

INSPIRE

SHMINI- MEVOCHIM IYAR
28TH NISSAN - 10 APRIL 2021

WHY WE EAT KOSHER

By Yossi Goldman



Service times

Friday 7 PM

Shabbos 9:30-11:30 am

This week's parshah, Shemini, introduces the Torah's dietary laws. Animals must chew their cud and have split hooves to be kosher, fish need fins and scales, and a list of forbidden fowl is enumerated.

To those of us in Jewish education, it is a continuing source of disappointment that so many Jews still believe the kosher laws to be outdated. After all, they reckon, in the desert our ancestors needed to protect themselves from trichinosis and all sorts of diabolical diseases so some kind of dietary system was needed. But today, they argue, in an age of refrigeration, government inspection and modern hygiene standards, the kosher laws are archaic, anachronistic and quite dispensable.

How sad. The fact is that the kosher laws were never given to us for health reasons. If they happen to be healthy or provide good hygiene that is purely a fringe benefit. It may well be one of the perks but it has never been the reason.

I often joke that if the kosher laws were for health, then all the rabbis should look like Schwarzenegger! And those who don't keep kosher should look sickly. In fact, anecdotal evidence seems to prove the very opposite; your average religious type looks rather scrawny (or overweight) and the non-kosher guys are the ones with the big biceps!

So let it be stated categorically: kosher is not for our physical health but for our spiritual health. It is not for our bodies but for our souls. It is a Jewish diet to help Jews remain spiritually sensitive to their innate Jewishness.

While the Torah actually records no official reason for these laws, the rabbis and philosophers have speculated on their purpose. They act as a bulwark against assimilation, we are taught. On a simple level, if we keep kosher, inexorably, we will shop with fellow Jews, socialize with fellow Jews and remain close to Jewish communal life. A rabbinic friend of mine once asked a very high-profile Jewish businessman why he was about to marry a non-Jewish woman. Couldn't he find a "nice Jewish girl"? His reply was very revealing. "I just don't mix in those circles anymore, Rabbi." There is no doubt that had he still kept Kosher his life choices may well have been very different.

On a deeper, more spiritual level, keeping kosher keeps our Jewish souls sensitive to things Jewish. This is clearly a mystical concept and imperceptible to our physical senses, but according to our sages it is a fact.

Just as too much red meat or fatty foods are bad for your cholesterol, non-kosher foods are bad for your neshamah. They clog your spiritual arteries and prevent those warm, healthy Jewish feelings from circulating through your kishkes and your consciousness.

It's very important to have a mezuzah on your door. It identifies your home as Jewish. But what really defines your home as a "Jewish Home" - what your zayde meant when he said with pride "my children run a Jewish home" - is the kitchen. A kosher kitchen makes a Jewish home truly Jewish. It also extends a very warm and eloquent invitation to all fellow Jews. Here you are welcome. Here it is safe to come in and eat. Make yourself at home.

Your favorite diet may build healthy bodies, but a kosher diet builds healthy souls.

FIRE – HOLY AND UNHOLY

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The shock is immense. For several weeks and many chapters – the longest prelude in the Torah – we have read of the preparations for the moment at which G-d would bring His presence to rest in the midst of the people. Five sedras (Terumah, Tetzaveh, Ki Tissa, Vayakhel and Pekudei) describe the instructions for building the sanctuary. Two (Vayikra, Tzav) detail the sacrificial offerings to be brought there. All is now ready. For seven days the priests (Aaron and his sons) are consecrated into office. Now comes the eighth day when the service of the mishkan will begin. The entire people have played their part in constructing what will become the visible home of the Divine presence on earth. With a simple, moving verse the drama reaches its climax: “Moses and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting and when they came out, they blessed the people. G-d’s glory was then revealed to all the people.”

Just as we think the narrative has reached closure, a terrifying scene takes place:

Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, took their censers, put fire into them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before G-d, which He had not instructed them to offer. Fire came forth from before G-d, and it consumed them so that they died before G-d. Moses then said to Aaron: “This is what G-d spoke of when he said: Among those who approach Me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured.” (10:1-3)

Celebration turned to tragedy. The two eldest sons of Aaron die. The sages and commentators offer many explanations. Nadav and Avihu died because: they entered the holy of holies; they were not wearing the requisite clothes; they took fire from the kitchen, not the altar; they did not consult Moses and Aaron; nor did they consult one another. According to some they were guilty of hubris. They were impatient to assume leadership roles themselves; and they did not marry, considering themselves above such things. Yet others see their deaths as delayed punishment for an earlier sin, when, at Mount Sinai they “ate and drank” in the presence of G-d (Ex. 24: 9-11).

