

Parashat Sh'mini
April 21, 2012 – Hazzan Neil Schwartz

Today's Torah Portion enumerates the general **categories** of animals that we may and may not eat, and along the way it also **specifies** certain species of animals.

While there are exceptions to the over-arching pattern, in general we can characterize the types of **forbidden animals** as either **scavengers** or **predators**.

This leads to the following list of reasons for keeping the Kashrut dietary laws, even in our modern era of supposedly improved food safety standards.

1. While the system of Kashrut may have had its origins in the collective ancient wisdom of food-handling in a desert environment that lacked refrigeration, **health was not and is not the main reason for keeping Kashrut rules.**

2. Having said that, it is nonetheless true that people still get sick and even die from food poisoning that could be avoided by simply following the Torah's rules of what is and is not permissible to eat. Examples of this include shellfish poisoning and

contamination of ground meat from the hind quarters of cattle.

3. The **main reasons** for following even the basic Kashrut rules of which animals we may and may not eat are issues of primarily **group identification and boundaries**, and secondarily the Jewish concern of **bringing holiness into everyday life.**

The concept that "we are what we eat" helps explain the idea that if we eat animals which are primarily scavengers, we are also to a certain extent eating everything that they ate while alive. Thus, according to this view, pork is forbidden to us because in many human environments, pigs eat garbage.

This also can help explain our aversion to shellfish. Most shellfish live on the shallow Continental Shelf surrounding the seacoasts, and our human pollution becomes an important part of their diet. This is why shellfish poisoning is still a modern concern.

Additionally, the concept that "we are what we eat" goes beyond scavengers. There is an ancient idea that animal species have innate personalities, such as aggression. This can be a reason for not eating predators such as members of

the cat and dog families, including lions and bears, and species such as snakes and birds of prey.

However, as I said earlier, the real reasons for Kashrut rules are **Jewish identity** and **bringing holiness into the world**. I will be the first to admit that neither of these are top priorities for some modern Jews, but that very situation by itself provides a good impetus for considering these ideas and concerns.

Group identity can be established in many ways, but a shared tradition of what may and may not be eaten is the most pervasive **reinforcement** for group identity. I did not grow up in Northern Minnesota wearing a kippah on my head, but the simple fact that I did not eat pork was enough to announce to my friends and classmates that I was different.

Now, fifty years later, I face the situation that here in Saskatoon there is a Chassidic family in town who is more strict about Kashrut than I am. As a clergyperson in the Conservative Movement, I have been able to work in cities that *do not* have Kosher markets by using products that have a variety of Kashrut symbols, some of which are not acceptable to those who take a stricter view. Thus, group boundaries can cut the other way, separating one type of Jewish family from another over food concerns.

The concern that we **bring holiness into the world** is related to a main reason for some people to be vegetarians – cruelty to animals. If meat animals are slaughtered in the proper Kosher manner, they supposedly feel no pain from the process. The basic idea is this: if we are concerned about causing animals pain, we will be even more careful about causing various types of pain to our fellow humans.

I call that “Jewish ethics being carried forward by Jewish ritual actions.” The model is the way FM radio signals work: **Jewish ritual actions** are the “carrier wave” that brings the radio signal from the sender to the receiver, while **Jewish ethics** are the frequency modulations (hence “FM”) that carry the actual voice and music messages. In the case of Kashrut, the ritual dietary laws carry forward through the centuries the Jewish ethical message of preventing cruelty to animals, and correspondingly, mistreatment of people.

These are some of the lessons in today’s Torah Portion that are still relevant, at least 2500 years after they were written. The choices before us today are whether or not we can find a place in our daily lives for these ancient aspects of Jewish action and identity.