



God-related, family-connected and animal-conscious: food in the Jewish tradition

Clive A Lawton

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

The author explains some Jewish food rules and offers advice on how to provide for Jewish guests.

It is probably true that most Jews cannot spend too long thinking about the realities of Jewish life without their thoughts turning to food. The old joke has it that Jewish festivals can be summed up as, 'They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat!' and, as with all good jokes, there's more than a grain of truth in it.

The Shabbat meals are famous glue for Jewish families, the Pesach (Passover) Seder – that remarkable meal/service as the festival begins – is almost every Jew's richest Jewish ritual experience and memory (besides personal lifecycle events of course), and all personal lifecycle events have their feasts or ritual foods. Even the great fast of Yom Kippur – no food or drink *at all* for 25 hours – is characterised not least by the meal before the fast and the gathering and fast-breaking.

It is probably also true that if you asked any regular person what they know about Jews, one of the first pieces of information they'll dredge up is 'Jews don't eat pork'. Let us for a minute set aside those who do – after all, not all Jews are scrupulous about Jewish rules – and consider where this rule comes from and its status.

It's not from the 10 Commandments. They don't contain one food rule. It's derived from one of the other 603 mitzvot in the Torah, making up the 613 Commandments in total. But even then, the Torah doesn't explicitly forbid the eating of pig meat. It forbids eating mammals without both cloven hooves and the capacity to chew cud. That includes pigs – but also horses, rabbits, camels, whales, kangaroos and many, many others only rarely served on British tables. The fact is that pork is no more forbidden, no more 'treyf' (the opposite of kosher), than horse- or whale- meat, or rabbit, just more famously so. The reason for this is more to do with the fact that Christians *do* eat pork. After all, in Muslim lands, Jews are not famous for not eating pork and Chinese folk wouldn't think to mention it as a particularly distinctive feature of Jews either.



The word 'treyf', 'non-kosher' – what does it mean? 'Kosher' means 'fit' or 'legal' or 'suitable' and can be applied not just to food but also to a properly written scroll of Torah or a properly built sukkah. But 'treyf' only applies to food. It means 'torn' or 'damaged' and it reveals a central principle of meat production and consumption in Jewish law. Animals must be carefully and precisely slaughtered by a skilled, highly trained slaughterer in a manner that causes the animal the least possible pain. So far, all the scientific evidence suggests that no other method causes animals less, and many of the popular methods cause much more. So obviously a Jew can't hunt for meat by shooting or spearing if he wants to stay kosher – and he can't even trap the animal to slaughter it if his trap causes the animal injury, because you cannot consume a previously damaged or injured animal – it's 'treyf'.

This is so important a principle that when our rabbis were determining what constituted moral, civilized, behaviour by non-Jews (who are, after all, not bound by Jewish law, but perfectly able to 'go to heaven' or whatever God's reward is), they determined this on the 'seven laws to the sons of Noah', as they are called, similar to several of the 10 Commandments, but with the distinctive addition of 'not eating meat torn from a live animal'. In the Jewish view, that's a component of basic human morality.

The slaughter of animals for kosher consumption, 'shekhita', is highly regulated. Kosher slaughterers are religiously trained and learned men. We cannot have the conveyor belt processing of meat, from living creatures to food. Animals must be looked in the eye by the slaughterer, the 'shokhet', who must pause between each slaughtering and carefully check and, if necessary, re-sharpen his knife. If there is the slightest nick in his knife or the slaughtering is not achieved in one swift stroke, the animal is not kosher and must be handed over to the non-kosher meat trade. It is true that this method produces a lot of blood – the blood pressure instantaneously drops in the brain – which is very distressing to any faintly squeamish observer, but we do need to admit that we are taking a life and not hide from the fact.

From time to time – about every 10 years or so – there are attempts in Britain to outlaw shekhita, but they fail each time because of the absence of any conclusive evidence that the system is any less than fully humane. However, this still does not prevent the current absurdity that kosher organic chickens cannot be labelled 'Organic', because the Soil Association objects to the method of slaughter used by Jews.