These interpretations represent close readings of the four places in the Torah which Nadav and Avihu’s death is mentioned (Lev. 10: 2, 16: 1, Num. 3: 4, 26: 61), as well as the reference to their presence on Mount Sinai. Each is a profound meditation on the dangers of over-enthusiasm in the religious life. However, the simplest explanation is the one explicit in the Torah itself. Nadav and Avihu died because they offered unauthorized (literally “strange”) fire – meaning “that which was not commanded.” To understand the significance of this we must go back to first principles (Covenant and Conversation, Terumah) and remind ourselves of the meaning of kadosh, “holy”, and thus of mikdash as the home of the holy.

The holy is that segment of time and space G-d has reserved for His presence. Creation involves concealment. The word olam, universe, is semantically linked to the word neelam, “hidden.” To give mankind some of His own creative powers – the use of language to think, communicate, understand, imagine alternative futures and choose between them – G-d must do more than create homo sapiens. He must efface Himself (what the kabbalists called tzimtzum) to create space for human action. No single act more profoundly indicates the love and generosity implicit in creation. G-d as we encounter Him in the Torah is like a parent who knows He must hold back, let go, refrain from intervening, if his children are to become responsible and mature.

But there is a limit. To efface himself entirely would be equivalent to abandoning the world, deserting his own children. That, G-d may not and will not do. How then does G-d leave a trace of his presence on earth?

The biblical answer is not philosophical. A philosophical answer (I am thinking here of the mainstream of Western philosophy, beginning in antiquity with Plato, in modernity with Descartes) would be one that applies universally – i.e. at all times, in all places. But there is no answer that applies to all times and places. That is why philosophy cannot and never will understand the apparent contradiction between divine creation and human freewill, or between divine presence and the empirical world in which we reflect, choose and act.

Jewish thought is counter-philosophical. It insists that truths are embodied precisely in particular times and places. There are holy times (the seventh day, seventh month, seventh year, and the end of seven septennial cycles, the jubilee). There are holy people (the children of Israel as a whole; within them, the Levi’im, and within them the Cohanim). And there is holy space (eventually, Israel; within that, Jerusalem; within that the Temple; in the desert, they were the mishkan, the holy, and the holy of holies).

The holy is that point of time and space in which the presence of G-d is encountered by tzimtzum – selfrenunciation – on the part of mankind. Just as G-d makes space for man by an act of self-limitation, so man makes space for G-d by an act of self-limitation. The holy is where G-d is experienced as absolute presence. Not accidentally but essentially, this can only take place through the total renunciation of human will and initiative. That is not because G-d does not value human will and initiative. To the contrary: G-d has empowered mankind to use them to become His “partners in the work of creation”.

However, to be true to G-d’s purposes, there must be times and places at which humanity experiences the reality of the divine. Those times and places require absolute obedience. The most fundamental mistake – the mistake of Nadav and Avihu – is to take the powers that belong to man’s encounter with the world, and apply them to man’s encounter with the Divine. Had Nadav and Avihu used their own initiative to fight evil and injustice they would have been heroes. Because they used their own initiative in the arena of the holy, they erred.

They asserted their own presence in the absolute presence of G-d. That is a contradiction in terms. That is why they died. We err if we think of G-d as capricious, jealous, angry – a myth spread by early Christianity in an attempt to define itself as the religion of love, superseding the cruel/harsh/retributive G-d of the “Old Testament.” When the Torah itself uses such language it “speaks in the language of humanity” – that is to say, in terms people will understand.

In truth, Tenakh is a love story through and through – the passionate love of the Creator for His creatures, that survives all the disappointments and betrayals of human history. G-d needs us to encounter Him, not because He needs mankind but because we need Him. If civilization is to be guided by love, justice, and respect for the integrity of creation as such, there must be moments in which we leave the “I” behind and encounter the fullness of being in all its glory. That is the function of the holy – the point at which “I am” is silent in the overwhelming presence of “There is”. That is what Nadav and Avihu forgot – that to enter holy space or time requires ontological humility, the total renunciation of human initiative and desire.

The significance of this fact cannot be over-estimated. When we confuse G-d’s will with our will, we turn the holy (the source of life) into something unholy and a source of death. The classic example of this is “holy war” – investing imperialism (the desire to rule over other people) with the cloak of sanctity as if conquest and forced conversion were G-d’s will. The story of Nadav and Avihu reminds us yet again of the warning first spelled out in the days of Cain and Abel. The first act of worship led to the first murder. Like nuclear fission, worship generates power, which can be benign but can also be profoundly dangerous.

