

1st Day Rosh Hashana 5769
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Kashrut – It's Not Just the Meat We Eat But the Ethics Too!

I'm wrestling. Like so many of you here this morning, I am wrestling with my Jewish self. I am wrestling with a practice that I have made my own for the past 15 years and to be honest, I still do not have an answer. So, I thought I would present it to you this morning and ask you to wrestle with me. That's the beauty of being a Reform Jew – there is no "e-d" we're not Reformed Jews, we're not done wrestling with our identity and practice.

So what is it that I am wrestling with this morning? I'm wrestling with my observance of kashrut, or ritual dietary observance. Before you tune out because you might be thinking, 'this has nothing to do with me, because I don't chose to keep kosher', let me ask you to just stay with me for a few minutes, because actually, this very issue does have something to do with all of us. This issue has to do with ethics and the treatment of all of God's creation.

Let me first take you on a brief jaunt through my kashrut journey. Growing up, we never kept kosher at home. In fact, my parents can attest to this, when I was in middle school, I was in the finals of a spare-rib eating contest, flanked only by two football players from the Denver Broncos and holding my own! I loved lobster, crab and shrimp...ok until I became extremely allergic to it. And I never thought twice about ordering pepperoni pizza with my friends in school when we would go out to lunch. Jewish dietary laws were just never something that held any meaning for me. Until, that summer in High School when I went to Israel and came home wanting to keep kosher. Mom and Dad respected this decision but it was going to be me who would have to make the effort of not mixing milk and meat and not eat pork or shellfish, which sometimes meant, I made some alterations to my own meal when there might be sausage in the sauce.

It was not until I moved to Israel and had my own apartment that I fully engaged in the practice of Kashrut with separate dishes. Today, we have five sets of dishes – every day dairy and meat, Passover dairy and meat, and our china, which is dairy because many of Matt's and my friends when we were married were vegetarian. I learned quickly that keeping kosher was not so that everyone would eat in my home, because that would never be the case as my level of observance may not be to the standards of others who might be more orthodox. Rather, keeping kosher became a ritual which reminded me to consider that I am created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Therefore, it is important to consider all that I put in my body and how to make, even the most mundane act, a holy act. Keeping kosher for me personally has allowed me to stop before I eat, consider the holiness we find in the production of our food and that gift that God gives to us from the harvest in the field and the animals which we ritually slaughter so as not to cause suffering, because they too are holy.

Everything was going great for the past 15 years. I felt I was connecting to the larger Jewish community when I visited the Kosher market and bought my meat certified Kosher. I felt good thinking that these animals did not suffer in their death so that I might enjoy a good steak. I felt that I was able to appreciate that meat does not come neatly packaged in a Styrofoam and

cellophane wrapper, but that there was holy consideration as to the not so pretty realization of slaughter. But I was o.k. with all of this because I felt I was somehow elevating this act to a holy level. That was until the reports started coming out from the May raid on Agriprocessors Company who produce meat under the Aaron Brother's and Rubashkin label. My meat world turned upside down! But let me state right here, that I have not become a vegetarian, I still yearn for a good steak and chicken soup when I have a cold.

Here is what I am wrestling with, Kashrut, ritual dietary laws, go beyond how the food is prepared or slaughtered. True, the very basics of the dietary laws are such that we are told that we do not mix milk and meat, for the Torah teaches, you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. Biblically, this meant, don't offer sacrifices the way the surrounding nations do. Historically, it means, separate yourself from the other nations, you are special and your actions should represent that you belong to a holy nation. We are taught which animals we may eat of – those with split hooves and chew their cud; birds that are not scavengers; fish with scales and fins; and even what types of grasshoppers and locusts are acceptable – yes, you can have those chocolate covered grasshoppers.

But if kashrut is about how we separate ourselves apart in that we are a holy nation, there is a problem today that the largest producer of kosher meat is being investigated for accusations of unsafe working conditions, use of child labor, sexual harassment, failure to pay wages, the active hiring of undocumented workers, and cruelty to animals. And these issues go back not just to this past May, but they have been going on for years. In 2006, Agriprocessors paid a \$600,000 settlement to the Environmental Protection Agency to resolve wastewater pollution problems, and this past March it was assessed \$182,000 in fines for 39 state health, safety and labor violations. And since the raids in May, as the company has hired new workers, there are still allegations of unfair compensation and work conditions. New workers were told they would have to pay \$100 for housing for the first week and then \$60 every week thereafter only to find that they were having to pay \$100 for every week. Some new workers are finding unexpected deductions on their paychecks, such as service charges on withdrawals from the accounts the pay checks are deposited into. And those workers who were detained or were placed under house arrest, who never met a Jew before coming to Postville, Iowa, blamed all Jews for what has happened to them. Fortunately, some of those views are changing as Jewish groups came from Chicago and Minneapolis for an interfaith service and rally on the worker's behalf. It was a realization for the workers that the actions of a small group of Jews does not reflect the larger Jewish community's beliefs or practices.

I am wrestling beyond the Kashrut, I am wrestling with the allegations against Agriprocessors and the ethics of this company that is in the words of Hebrew National "answer to a Higher Authority."

While the final rulings have not been passed down as of yet, and we must respect our system that one is innocent until proven guilty, it does not stop me from wrestling with issues of not only humane treatment of animals, but also the fair treatment of the worker.

Our Torah teaches us, "You shall not abuse the needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or noncitizen in your communities." (Deuteronomy 24:14)

We are to stand up against injustice, whether it affects us or not. As the Jewish community, we stand by immigrant communities who, much like our own, have come to this country seeking a better life for them and their families. Often there are those who are seeking a safe haven from violence, war or poverty in their home countries. Remember, it was our grandparents and great grandparents who came to this country seeking the same opportunities immigrants seek today – a chance for a better life. Yes, we need to work toward comprehensive immigration reform to protect all. At the same time, it is not permissible and it is against Jewish law for us to take advantage of these workers.

