

Initiative: BE A LEADER WITH PURPOSE

Study Packet • Parshat Shemini

“...In order that they hear, and in order that they learn and fear the Lord, your G-d, and they will observe all the words of this Torah”—Deuteronomy

Dear Leaders,

This week, we take an in-depth look at the mitzvah of keeping kosher.

“You are what you eat,” has become a popular adage, and, nowadays, many of us are more health-conscious than ever. We’re careful about the food we put into our mouths because we’ve come to realize the effect that different foods can have on our entire well-being. But does the food we consume also have a consequence on our spiritual welfare? Does food have a spiritual profile?

Why are some foods forbidden while others are permissible? Do the traits of kosher animals indicate something about which positive qualities we are trying to cultivate within ourselves?

We also share with you the interesting question of whether one should say a blessing on food that isn’t kosher, and we include a heartwarming story of the far-reaching repercussions of keeping kosher.

No matter what stage of observance you are at, we hope you gain something from these insights. Pause for a moment and think about what the act of eating means to you. Is eating just a necessary physical act, or does it contain some deep and intrinsic spiritual value? Why do we find such joy and connection in sharing a meal and breaking bread with others? As always, we’d love to hear your thoughts!

Wishing you a wonderful week and a great study gathering,

Chana Weisberg,
Editor, TJW

EATING KOSHER

By Tzvi Freeman

Some people think that if they were truly spiritual, they would never eat.

In truth, few acts are as divine as eating food.

Eating is similar to sifting gold. You grasp the divine spark within a food and reject the dross. And then, in the mitzvahs energized by that food, you carry that divine spark back to its origin within the oneness of its Creator.

That is why there are foods that are forbidden and foods that are permissible. The Hebrew word for “forbidden” is *assur*—meaning *tied down*. “Permissible” is *mutar*—untied.

Kosher means “fit.” Foods that are *assur* are not *fit* for the divine act of eating because the divine spark within them is tied down and cannot be released. If we would eat them, rather than carrying that spark upward, we would be pulled down with it.

But foods that are *mutar* are fit and ready to release powerful divine energy into all the mitzvahs we do.

Tanya, chapter 7.



FOOD FOR GROWTH

By Chana Weisberg

Judy was expecting her first child, and was doing everything she could to guarantee healthy growth.

She prepared her meals carefully to ensure a sufficient supply of essential nutrients. She swallowed her daily prenatal vitamins and exercised regularly as per her doctor's recommendations. Naturally, Judy never smoked.

When Judy read about the benefits of exposing her unborn baby to music, she began playing evocative, beautiful melodies. She also became aware of the benefits of reading stories to babies in utero, so she dutifully read nightly.

Judy never regarded her behavior as extreme or fanatical. In fact, she is constantly seeking more ways to nurture the physical, emotional or spiritual development of her child.

In the Torah reading, Shemini (Leviticus 9-11), G-d commands the kosher laws, identifying the animal species permissible and forbidden for consumption. Land animals may be eaten only if they have split hooves and chew their cud, while fish must have fins and scales. There are no signs for kosher fowl, but rather a tradition affirming which species are not kosher.

"You are what you eat" is a popular adage. Our physical food is transformed into blood and flesh, becoming an integral part of our being. Spiritually, too, the intrinsic qualities within our food help mold our spiritual persona.

The Torah prohibits non-kosher foods to prevent us from assimilating their negative characteristics. What are the traits of kosher animals, embodied by their signs of kashrut? And, what do these signs indicate about which positive qualities to cultivate within ourselves?

1) Kosher land animals have split hooves and chew their cud.

A closed, unsplit hoof represents rigidity, being closed off and untouched by the plight of others. The split hoof, on the other hand, symbolizes approachability and sensitivity to others' suffering and needs. It also epitomizes

receptiveness to further growth.

Foster an

openness and awareness of others. Sustain an interest in continual learning and growing.

The kosher animal that chews its cud symbolizes a thoughtfulness and "chewing over" of teachings and circumstances.

Think over a situation before reacting in the heat of anger, recklessness, or impatience. Take a step back and consider a proper response or course of action. Shape yourself into a more insightful individual by analyzing, studying, and internalizing knowledge.

2) Kosher fish have fins and scales.

Scales, which cover the fish like a protective armor, signify the quality of integrity and morality.

Develop the ability to stay true to your inner self. Protect yourself from outside temptations and stay true to your morals.

