

YK KN 5771 The Sanctity of Kashrut
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah* – may we be sealed for a good year.

So, I am going to do something a bit risky tonight. I am going to talk about food. Maybe it's better tonight than tomorrow; since we hopefully ate not too long ago!

Let me go back to first grade when I decided to become a vegetarian.

I'm not sure of my motive: higher morality, the realization that's my mother's Shabbat chicken was actually once a bird. She claims it has something to do with squirrels, but that's another story. I think I just did not like eating chicken. It was hard to be a vegetarian though, since I really liked chicken soup and those little hot dogs in pastry dough that we called: franks n' blanks.

But I was vegetarian so I knew I could not have them. One Shabbat, we were having lunch at the shul, and we were served a beautiful platter of lettuce with a scoop of chopped liver. I looked at it, tasted it and started to devour it. My mother said, "wait, I thought you were a vegetarian." I said I was, but it was OK, since it was tuna fish. My mother said that it was not tuna, "that's chopped liver and if you want to eat the rest, then you cannot be a vegetarian."

A six-year-old choice moment.

Well, I opted for the liver.

But not without some regrets – there is a part of me that believes that eating animals is problematic, especially because in our atomized society we are so disconnected from the food we consume and its production.

Jonathan Safran Foer's book, *Eating Animals*, argues against eating meat, as I mentioned one Shabbat after its publication. Not only does Foer consider eating meat problematic in principle, but he also describes the disturbing process that animals and meat undergo on their way to our dinner tables. This brought home how little I thought about the food I regularly consume. I realized that I needed to learn more and cut down my consumption of animal products.

I had never been to an actual *shehitah* – Jewish ritual slaughtering. The Jewish Theological Seminary's Rabbinical School covers many areas, but that old-fashioned knowledge was not in the curriculum. So in June, my father (who in 43 years in the rabbinate had never seen it either) and I joined a group of twenty from www.lokomeat.org at a farm outside of Worcester to see chickens being kosher slaughtered and to help process them.

I decided that if I could not handle it, I would become a vegetarian.

So, I will kill the suspense (bad pun intended) – I'm still a carnivore or actually an omnivore. It was intense experience watching *shehitah* and it certainly was not pleasant. We were in a hot barn full of pigs, ironically.

Naftali, our *shoheit*, explained the process – these were not regular chickens, but pasture-fed free-range chickens (apparently, many free-range chickens never actually venture outside) who had not been pumped with antibiotics, or growth hormones. They were treated well for chickens despite their unnaturally shortened lives.

The day began with a blessing – *Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Haolam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al hashehitah* – Praised are you Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with *mitzvot* and commanded us about ritual slaughtering.

This set a tone to our work; it was holy. Just as today on Yom Kippur, we fast to elevate ourselves and raise our actions to another plane, so too, with food and animals – we sanctify the process of preparing food.

I stood next to the *shoheit* as Dave, the farmer who raised the chicken, held it and Naftali took his knife and killed the bird in one swift, short stroke. It was intense, but it forced us out of a dis-associative state that tricks us into thinking that our meat magically appears on store shelves. If we are to eat animals, I think watching the process should be a prerequisite.

Naftali handed me the dead bird, still warm, which I then plucked – it was hard work and, to use a technical term, kind of icky. Normally, chicken feathers are machine plucked. In a strange way, I became close to this recently deceased bird, which, after some 45 minutes, was eviscerated by someone else before being soaked and salted to drain the rest of the blood – steps in the kashering process.

And then, after spending a few more hours processing a few more chickens along with other Emunah-ites, Wendy Russman-Halperin and Hannah Levine (Beth and Al Levine's daughter who has shared these values with Governor Patrick recently), I bought some of these chickens to take home. Because of the way these chickens were raised, the diverse free-range diet they were fed, the minimal processing, and the freshness, Sharon roasted the tastiest chicken I had ever eaten.

It was also strangely the most connected I ever felt to something I ate – it was like picking fresh fruit and eating it. I had been with this chicken on its

journey from life to death, becoming kosher, being cleaned and cooked. I saw this chicken all along and understood the significance of what I was eating.

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Not only did I learn a lot that Sunday afternoon, but this meat was more expensive, discouraging us from eating too much of it or wasting it. It also reminded me of several key Jewish values: we treated the animals as well as we could, given that we were taking their lives. We were the workers, so there were no labor issues (except the hard work). Dave also works hard to mitigate his farm's impact on the environment. Finally, since we simply took the chickens home, there was clear transparency, corporate integrity and the consumer was well protected.

Not coincidentally, these are the same Jewish ethical values of Magen Tzedek, the new Jewish ethical seal of the Conservative Movement. Since I last spoke about Hekhsher Tzedek a couple of years ago, much work has been done, which I will forward to you in an email. We should all be proud that our community is an active leader in this area and that David Landis is our liaison to the national Magen Tzedek.

As an FYI, as we did a few weeks ago, we will sell this type of chicken once a month here at Emunah – next delivery on October 13 <http://www.growandbehold.com/> – and we are planning an educational event and *shehitah* program at our shul on Sunday, October 24 – details to follow in future emails and notices.

