

For many years, my father of blessed memory, had a cartoon posted on his office wall. It came from an old issue of the *New Yorker*, and featured two pigs engaged in conversation. The caption read, “Personally, I wish the whole world were Jewish.” In his own hand my father drew a conversational balloon over the head of the second pig so that he might reply to his friend, “Yes, but a majority of them don’t keep kosher.”

It is certainly true that most Jews do not observe the laws of *Kashrut*; yet even among those who do not own two sets of dishes, do not buy kosher meat, and freely mix meat and dairy, there nevertheless remains a reluctance to eat pork. The majority of Reform synagogues do not maintain kosher kitchens, yet there, too, in most Reform congregations the sight of a baked ham is something of a rarity. What is it about *hazer* that is so taboo, particularly when so many Jews have jettisoned nearly every other aspect of our religious dietary laws?

This week’s *sedra* offers little insight into the revulsion occasioned by ham and bacon. *Parshat Shemini* simply includes pigs on a list of other forbidden species, including the camel, hyrax (a small mammal the Torah calls *shafan*), and hare (or *arnevet*, which in reality is not a rabbit, but a rodent). These four animals are specifically mentioned because they have one, but not both, of the necessary characteristics of kosher mammals. Camels, hyraxes and hares chew their cud, but do not have split hooves; pigs, on the other hand, have split hooves, yet do not chew their cud. The Torah does not heap any particular abuse on porcine flesh; instead the narrative merely observes, “מבשרם לא תאכלו ובנבלתם לא תגעו טמאים הם לכם -- You shall not eat of their flesh or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you” (*Leviticus* 11:8).

The neutrality and evenhandedness of the Torah’s prohibitions notwithstanding, the aversion to pork has long been a defining element of Jewish identity through the ages, one that was preserved even when all others had disappeared. In the wake of the forced conversion of Jews on the Iberian peninsula in the 15th century, many so-called “New Christians” refused to eat pork as one of the last signs of their secret loyalty to Judaism. Indeed, the pejorative term used to describe these crypto-Jews was “marrano” -- Spanish for “swine.”

Fast forward 500 hundred years to Israel, and one will find a deep emotional fault line running through Israeli society over the issue of pork. For many years, Israeli law banned pork from supermarkets -- not because most Israelis kept kosher, but as a concession to the leverage of the ultra-Orthodox in the *K'nesset*. Two years ago, however, the Supreme Court of Israel declared this blanket prohibition illegal. According to the ruling, neighborhoods were directed to conduct referendums regarding residents' feelings about the presence of pork in their midst. The Minister of the Interior at the time, Avraham Poraz of the secular *Shinui* party, praised the Supreme Court decision as "an important landmark in the struggle against religious coercion and for the sake of individual liberty." On the other hand, Eli Yishai of the Sephardic religious party, Shas, characterized the High Court's ruling as "one of the main nails in the coffin of Jewish identity in the country," while the secretary of the Degel Ha-Torah party, Rabbi Moshe Gafni (spelt differently and no relation to our own Rabbi Gaffney), accused the judges of "essentially destroying every good aspect of the Jewish People and eradicating the Jewish identity of the country." Even the Hebrew language has weighed in on the issue, for pork is referred to euphemistically as "*Bassar Lavan*" -- "white meat," which is about as vague and generic a term for pig flesh as one could possibly imagine.

According to Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom, an abhorrence of the pig was widespread in the ancient Near East. Many cultures considered it an impure animal, fit only for sacrifice to the gods of the netherworld. Archeological evidence suggests that while the Philistines, detested by Israel, used the pig for cultic purposes, the raising of swine ended abruptly when Israel gained ascendancy over the country. In fact Milgrom goes so far as to suggest that the second criterion for a kosher mammal -- the chewing of cud -- was deliberately added by *Leviticus* to exclude the pig specifically, for the absence of the cloven hoof was sufficient to eliminate the other mammals forbidden by the Torah.

By the time of the Hasmoneans the eating of pork was considered a betrayal of Judaism at the deepest level. In *Second Maccabees* we read of the martyrdom of Eleazer, an elderly and well-respected scribe, who refuses the command of Antiochus' soldiers to eat swine's flesh in public. "He welcomed death with glory rather than life with pollution, and of his own free will went to the rack," the ancient narrative tells us.

*Midrash* sought to explain the particularly deep aversion to pork by pointing out, that of the four non-kosher mammals specifically named in the Torah, pigs were the only ones to possess split hooves -- an obviously kosher characteristic -- while not chewing their cud, a trait that is far less visible, for to ascertain whether or not an animal chews its cud requires we observe its digestive tract in action. Thus, in *Midrash* the pig is viewed as an imposter of sorts. He gives the appearance of being a kosher animal by parading about on his cloven hoofs; but his internal character, out of sight and hidden away, is precisely what renders him *trayf*.