Fins, propelling the fish forward, represent ambition.

Maximize your talents and capabilities by feeding your ambition to advance and improve yourself.

The Talmud teaches that all fish that have scales also have fins, but some fish with fins do not have scales and are not kosher. Having fins (ambition) without scales (morality) can lead to less-than-kosher behavior. Too many people, in their climb to success, abandon their values along the way.

Encourage yourself to use your drive— but charted by a moral guide.

3) Kosher fowl do not have specific signs, but are determined by our tradition, which affirms which species are kosher.

The fowl reminds us of the need for tradition and a higher guidance. There are times when every individual, no matter how intelligent or talented, will gain from seeking the guidance of those wiser or more experienced.

Consult a mentor and value his or her wisdom, and you



bypass many faulty courses in life.

What emotional or spiritual profile would you like to build in yourself?

Sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and consideration are indispensable qualities. A drive to accomplish tempered by moral integrity is also an essential life skill. Add the ability to know when to seek guidance, and you have a winning combination.

The food we consume has a profound effect on our wellbeing. In our efforts to nourish ourselves,

let's acknowledge the profound spiritual effect of food on our ever-developing psyche.

Ideas for discussion:

1. How does the food we eat mold our physical and spiritual selves?
2. Are you particularly careful not to eat certain foods? Why?
3. What qualities would you like to cultivate within yourself?

DO I SAY A BLESSING ON NON-KOSHER FOOD?

By Chaya Sarah Silberberg

Question: Is it improper and hypocritical to recite a blessing on non-kosher food? I'm starting to become more observant of the Torah laws, but I'm not yet at the stage of keeping 100% kosher. What do you advise?

Answer: First of all, may I commend you for your desire to keep growing in your Judaism and spirituality. Our sages tell us (Ethics of the Fathers 4:2) "A mitzvah brings another mitzvah." Doing mitzvot puts one in a "positive cycle," where one mitzvah leads to another. So, generally speaking, "all or nothing" is definitely not a Jewish mentality... and the fact that you are not yet observing one mitzvah is not a reason not to do another. And starting slowly and moving upwards steadily but sincerely in one's observance is certainly not hypocrisy!

But as it happens, this particular case is an exception to the abovementioned rule—allow me to explain:

What exactly is the purpose of making a blessing on food? Two basic answers are given for this mitzvah:

1. With the blessing we are acknowledging G-d, the Creator of the food, and thank Him for providing it for us.
2. According to Kabbalah, all matter exists because it contains within it a spark of G-dliness. When we recite a blessing over food, we activate and elevate this G-dly spark. Thus the food nourishes us both physically and spiritually.

So, with regards to reciting a blessing on food that is not kosher:

1. It's a mockery to bless and thank G-d for the un-kosher food that one is eating—in opposition to His will.
2. Although all of physical matter contains within it the G-dly sparks that give it existence, in some cases the Divine energy is accessible to us, while in other cases it is inaccessible. The purpose of our existence on this world is to interact with the physical world in order to elevate the divine sparks within it. It therefore follows that when the Divine energy within something is not accessible, we have no business with it. Since the purpose of the blessing is to release the Divine energy within food, one does not recite a blessing over food whose Divine energy is so tightly imprisoned, that we cannot access it and it cannot be elevated.¹

I hope this has been helpful.

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1. This applies to food that is definitely un-kosher. The generally accepted opinion is that when we do not know that food is definitely un-kosher – though we should not be eating it unless we are certain that it is kosher – we do recite a blessing.

Ideas for discussion:

1. Does Judaism believe in an "all or nothing" approach?
2. How does food have a spark of G-dliness in it?
3. Why shouldn't one say a blessing on food that is definitely not kosher?

THE KINDNESS OF YOUNG BOYS WHO CONVINCED A CAMP TO GO KOSHER

By Batya Schochet Lisker

“My answer is yes! I will do it. I will commit to everything that needs to happen so that our camp can become kosher certified,” Avi asserted in his low-pitched, Israeli-accented voice.

Despite his noble resolve, my father was prepared for it to be a very tough sell and was gratified, even astounded, by this response. It was 1975, the year the Lubavitcher Rebbe launched the Kosher Food Initiative as part of the 10 mitzvah campaigns instituted to encourage Jews to experience a deeper and more fulfilling relationship with their Jewish heritage. My father, Rabbi Dovid Schochet, the Rebbe’s emissary to Toronto, reasoned that outreach to individuals introduced kosher food to families, but koshering camps brought kosher food to hundreds of Jewish children and enabled them to be actively Jewish every day of their summer. Kosher food nurtures a healthy and sound soul, and enables Jewish identification on a very real and fundamental level. Two camps that my father had contacted that week had already signed on, but everyone assumed that approaching the Hashomer Hatzair camp was an effort in futility.