The episode of Nadav and Avihu is written in three kinds of fire. First there is the fire from heaven:

Fire came forth from before G-d and consumed the burnt offering . . . (9: 24)

This was the fire of favour, consummating the service of the sanctuary. Then came the “unauthorized fire” offered by the two sons. Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before G-d, which He had not instructed them to offer.(10:1)

Then there was the counter-fire from heaven:

Fire came forth from before G-d, and it consumed them so that they died before G-d. (10:2)

The message is simple and deadly serious: Religion is not what the European Enlightenment thought it would become: mute, marginal and mild. It is fire – and like fire, it warms but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame.

On the eighth day, following the seven days of their inauguration, Aaron and his sons begin to officiate as kohanim (priests); a fire issues forth from G-d to consume the offerings on the altar, and the divine presence comes to dwell in the Sanctuary.

Aaron's two elder sons, Nadav and Avihu, offer a "strange fire before G-d, which He commanded them not" and die before G-d. Aaron is silent in face of his tragedy. Moses and Aaron subsequently disagree as to a point of law regarding the offerings, but Moses concedes to Aaron that Aaron is in the right.

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 also chew their cud; fish must have fins and scales; a list of non-kosher birds is given, and a list of kosher insects (four types of locusts).

Also in Shemini are some of the laws of ritual purity, including the purifying power of the mikvah (a pool of water meeting specified qualifications) and the wellspring. Thus the people of Israel are enjoined to "differentiate between the impure and the pure."

II Samuel 6:1-19.

This week's haftorah mentions how Uzzah was struck dead when he disrespectfully touched the Ark of the Covenant; reminiscent of Nadab and Abihu's death described in this week's Torah reading.

The Holy Ark had been in storage in the house of Avinadav for many years, ever since the destruction of the Tabernacle in Shiloh. Recently crowned King David decided to move the Ark to the new capital, Jerusalem. He had the Ark placed on a cart and it was transported amidst singing and dancing. When the procession reached Goren Nachon, the oxen misstepped and Uzzah, Avinadav's son, took hold of the Ark to steady it—whereupon he was instantly killed.¹ David was devastated, and he temporarily placed the Ark in the home of Oved-edom the Edomite, where it remained for three months.

"And it was told to King David saying: 'G-d has blessed the house of Oved-edom, and all that belongs to him, because of the Ark of G-d.' And David went and brought up the ark of G-d from the house of Oved-edom into the City of David with joy." The Ark was brought up to the city of David with great singing and dancing. David then blessed and distributed presents to all the assembled Israelites.

WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Kass, Mark mother Kass, Miriam Zelda Miriam Zelda bas Meir Saturday 10/4/21 Nissan 28, 5781

Posner, Austin father Posner, Louis Aryeh ben Avraham Meir Sunday 11/4/21 Nissan 29, 5781

Williams, Tara 1st husband Williams, Clive & Karen son Berg, Melinda Brother Williams, Jonathan Yonatan ben Michael Monday 12/4/21 Nissan 30, 5781

Pushkin, Norman mother Pushkin, Fanny Faigel bas Nuchum Tuesday 13/4/21 Iyar 1, 5781

Selwyn, Maurice brother Selwyn Tuesday 13/4/21 Iyar 1, 5781

Cramer, David father Cramer, Meir Meir ben Moshe Wednesday 14/4/21 Iyar 2, 5781

Sugarman, Marlene mother Yaros, Hetty Hindel Bas Yacov Wednesday 14/4/21 Iyar 2, 5781

Perry, Mylene mother Freedman, Freda Freydal bas Yitzchack Thursday 15/4/21 Iyar 3, 5781

JEWISH HUMOUR

A man was walking in the mountains just enjoying the scenery when he stepped too close to the edge of the mountain and started to fall. In desperation he reached out and grabbed a limb of a gnarly old tree hanging onto the side of the cliff.

Full of fear he assessed his situation. He was about 100 feet down a sheer cliff and about 900 feet from the floor of the canyon below. If he should slip again he'd plummet to his death.

Full of fear, he cries out, "Help me!" But there was no answer. Again and again he cried out but to no avail. Finally he yelled, "Is anybody up there?"

A deep voice replied, "Yes, I'm up here."

"Who is it?"

"It's the Lord"

"Can you help me?"

"Yes, I can help."

"Help me!"

"Let go."

Looking around the man became full of panic. "What?!?!"

"Let go. I will catch you."

"Uh... Is there anybody else up there?"

RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

Three playing cards in a row. Can you name them with these clues? There is a two to the right of a king. A diamond will be found to the left of a spade. An ace is to the left of a heart. A heart is to the left of a spade. Now, identify all three cards.