The explanation may be fanciful, but the term “pig” is hardly a flattering one. To be a “pig” connotes a lack of grooming and hygiene; to “live like a pig” is to reside with dirt and mayhem; to “act like a pig” is to engage in crude and boorish behavior, and to “eat like one” is to demonstrate gluttony or manners capable of turning the stomach of an onlooker.

Among the detractors of the Jewish people there were those who took our revulsion with pork and created from it a twisted and obscene anti-semitic motif. In the Germanic lands of the Holy Roman Empire, the pig was thrown back at Jews as a symbol of hate. From the 13th to the 16th centuries, Christian iconography adorned churches and public buildings with the scatological representation of Jews nursing at the teats of a sow. The depiction on the church at Wittenberg gained especial notoriety in 1543, when Martin Luther, in a virulently anti-Jewish tract, fixed on it to “prove” that the pig is the source of the Jews’ uncanny wisdom and power. By transforming an object of religious revulsion into one of veneration, much as the infamous blood libel did with blood, the *Judensau*, or “Jews’ sow,” as it was called, made our forebears appear less than human, accomplices of the devil and masters of black magic. How ironic to note the full circle traversed by history: from a Jewish revulsion with pigs because they were sacrificed to the gods of the underworld to medieval Christendom’s revulsion with Jews rooted in a mistaken belief that we worshipped pigs because we do not eat them!

But there is one more layer to add to this complex story . . . stunningly, we find in a *midrash* mentioned by the *Ritba*, the 14th century Spanish sage Rabbi Yom Tov ben Avraham, that states one day Jews will eat pork: “למה נקרא שמו חזיר? שעתיד הקב”ה להחזירו לישראל”

לעתיד לבוא -- Why is a pig called *Hazir* in Hebrew? Because in the world-to-come, the Holy One shall return it [*hozro*] to Israel” (*Hiddushei Ritba, Kiddushin* 49b). Beyond a play on words in Hebrew, the *midrash* is bizarre. Can the righteous among us look forward to bacon and egg breakfasts in the Garden of Eden? Will the holy and pure of the messianic age feast on Westphalian ham? (Presumably, ham and cheese sandwiches will still be taboo since they are, after all, a combination of meat and dairy . . .)

The deeper meaning of the *midrash*, however, has precious little to do with a greater selection of foods in heaven’s cafeteria. Should *Kashrut* as a spiritual discipline associate certain animals with undesirable human traits, our avoidance of certain foods on a symbolic level reminds us of the human characteristics the Torah would have us shun. If physically we are what we eat, then spiritually we are the sum of the religious teachings we ingest through learning and digest through practice. And if *midrash* speaks of a kosher pig in the world to come, it isn’t referring to the possibility of a rabbinically supervised Bono’s franchise in heaven, but rather the erasure of those unsavory characteristics we associate with pigs -- deception, dirt, boorishness. When human behavior is *kashered* at the end of days and freed of its *trayf* qualities, so too, will pigs become kosher . . . at least metaphorically.

There are many reasons advanced by tradition for keeping *kosher*. Divine imperative . . . a means of ensuring and retaining Jewish identity through the strictures of diet . . . self-discipline . . . a way of hallowing ordinary experiences and transforming the mundane into the sacred. These are all good reasons, of course. But to them we must add the ethical dimension of *Kashrut*, for on one level, the Jewish dietary laws are more than a non-rational and arbitrary set of rituals commanded by the Torah. That we do not eat birds of prey or those who feed on carrion carries with it a moral implication; that we do not mix milk, the stuff which nourishes and sustains life with a piece of meat that represents the absence of life also possesses an ethical dimension. And if Jews do not eat pigs, this, too, is emblematic of certain qualities we are taught to avoid.

These truths are real, but not literal. I do not mean to suggest that the consumption of pork leads to poor hygiene, or that abstention from sausage will invariably lead to a generation of Jewish children with spotless bedrooms. There are boors (or should I say boars) who keep *glatt* kosher, and highly moral individuals who are *glatt trayf*. Yet the laws of *Kashrut* challenge us to pay attention to that which we ingest, to that which we take from our environments and make part of ourselves. In the world of biology, that is called digestion -- but is there not a spiritual analogue, one with its own complex set of vitamins necessary for a well-nourished soul? *Kashrut* is not a primitive system of healthy diet, and the abstention from pork has nothing to do with trichinosis, a rather nasty parasite killed by thorough cooking. In a society of pork-barrel politics, however, there can be a trichinosis of the spirit, one that may be carelessly ingested given the materialism, greed, and shabby indifference with which so many treat their fellow human beings. We bring home the bacon, but in doing so, have we checked to ensure it is free of the contaminants and carcinogens of negative ambition, backstabbing and politicking. In powerful fashion, Judaism reminds us that in this world, what comes out of our mouths is a function of what we put in them.

And were we mindful of this, there might come an era of great civility and integrity, a time when compassion on the outside will flow from a wellspring of inner decency. May all of us live to see the age of the kosher pig, a day when the world itself will no longer be *trayf*.