But 'kashrut' (from kosher – 'kosherness') doesn't just require the avoidance of certain animals – and fish and fowl – and the careful slaughtering of those permitted, but also the removal of as much blood as possible, the avoidance of non-kosher parts even of a kosher animal (those parts of the animal that used to be offered up when the Temple stood in Jerusalem), and then the total separation of all milk-based and meat-based foods – even in your mouth and gut. Three hours is the most popular British Jewish time lag between eating meat and dairy foods. Other communities keep between one and six hours. Kosher households will have separate cutlery, tablecloths, pots and pans, kitchen tops, washing-up bowls and so on. Kosher restaurants will either be meat or dairy based. The result of all this is that a kashrut observant Jew cannot eat thoughtlessly and can rarely go long without having to think Jewishly.

Of course a vegetarian like me sidesteps a lot of these issues, but not all. My vegetarianism is not drawn from Judaism, which has no such doctrine, except the view drawn from the Bible that the ideal paradisaical state for Mankind – Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – is vegetarian, but that's not here and that's not now. But I still choose my food carefully and would be much more disappointed in myself if I inadvertently ate something treyf than if I mistakenly ate something with kosher meat in it. (Checking food labels and ingredients is part of the Jewish way of life!) That's why some Jews prefer only to eat food which is sealed or approved by a recognized kashrut authority, which sends inspectors to the factories and



regularly carries out analyses and spot-checks of the food which is produced and approved under their auspices.

At this level of kashrut observance, non-Jews will probably not be able to provide cooked food for their Jewish guests, unless they get in a sealed re-heatable airline-type meal provision. Most such Jews will drink a drink with you – alcohol will do! – but not wine (too many complicated associations). A glass of whisky, a bottle of beer, some fruit juice would be fine. But just be careful of what you might pour it into. Having doubts about whether you last washed this cup with your bacon and egg plate in a bowl of soapy water means a disposable cup will almost always be safer.

Other Jews may be happy with carefully chosen vegetarian/dairy options – though they may still worry about your plates and the pots you cooked in – and of course, others will cheerfully eat whatever you put in front of them. The golden rule is – ask! I found myself terribly discomfited before my vegetarian days when someone drove miles and miles to buy a kosher chicken (how could I know if I respected the kashrut authority which my non-Jewish friend had chosen?) and then served it up garnished with chipolata sausages (non-kosher) and a dairy enriched sauce. If they'd been *trying* for treyf points, they probably couldn't have won more!

So food is God-related, family- and fellow- connected and animal-conscious. Celebrations involve feasting since feasting is a component of fellowship. Sometimes our food laws inhibit the easiest of social interactions with non-Jews – and that may be potentially one of their purposes. Ideally, Jews should remain self-consciously Jewish at all times. But most Jews don't want to isolate themselves from the world at large and a little creativity and thoughtfulness should overcome most apparent impasses.

Given this emphasis on food, what of fasting? There are several, usually minor, fasts during the year, all relating to historical catastrophes that have befallen the Jewish people. But the biggest and by far the most important is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is not a historically commemorative event and has little or no family resonance. On this day, the community comes together in a way unparalleled during the rest of the year, gathering in the synagogue for the opening evening service – from perhaps 7 until 9.30 pm. The next morning, services start again at about 8 or 9 am, and many stay in the synagogue all day until the fast finishes in the evening, at perhaps seven or eight o'clock.

Different suggestions are offered as to why we fast when we atone. Perhaps it's a kind of sacrifice, or maybe food would be an indulgent distraction. Others suggest that we are striving to be like angels – who, we are reliably informed, don't eat – but I prefer to think that we are reminding ourselves of our precarious vulnerability, just a hair's breadth away from mortality, for all our everyday illusions of dominating our world.

Food, its absence or presence, is always momentous and consequential and Jewish practice serves to accentuate that fact.

Editors' note

For more about the Jewish festivals referred to here, and many other religious festivals, see the Shap publication, *Festivals In World Religions* (2nd edition 1998, RMEP, obtainable from shap@c-of-e.org.uk, cost £21.50 including p&p). The book is written by a team of experts, many them members of the Shap Working Party.