

I AM A SOUL

by Rabbi Label Lam

Avoiding the consumption of non-kosher food can bring one to holiness, as it states; "You are to sanctify yourselves and you will become holy, because I am holy and you shall not contaminate yourselves..." Leviticus 11:45

How does avoiding certain foods bring one into a state of holiness? Let's try one approach!

Here's a story that I thought I understood at first. There was a group of Jews who were part of a Nazi work force. They were given plenty of pork to keep them physically robust. One of the guards reported that there was a certain member of the group who was refusing to eat the non-kosher meat. The guards were infuriated.

They approached the room where the Jews were eating and noticed one fellow in the corner who had an empty plate before him. They confronted this fellow and demanded that he eat the meat there on the table or face immediate death. The fellow was startled and confused. He was about to reach out and take a piece of meat when he decided to refuse adamantly. They urged him again with the risk of death. This time without hesitation he emphatically refused. So they beat him mercilessly till he was left there in a heap broken toothed, bloody and half dead.

When the SS left the room his comrades gathered around him. They were amazed, not by his courage, but his seeming foolishness and hypocrisy. It seems they had picked on the wrong man who was positioned in a different corner. The fellow they had beaten was not a notorious observer of Jewish law and custom. He had just finished eating a full plate of the forbidden food (that was allowed for him in this situation to stay alive), and he would have eaten it voluntarily without conscience and without duress outside the concentration camp.

The fellow prisoners asked the broken and beaten man, "Felix, why had you risked your life and put yourself into this weakened state for a piece of meat you would otherwise have eaten gladly?" He looked up from the floor where he lay bleeding and said with certainty, "I never knew the value of not eating non-kosher food!"

When I heard this story, maybe it was the way it was told, I felt I understood perfectly. I told it over to my wife finishing with that dramatic retort, "I never knew the value of eating non-kosher food!" All I got was a blank stare from my wife who asked calmly, "What does that mean?" I repeated it again more emphatically, "I never knew the value of not eating non-kosher food!" My wife looked at me

with a look that seemed to say, "Louder doesn't make clearer" and asked again verbally, "What is that supposed to mean?" I was stuck for an explanation. I thought I had understood it earlier that day.

After a full cup of tea it occurred to me to explain it this way. Let's say we bought this house for \$158,000. Suppose, now, that one day two gentlemen with trench coats, wing tip shoes and four heavy suitcases appear at our door. We invite them in. They claim to have been sent by EXXON Corporation and they would like to make us an offer we cannot refuse. Opening the suitcases, our eyes are treated to more cash than any of us have ever seen or dreamt of. "Mr. and Mrs. Lam, we would like to offer you 8 million dollars cash for your home!"

Our initial reaction is to celebrate and acquiesce, but a second wave of thought brings my wife and I into "the other room" for a private discussion. The reasoning goes like this; "If they want our little house for 8 million dollars, they know something we don't about this property. It must be worth billions!" Returning, we refuse the tempting offer with conviction and gusto!

When this fellow was confronted with a choice of eating the pork or dying, his first reaction was to easily agree. However, when he thought a little further he must have reasoned that if they are so insistent that I eat that grisly meat for the price of my life, then there must be something about not eating non-kosher food that is more precious than life itself.

(Though one is generally not bidden to give one's life for not eating non-kosher food, if the oppressor intends to test one's religious mettle then every detail of Judaism, even a small custom, becomes an issue worth dying for.)

Every time a Jew curbs his initial instinct and defers to the user's manual putting only kosher fuel in his tank, he declares that he is the driver of his life, not that he is driven. When refraining from non-kosher food stuffs I am not only affirming, "I have a soul" but that, "I am a soul!"

Good Shabbos!

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