibited by the Torah! How much more so must we be careful about not causing another person to suffer!

Not only that, but we must be careful not to cause another Jew any spiritual pain—when we meet a Jew who is devoid of mitzvos, that fact is terribly painful to his or her soul, especially when that Jew doesn’t even know that he or she is devoid of mitzvos! In such a case, one make the effort to supply that Jewish person with mitzvos, the same way the Torah tells us that if we see a person who has no clothes, we must dress him.