

Parashat Shemini, 5776, 2016:

*Kashrut and Kedushah of the Body and Soul*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The final chapter of Parashat Shemini contains more than 20 *pasukim* (verses) that discuss various aspects of the Laws of *Kashrut*. Therein, the Torah gives us general guidelines for determining the status of kosher and non-kosher mammals, fish and insects, and seven verses listing specific species of birds that we are forbidden to eat. In short, it is very nearly a self-contained “handbook” for understanding these laws on the Biblical level.

In his commentary on *Sefer Shemot*, the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) presents a powerful argument for understanding the Laws of *Kashrut* from a spiritual perspective. He begins by examining the phrase, “And you shall be holy people to Me,” (22:30, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) and notes the following:

... and now that the Torah has come to the beginning of its examination of the Laws of Forbidden foods, it begins with the phrase, “And you shall be holy people to Me,” for in truth, it is proper and fitting that a person should be able to eat anything that would enable him to live, [therefore,] it must be the case that the prohibitions that exist regarding various foods are for the exclusive purpose of the spiritual purification of the soul. [This means] that one should eat pure foods (literally, *devarim nekiyim*) that will not produce a thickness and arrogance of the soul. As such, the Torah states, “And you shall be holy people to Me,” which means that I [G-d] desire that you [the Jewish people] will be holy people in order that you will be fitting to Me, [so you will be able] to cleave to Me for I am holy. Therefore, do not sully your souls through the eating of disgusting things ... [and in regards to a *treifah* (literally a torn animal)], while it is not revolting,

holiness ensues when one guards themselves from eating it. (Translation and brackets my own)

Rabbi Don Yitzhak Abarbanel (1437-1508) builds upon the Rambam's analysis and passionately advocates for the spiritual understanding of the Laws of *Kashrut*:

The Divine Torah did not come to heal the body or to promote physical health but rather to foster the health of the soul and to heal its afflictions. Therefore, the Torah forbade these foods because they have a deleterious effect on the pure and intelligent soul, breeding insensitivity in the human soul and corrupting its desires. This causes the formation of an evil nature that breeds a spirit of ritual impurity and banishes the spirit of ritual purity and holiness, concerning which David implored: "Do not take Your spirit of holiness from me!" (*Sefer Tehillim* 51:13).

(*Commentary* on Parashat Shemini, translation, Rabbi Yaakov Beasley with my underlining and emendations)

The Torah's emphasis on the role of *Hilchot Kashrut* as a means to achieve *kedushah* (holiness) and avoid spiritual defilement is explicitly demonstrated in our *parasha* regarding the prohibition of eating "creeping creatures that creep on the ground":

You shall not make yourselves abominable with any creeping creature that creeps, and you shall not defile yourselves with them, that you should become unclean through them. For I am the L-rd your G-d, and you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, because I am holy, and you shall not defile yourselves through any creeping creature that crawls on the ground. For I am the L-rd Who has brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your G-d. Thus, you shall be holy, because I am holy. (*Sefer Vayikra* 11: 43-45, underlining my own)

Closer to our own time, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the "Rav" by his students and disciples, translates the underlying concept of the Laws of *Kashrut* into the modern idiom. Rather than emphasizing the spiritual motif, however, he focuses upon the sanctification of the body that takes place as a result of following these laws. In doing so, he underscores their overarching significance for the Jewish people:

It is interesting to note that there is only one verse in the Torah that mentions prayer (*Deut.* 11:13), but there are many chapters that deal with dietary laws. It is easier for man to pray than to withdraw from food he desires. Man is ready to serve G-d spiritually, but resents any interference with his eating habits, or with the manner in which he gratifies physical or carnal needs... he resents being told that there are laws which guide him

concerning behavior not of the spirit, but of his body. The Torah is of the opinion, however, that it is impossible to hallow and inspire the spirit without disciplining the body. These *mitzvos* [i.e. the dietary laws] belong to the category of discipline of the body and its sanctification. What is forbidden here is overindulgence in satisfying human corporeal needs and drives.

The Rav stresses Judaism's respect for man's physical being and desires, in notable contrast to other religions. At the same time, however, he underscores the Torah's unequivocal insistence on sanctifying all aspects of our physical existence:

Judaism does not reject the body. The body is part of man and so is the spirit, the soul. But the body should not be that of a savage; it should be a disciplined body, one capable of refraining and retreating from certain actions that promise corporeal pleasure. The body must be sanctified and elevated.

It is in the context of his above-stated comments that Rav Soloveitchik notes the singular import of the Laws of *Kashrut*, "We have existed for almost two thousand years without a sanctuary [*Beit HaMikdash*], and the absence of its service has not affected the integrity of our people. If a Jewish community would reject *kashrus*, however, it would become assimilated in a few generations." (*Festival of Freedom: Essays on Pesach and the Haggadah*, J.B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler, Editors, page 137, all brackets my own).

Whether we focus upon the Laws of *Kashrut* from a spiritual standpoint (the Ramban and the Abarbanel), or from the viewpoint of the elevation of the body (Rav Soloveitchik), it is clear that each of these opinions lead to the pursuit of holiness. With Hashem's help, may we continuously strive to lead lives dedicated to *kedushah*, so that we may grow ever closer to Him. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.