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But for this most sacred night of the year, I want to place *kashrut* and eating in a larger context. First, keeping kosher and *kashrut* are a growing phenomenon. While over the last few generations, more and more non-Orthodox Jews moved away from keeping kosher – first outside the home, and then in the home, today there are some moves in the opposite direction. More and more families are observing *kashrut* on some level, often more strictly than the manner in which they were raised. This is most noticeable in the Reform movement where synagogues and camps have moved toward increasing *kashrut* observance.

Kashrut has become part of mainstream America. The New York Times' feature on its Op-Ed page on July fourth was entitled "Red, White and Kosher" with a large picture of a hotdog and a large kosher symbol, the "*khaf-K*." The writer noted: "Today a majority of Americans believe that kosher food is safer, healthier, better in general than non-kosher food, and they're willing to pay more for it. Kosher is the fastest growing segment of the domestic food industry with bigger sales than organic. One third to one half of the food in American

supermarkets is kosher certified.” (I am not sure all kosher food is actually safer and healthier, but it speaks to the impact of *kashrut*!)

But what’s behind *kashrut* is more significant - *kashrut* embraces Judaism’s overall approach to life and living, elevating our actions, infusing them with holiness and morality. It is a path of *kedushah*, of sanctity, developing our awareness.

Think about it – we take a basic human need, and we infuse it with holiness. We think about what we are about to eat, heightening our sense of awareness. This is something that I see increasingly in our society – and not just regarding *kashrut*. Given allergies, special diets, and vegetarianism, people want to know exactly what they are eating so they can consume food more wisely.

As Jews, we must prepare our food carefully; we must drain the blood from meat through soaking and salting. Since blood is the life of the animal, consuming the blood is not holy, but animalistic. We are limited in what we can eat – some animals, birds, and fish are not kosher, we do not mix milk and meat – a deep moral lesson on the difference between something that was once alive versus something that sustains life. While both are special, the former is much more significant – an explanation for the longer hiatus between eating meat and eating dairy products.

Kashrut infuses my day with constant reminders of how blessed I am to have food, how I should make the right food choices, and how eating can be elevated.

Our Emunah community is on the leading edge. Rabbi David Golinkin, a Masorti/Conservative rabbi in Israel wrote a critical *teshuvah* – religious responsum – about the *kashrut* of veal. Now, before we have too much confusion – veal is kosher according to many Jews. Walk into Ta’am China and you can order Hunan Veal, but Rabbi Golinkin determined that we should not eat any veal because the way the calves are treated before they are killed is immoral. Because they are chained in tiny pens so they cannot walk so their meat will be softer, veal is not kosher. And that is the position of the Conservative Movement and of our synagogue. Kosher caterers who might serve veal elsewhere cannot serve veal here in our shul under any circumstances.

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It should be noted that the Torah is the first text in human history to worry about the welfare of animals. There are the laws of *tza’ar ba’alei ḥayyim* – of not causing suffering to an animal. We are commanded to help animals, relieving them of extra burdens and suffering. *Shiluah Hakein* is another one – sending away the mother bird if we need to take its eggs so she does not witness it. And

it is clear from Genesis that the best state to aspire towards is vegetarianism; the laws of *kashrut* and of not eating blood are for those who need meat, who cannot reach that higher level.

We see this today more and more in our community and in the world, especially among our young people. There is a real move towards vegetarianism, being vegan, or a piscetarian – who also consume fish.

We centrist Jews have a real opportunity to frame *kashrut* for ourselves and for the next generation. We can help make sure that the food we eat is not only kosher, but also healthy, produced while taking into account workers' rights, animal welfare and the environment. Hopefully, more and more in our community are composting; we started composting in our home last year. As a shul, we are looking to do more about all these issues in our building and beyond.

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A final vignette that sums up the Jewish way of *kashrut* takes me back to the farm. After hours of plucking chickens, we were sweaty, hot and tired. But before we could leave, we had one more vital ritual, one that I had never seen, in fact rarely heard of, even though it is mentioned in Leviticus (17:13-14).

It was the covering of the blood. Naftali took sawdust and wood chips and sprinkled them over the floor where some of the blood had spilled and recited a *brakhah*, a blessing – *Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Haolam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al kissui hadam* – Praised are you Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with *mitzvot* and commanded us about the covering of the blood. Just as we opened the *shehitah* with a *brakhah*, we closed it in the same manner.

It was a solemn moment – reminding all of us of what we had done, we had taken the lives of these animals, and that was not to be taken lightly. As we drove home, I thought about the power of that ritual, of the sanctity of all life and how our tradition has always pushed us through all our *mitzvot*, and especially through *kashrut*, to move toward holiness.

May we all use this day of Yom Kippur, this day of abstaining from food, to inspire us to a deeper level of awareness about what we consume, elevating ourselves and the world just a bit higher.

Shabbat Shalom and *Gmar Hatimah Tovah*.