

Parshat Reeh 8.11.18

Some rabbis argue that there is no reason given for the laws in the Torah other than to make us a holy people. Others argue that we are allowed to seek deeper meaning in these laws.

The laws of kashrut teach us that we are in control of what we put in our bodies. We also learn that not everything in the world is ours for the taking. Finally, we are reminded by these laws to have compassion for animals.

One of the features of the kosher kitchen is the separation between meat and dairy. The source for this total separation is a verse, repeated three times in the Torah - one of which is in our Torah portion - "Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother's milk".

You may know the joke that when God first says, Thou shalt not seethe the kid in its mother's milk, Moses turns to him and asks, "You mean no meat and dairy on the table at the same time?"

God replies, Thou shalt not seethe the kid in its mother's milk. Moses thinks for a minute, then inquires, "You mean we need two sets of dishes?"

God thunders, Thou shalt not seethe the kid in its mother's milk.

Now Moses tries again, "You mean we have to wait six hours after eating meat until we can have dairy?"

And God sighs, "All right, do it your way."

In truth the rabbis of the Talmud learn from the triple repetition -- a triple prohibition: 1) one may not cook meat with milk (say, for someone else to eat), 2) one may not eat meat cooked with milk and 3) one may not derive benefit from meat cooked with milk (for example you can't sell cheeseburgers).

Hence, the **Biblical** prohibition is meat and milk mixed together by means of the cooking process. The **Rabbinic** prohibition also extends to eating meat with milk, even if it is not cooked, for example, a salami sandwich with buttered bread.

Now you know that people wait different amounts of time between eating meat and then milk. One theory holds that three customs developed regarding eating meat and milk at separate meals because in Poland and Russia -- they waited 6 hours because they generally ate at 6:00 A.M., 12:00 P.M., and 6:00 P.M.

Germans waited three hours, because they were accustomed to two additional snack-times at 10:00 A.M. and 4:00 P.M.; and Scandinavians waited one hour because they enjoyed many small "nibble" meals during the day.

What I find interesting is the strange phrase that is used in the Torah, "Thou shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk." Why not just say don't eat milk and meat together? The usual explanation is that our Torah is adding the message of compassion in our Kashrut laws; God is also showing us the moral ambiguity involved -- in destroying animal life for our eating enjoyment.

Moreover, it is considered especially cruel to take the milk that is a gift, a life giving and nourishing drink given by the animal and then use it against the animal to kill its offspring.

Therefore, God limits our meat consumption, and formulates the prohibition of meat and milk in terms of sensitivity.

However, I once learned of a second lesson from Rabbi Shlomo Riskin. He began by saying that it was not a foregone conclusion that what an animal produces could be anything other than fleishig, or meat. Any product of a cow perhaps should be meat -- just as an egg could be meat as well.

By declaring milk from a cow as dairy and not meat, the Jewish tradition is saying that you can produce something different from yourself.

For example, the rabbis teach, children are not destined or doomed to repeat the vices of their parents, offspring can be different from - and better than their parents.

Perhaps that is why the repetition of the prohibition of boiling a kid, in its mother's milk, is in the book of Exodus/Shemot, which comes at the conclusion of a description of our three major national festivals (Exodus 23:19) -- and so close to the High Holidays.

The festivals are about changes in the seasons of nature -- and they are they are surely about the possibility of change in human nature.

There are many kashruth laws and I know that there are different practices and customs about what to keep.

Remember that kashruth is a reminder to us about being in control about what enters our body; it also teaches that not everything on this earth is ours for the taking; and the laws of kashrut are about compassion for other living creatures.

And in this season leading up to the high holidays -- they also contain a lesson about the possibility of change.

Shabbat Shalom.  
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