

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Kashrut



Context

*Reform Rabbis, like all Jews, approach Jewish practice in diverse ways, with a variety of levels of observance. It is powerful when they are willing to share the thinking that underpins their decision making. Here, **Rabbi Benji Stanley**, Reform Judaism's Rabbi for Young Adults presents the values that he emphasises in his observance of kashrut.*

Content

My views on kashrut are influenced by two scholars with very similar names - Stanley Milgram and Jacob Milgrom. Stanley, a psychologist, performed an experiment in the early 1960s in which volunteers were individually told to administer, recurrently, an electric shock to a victim. This victim was, in fact, an actor, but screamed convincingly. More than 60% of the 40 volunteers continued to press the button, when told to do so, ramping up the supposed wattage to a frightening maximum. What did the experiment suggest? That people, regardless of the own moral intuition, may obey orders; that habitually doing something, pressing the button repeatedly, may make it easier to continue acting in this way; and finally, that small habitual actions may be of world-changing, or world-destroying significance. The experiment coincided with the trial of the Nazi, Eichmann, and suggested that we might take a rather sceptical view of our own ability to act on our nobler impulses- people sometimes act according to cruel authority and bad habits.

Such a worrying assessment of our own human capability to act kindly contrasts with a strong impulse in early Reform Judaism, that rejected the modern relevance of our topic, the laws of kashrut which detail what is fit and unfit to eat. The authors of the 1st American Platform of Reform principles, the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, believed that both nation-states and human beings were inevitably progressing towards just governance, that countries and individuals now knew the equal value of every human life, and that reason alone would govern kind conduct. They lived, so they believed, in a “modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel’s great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men”. In striving for this kingdom they accepted “as binding only its [the Torah’s] moral laws”; and so they held, “that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet... originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state”ⁱ. This platform reflected a dismissal of “kitchen Judaism”, seemingly petty and even arbitrary in its concern for behavioural details.

Yet, post-Stanley Milgram it seems to me that the laws of kashrut are in fact entirely relevant to *our* present mental and spiritual state. It is our other Milgrom, Jacob Milgrom, who convincingly explains an underlying purpose of these laws. As one of the foremost academic experts on the Book of Leviticus, where the dietary system is set down, he stated that its primary purpose “is to teach the Israelite reverence for life by (1) reducing his choice of flesh to a few animals; (2) limiting the slaughter of even these few permitted animals to the most humane way [a swift cutting with a sharp knife]; and (3) prohibiting the ingestion of blood and mandating its disposal upon the altar or by burial as acknowledgement that bringing death to living things is a concession of God’s grace and not a privilege of man’s whim”ⁱⁱ. He also points out that the dietary system interacts with the stories of the Torah to teach everyday reverence for life. Adam and Eve seem to be told to be vegetarian. By the time we get to Noach and his generation the Torah and the Eternal have anticipated the Milgram experiment and understand that humans can lapse into the brutal spilling of blood. To re-channel this violent tendency God makes a dietary concession allowing humanity now to eat animals, but not eat the blood. All humanity are thus taught that their eating habits should habituate a reverence for life, and the laws of kashrut then come later to give the Israelites some extra responsibility to role-model limited meat eating.ⁱⁱⁱ

By keeping kosher we may reduce the amount of life we take from this world, and we may frequently remind ourselves to revere all human, as well as animal, life. There are other rationales for some of the diverse dietary legislation that accumulates in Biblical and Rabbinic literature, there may be concerns for hygiene and Jewish separateness, but Jacob Milgrom identifies most convincingly an underlying rationale: to habituate reverence for life.

We might embrace kashrut on this basis, for it is a particularly progressive basis, in the following ways: it is contemporary and ethical, recognising the environmental damage, worsening of world hunger, and animal cruelty of much of the meat industry; it is a *universal* ethical voice, taking our role as a light to the nations seriously, seeing the laws of kashrut as a more detailed version of the laws given to Noah, to all humanity, to curb blood-lust, and suggesting that our rituals might impact the moral behaviour of those around us; it is built on the finest academic readings of our ancient texts, those of Jacob Milgrom, readings which are sophisticated in understanding that our ancient laws are an expression of our ancient narratives and ethical values- that kashrut brings the glory of Eden and the life-saving endeavour of Noah in the ark to your kitchen.

Embracing kashrut on this ethical basis would allow for a diversity of practices: some of us might go vegetarian or even vegan, seeing this as the ultimate habituation of a reverence for life, while others might gratefully embrace kashrut as a way to reduce meat-intake, perhaps reserving it for Shabbat, without entirely eliminating it. There are challenges posed by keeping kosher on the basis that it is an ethical practice. What happens if the traditional kosher practice of refusing to stun cows before a swift slicing of the neck turns out to be more cruel than other contemporary methods, to be unfit, unkosher, ethically? We then might have to face up to the responsibility of finding a way to bring the practice of the law in line with its spirit. The challenge of seeing and enacting kashrut as an ethical practice is the challenge of taking our ethical responsibilities seriously, without, frankly, being too judgmental. We might endeavour to make some of our community functions vegetarian, and to educate on ethical eating, and to understand that eating loads of kosher meat is perhaps not really keeping kosher, while always bearing in mind that we have some conflicting Jewish responsibilities, namely to enjoy life^{iv} and to try not to embarrass others^v.

I, for myself, want to remember the value of human life, and all life, whenever I buy, prepare or eat food. Reform Judaism is a progressive movement that is slowly progressing beyond a complete confidence that we'll get it right when left to our own devices- we have autonomy inevitably and unless we curb it in the right ways then we may cause harm. Jacob Milgrom, in explaining kashrut, raises a great question and provides a moving answer: if kashrut is about the value of life, then, "why a ritual? Could not the Bible have acted in a more ideological way, defined its concept of reverence for life and then left each individual free to live by it without the encumbering restrictions? The answer implied by the priestly legislation is that ideals are just abstractions, which humans may pay lip service to yet rarely actualise. All religions urge reverence for life though few adherents live by it".

We are reminded of the Stanley Milgram experiment and all it evokes. Keeping a degree of kashrut might be seen as a powerful inversion of this experiment: we habituate ourselves not to doing harm but to revering life, through everyday actions; we submit to an authority, not arbitrary or callous, but kind and just, and we hear that authority speaking through ancient texts and stories, and restrained action; and we see that small actions can change the world, for the better.

Contemplation

In his approach to kashrut, Benji emphasises the intellectual - his own engagement with certain thinkers about the bible and human nature. This is just one approach to the issue. There are multiple ways in which what we eat might contribute to a sense of religious identity, spiritual practice, and engagement with the wider world. If we accept as Reform Jews that we can reach differing levels of practice, can we all articulate our reasons?

ⁱ The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 can be found here, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/pittsburgh_program.html

ⁱⁱ *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1-16*, J. Milgrom, Doubleday, NY, 1991, p735

ⁱⁱⁱ Milgrom 718-36

^{iv} Palestinian Talmud, Kiddushin 4:12, suggests you will be judged for anything that you didn't enjoy in this life.

^v Bava Metzia 58b equates causing someone to blush to shedding blood.