STORY TIME

While the sepia photograph of my father's Bar Mitzvah in Berlin, 1938 was prominently displayed in our living room, to me it was in always in the background. I knew my father's parents and brother were in the photo along with my father who was wearing a wool blazer, shorts, and knee-high socks. At the time, I had no reason to know more.

That changed in 2016 when I started writing the story of my father, Fred Bachner, who survived several concentration camps including Auschwitz and passed away in 2008. I picked up the photograph that was still in my mother's living room and saw details I had not noticed before.

I looked at the face of my grandmother, Erna Bachner, who was murdered at Auschwitz, hoping to know her as the Mutti my father adored. I was disheartened and confused why she appeared pensive and sad. This should have been a joyous occasion, but it was October 1938 in Berlin, a few weeks before Kristallnacht, and there were reasons for her to be worried. My grandfather, Abraham Bachner, survived Auschwitz. In the photo he is standing straight and smiling, looking proud of his son. Looking back on 25 years of memories and images of my grandfather, whether it was a joyous occasion or a Sunday get-together with his two sons and four grandchildren, there was never another time I saw him smiling. As the family posed for the photo, I imagine they had no idea this would be the last family portrait and only remaining picture of all four Bachners.

Growing up, my grandfather remained a mystery. All I knew was that he was a Holocaust survivor, spoke with an accent, wore bifocals, and walked with a limp, an injury sustained when a New York City bus hit him in the 1950s, or so I was led to believe. The only comments I remember him saying to me were, "There's room for improvement" when I showed him my Hebrew School report card, even though most of my grades were As, and "It could be better" the time I baked Pillsbury Poppin' Fresh Cinnamon Rolls. His childhood in Poland and his life in Berlin before the war were never discussed and the "H" word was never mentioned.

Abraham Bachner passed away on December 8, 1980 at 85 years old. At the funeral, Rabbi Fabian Schoenfeld of Young Israel of Kew Garden Hills told the mourners Abraham's final request was to be buried in his Auschwitz uniform. The Rabbi explained that initially he did not understand the request and reminded Abraham as an observant Jew he should be buried in the traditional shroud. Abraham insisted that at his time of judgment, he wanted the Almighty to look at whatever sins he had committed and weigh them against the years of torture and starvation he had endured during the Holocaust. The uniform would be a reminder.

I did not know my grandfather kept his uniform or understand why he wanted to be buried with it, but unlike my aunt and uncle who let it be known they thought the uniform should have been saved for posterity, I knew the uniform belonged with my grandfather.

Since his passing, I continued to wonder the reasons behind my grandfather's request. It was clearly significant enough that Holocaust scholar and educator Yaffa Eliach included it as a chapter in her book, *Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust*, and Benjamin Mead, founder of WAGRO told the story at the Yom HaShoah commemoration at Temple Emanuel in Manhattan in 1981. Despite reading the chapter many times, it was not until recently when I gained an understanding of my grandfather and his request.

My trip to Poland in 2018 was a turning point in my relationship with my grandfather. I visited Chrzanow, the city he was born in and where he and his family returned to in 1939 when forced out of Germany. I stood outside the house they lived in and were later dragged out of during the roundups to Auschwitz. I said Kaddish and left a stone at the grave of his father, Shimon Josef, who died in a fire in 1898 when my grandfather was three years old and at the grave of his grandfather, Aron, who died in 1855. I felt my grandfather's presence.

It was not until I stood outside the gates to Auschwitz that I realized when the war ended my grandfather was 50 years old and had been in labor and concentration camps for five years. Everything shifted for me as I came to understand and love him as the strong and brave person he had to be in order to survive. I also realized my grandfather's request to be buried along with the uniform was his way of telling us he knew he was not the best version of who he had been before the Holocaust.

I thought my journey was complete, but there was still more. I continued researching my family's history and recently found a new document. I never imagined it would be a picture of my grandfather in 1945, still wearing the uniform he wore in Auschwitz. He was thin, his eyes sunken, and he had a blank stare. It is hard to believe the picture of him at my father's Bar Mitzvah was taken only seven years earlier. All the life was sucked out of him and he appears "broken."

The contrast between the two photographs serves as reminder of the enormity of what he endured. Abraham Bachner survived the Holocaust, but so much of him had not.

FOOD 4 THE SOUL

Between the head and the heart lies a narrow passage called the neck.

This is to our advantage, so that when the heart rushes in frenzy over its desires and its fears, the head can still observe from its perch above the rapids and direct the heart back on course. It is also to our disadvantage, because the head must speak very loud and clear to make itself heard to the heart so far below.