What is extremely troubling with this situation is that Agriprocessors is a Jewish business whose reputation is not only tainting themselves, but the Jewish community as well. As Rob Eishman of the Jewish Journal wrote, “Of course, the image of bearded, black-hatted rabbis abusing farm animals and poor Guatemalan workers is red meat to the scattered anti-Semites out there, but this isn’t a problem of anti-Semitism.”^[1] And he’s right, this is a problem of holding ourselves up to higher standards and the practice of business and personal morality and ethics.

Sefer Hasidim, the *Book of the Pious*, written in the 13th Century on Jewish morals and ethics and regarded as a classic in Jewish ethical literature, reminds us of a number of business ethics we must adhere to. An employer must not impose superfluous hardship on employees and they may not demand the worker to exceed his or her capabilities or strength. An employer is not permitted to embarrass, insult, belittle or degrade an employee. And the employer is not permitted to withhold a worker’s pay in order to recover a debt. Providing employment is a most significant form of benevolence and placing a person’s job in jeopardy is considered an evil act. And these laws are equal on both sides. Just as the employer is to treat the employee with respect, so too is the employee to live up to high ethical standards. The employee is expected to render proper, capable and efficient service to the employer. The employee is not permitted to waste time, slack off in his or her performance, or engage in non-work related activities during the hours he or she is expected to be working. Jewish law does not favor the protection of any particular group, employer, or employee, rich or poor. Equal rights and justice is demanded from all parties.^[2]

Starting in the 1920s, the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union for Reform Judaism has affirmed its commitment to America’s workers. Some of this support has been in resolutions in support of unions safeguarding against inhumane treatment of workers and calling for the organization of unions. And there have been more resolutions and work in the Reform movement seeking equality in all worker’s rights issues such as religious discrimination, immigration reform, living wage ordinances, and pay discrimination.

And more recently, the Union for Reform Judaism has adopted resolutions on gender equality in the workplace and living wage campaigns. In the Union’s 1999 Resolution on Living Wage Campaigns, the Union called upon “our congregations and all arms of the Reform Movement to examine their employment and contracting practices to ensure that they reflect the spirit of this [living wage] resolution.” The 1999 resolution defined the “living wage” as no less than the poverty line for a family of four. What is considered a living wage can vary, depending on the cost of living in a given community, and is typically higher than the minimum wage, but it is generally calculated based on the assumption (whether or not it is true for a particular worker), that a worker is working full-time, year-round.^[3]

In 2005, the URJ passed a resolution continuing the call for employers to treat workers with dignity, be paid a living wage and to work in a healthy, safe and secure location.

The ethical treatment of employees affects each of us. Consider how many of us rely on domestic workers – those who clean our homes, provide yard work, and care for our children and our aging family members. There may be few laws to protect these workers, yet as we have examined this morning, there is a Jewish tradition that provides the values and ethical foundation to guide us as to how we treat the people whom we bring in to our homes and our lives.

Whether we are employers of large or small companies, whether we hire domestic workers in our home, we all “answer to a Higher Authority” and should ensure the ethical treatment of all workers. And even beyond employer-employee relations, we should ensure that we treat all people with dignity and respect.

How do we react to the barista when our coffee does not come out as ordered? Do we berate the individual for their lack of successfully fulfilling our order, or do we patiently ask to have the order corrected? How do we treat the person behind the counter at the grocery store or even our mail carrier? Are we rude to the telemarketer whose job it is to call our homes during the dinner hour, or do we just say, ‘no thank you and please remove me from your list.’

Viktor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor and psychotherapist wrote: “everything can be taken from a man but...the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Agriprocessors has made the choice to run their business in a manner that I do not feel exemplifies Jewish business ethical practices. However, they are the exception and not the norm. The conservative movement recently issued guidelines for a kosher certification program meant to supplement current kosher certification. This *kehsher tzedek* or certificate of righteousness will award companies who pay fair wages, provide a safe workplace, follow governmental regulations and treat animals humanely, just to name a few of the qualifications and there will be many companies that do fall under this certification.

Whether I choose to buy my meat from a kosher company that falls under the certification of *kehsher tzedek* or choose to not buy red meat for home; how each of us chooses to treat our employees and employers in an ethical manner; how we choose to use our awakening to consciousness toward fair and equal treatment for all; these are the fundamental issues we must examine in our lives and our community at this High Holy Day season. This is the time that we lay our actions out before ourselves and God and ask, have I treated everyone with dignity and compassion? Have I been fair in my treatment for all and what are the social choices I make in fulfilling my role as a part of the Jewish community and as a part of this holy nation?

Yes, I am wrestling and I am sure that many of us are regarding many social issues that challenge our religious and secular harmony. But this wrestling is what allows each of us to strive toward being better people each and every time our status quo is challenged. As Reform Jews, we wrestle with these social and ethical issues in order to seek a higher ground and maintain higher standards of secular and religious living. May each of us seek an ethical standard

that we can be proud of as we face social and ethical dilemmas and may each of us always remember, we do answer to a higher authority.

[1] “Eating Bambi” by Rob Eishman. August 5, 2008, Jewish Journal of Los Angeles.

[2] Business Ethics in Jewish Law. Zipperstein, Edward. KTAV Publishing House, Inc. New York, NY, 1983. p.115.

[3] http://urj.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=21406&pge_prg_id=57661&pge_id=1625