Yet the dignified, warm and gracious manner in which Avi, the Hashomer Hatzair *shaliach* to Toronto, received my father was heartening. A pleasant meeting of the minds ensued as my father explained the reason for his visit.

“My parents were immigrants from Austria. They brought with them a strong ethnic and Zionist identity,”
Avi

began. “I spent a few years after the army living in a radical left-wing *kibbutz*, but I was raised in Lod. We lived right near the Chabad *yeshivah* there. Due to biases I had been schooled to believe, I watched the *yeshivah* boys apprehensively until I became acquainted with them. They promoted truth and empathy, and though I am a die-hard trailblazer in my movement, I am honored to count some of them as my friends. It is because of their impact on me that I agree to your request.

“By embodying the values that are inherent and central to Torah, and being champions of morality, of meaningful living, of kindness, ethics and righteousness in every single activity—both interpersonal and religious—they raised the banner of the Master of the Universe and glorified His Name. Their behavior became a symbol of what G-d and observance of Torah and mitzvahs are all about, and therefore they were able to transform even the most hostile atmosphere. Many of my *chevrah* (friends) became religious. Like a current flowing through a wire creates a magnetic field, the energy flowing through them affected the environment in my neighborhood. I look forward to making every effort to partner with you in this kosher endeavor,” he concluded.

Avi proved to be as good as his word. And it seemed that his undertaking was the catalyst for all the other obstacles to be overcome. My father oversaw the koshering of the camp and found supervisors who agreed to live onsite for the summer. Not only was the food prepared according to dietary laws, but careful attention was paid to all the minutiae.

The camp remained kosher for three years until Avi was posted elsewhere. Of course, most of the children did not eat strictly kosher food at home, but the Rebbe believed that every commandment has value in and of itself, and we must focus on appreciating the efforts of every person—one mitzvah at a time.



This story my father told me drove home the message that Judaism is not about the truths we know, but about the truths we live. What we love, others will love—and we will show them how. The fate of “G-d’s name” in the world is dependent on each one of us, His ambassadors. In addition, it underscores to me the lesson of the Rebbe: Each bite of kosher food, full of powerful energy that gives spiritual, intellectual and emotional strength to the Jewish soul, is a mitzvah.

Judaism is not just metaphysical, but part and parcel of your very being; after all, “you are what you eat.” This phrase, coined by nutritionists in the early 1900s to advocate wholesome food for healthy bodies, is relevant to kosher food as well.

I am reminded of a story that I heard in high school that highlights this message of the Rebbe:

World War I was stretching into its second year. The Jews in the town of Radin in Poland were suffering tremendous deprivation. Food was scarce and taxes were high. Nevertheless, at the news that there were many conscripted Jewish soldiers in the army battalion that had camped in their vicinity, the community rallied together to provide them with kosher food. Needless to say, living a Jewish life in the Czar’s army was practically impossible. Kosher food was not available, and the army did not hide their attempts to convert the young Jewish boys who were institutionally underfed.

But upon discovering that the Jewish soldiers were consuming the kosher food and then lining up for their

regular meager non-kosher army rations as well, the community decided to discontinue their efforts, believing they were for naught. The saintly Chofetz Chaim—the rabbi of the town and a great leader of world Jewry at the time—urged the townspeople to continue. He said their endeavor was worthwhile, as every bite of kosher food was one bite less of non-kosher food and therefore a mitzvah. Furthermore, the kosher food contained the necessary spiritual nutrition that would enable the soldiers not only to survive physically, but to survive as Jews against all odds. History demonstrates that when kosher observance is strong, Jewish identity remains strong.

Following the destruction of the Holy Temple, a person’s table resembles the Altar (Menachot 97a)—a reminder that in a world without sacrifices, the food that we eat has the potential to bring us close to the sacred.

Ideas for discussion:

1. Do you agree with this statement: “Judaism is not about the truths we know, but about the truths we live. What we love, others will love.” Explain
2. How do you think kosher observance helps keep our Jewish identity strong?
3. How do our tables resemble the Altar?