

PARSHAS MISHPATIM - CHEESEBURGERS FOR DUMMIES

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Cheeseburgers for Dummies¹

When pressed to hazard a guess as to why the Torah imposed so many kashrus laws, most of us are quick to talk about the effect that ingesting certain animals can have on our personalities and neshamos. We do so for good reason. In speaking about at least one group of forbidden animals, the Torah expresses itself this way explicitly: "Do not make yourself abominable[2]," and "Do not contaminate yourselves[3]." Eating non-kosher items changes our inner selves.

This theory breaks down in regard to the prohibition of mixing meat and milk. It breaks the mold. First of all, the Torah forbids us to even prepare the mixture (by cooking), even divorced of consuming the mixture. Clearly, something more is behind the prohibition than the effect that eating it will have on our inner lives.

Secondly, the Torah is exceedingly strict with regard to the meat/milk mixture. We are enjoined from receiving any benefit whatsoever from the mixture. We cannot even sell it or gift it to a non-Jew. Even its ashes remain forbidden if it is burned!

We then remember that we have come across other foods whose impermissibility has nothing to do with some noxious quality that is imparted by partaking of them. This second class of prohibitions bans certain items because of what they symbolize, rather than what they are. These include the gid hanasheh, the sciatic nerve that Yaakov injured in his struggle with Esav's angel, and chametz on Pesach.

Our suspicions are confirmed when we note the similarity of the meat/milk interdict to some others. Several other prohibitions deal with mixing two objects together, such as growing two species of plants together, or cross-breeding animals, or hybridizing plants, or mixing two species of animals while working them, or mixing wool and linen together in a garment. The meat/milk rule seems similar to them.

These, in turn, remind us of an even larger group of prohibitions that all grow out of a single word in Bereishis: l'mineihu - according to their kind. This word, repeated several times in the story of Creation, sets down for us the Great Law of the Species. It tells us that there are no accidents in a world created by the Will of G-d. Beyond the apparent randomness of the discernible laws of Nature stands an overarching law designed by the Creator. Every species of plant and animal has a place and function. We do not always fathom the purpose of any one life form, but we understand that

Hashem's engineering is deliberate and profound. There is no fuzziness in His Creation. Whatever roles Hashem assigned may be permanent and immutable. As His people, we are charged with preserving for the world the sense of wonder and sanctity that beholding His handiwork ought to inspire. We are not going to be the ones to remove what may be a necessary cog in the larger machine of Creation.

Upon further reflection, however, we realize that only some of the "mixing" prohibitions make real changes in Nature. Those prohibitions concern cross-breeding animals and hybridizing plants. That still leaves a number of others we mentioned above unaccounted for. Those prohibitions mix diverse species without interfering with a law of Nature, because they do not produce any real change.

It is reasonable to conclude that those prohibitions take the Great Law of the Species one step further. They teach us not to mix different kinds in the way we make use of the world. As we go about our lives attempting to carry with us His mission of elevating the world and everything in it, we must be careful to discern the place and role of all elements of Creation. When we are immersed in G-d consciousness, we see in the different parts of Creation not only a fixity of simple existence, but we detect different potentials for carrying Hashem's message to humanity. The Torah wants us to be careful not to erase the differences between the various tools and potentials that He created for us.

The meat/milk prohibition is a wonderful exemplar of this realization. There is nothing spiritually unhealthy about either meat or milk. Combining them, however, blurs the distinction between what meat and milk represent to us symbolically. Moreover, their mixture represents moving in a trajectory opposite of what the Torah prescribes for us.

The most basic functions of life are nourishment and reproduction. Plants do just fine in these areas. Add abilities of locomotion and primitive consciousness to these plant functions, and you get an animal. Animals have their plant-like aspects, in that they, too, reproduce and then nourish the offspring that they bear.

Milk, the substance that mammals come equipped with to nourish their young, symbolizes this plant-like facet of the animal world. Through muscle tissue - meat - the animal locomotes, moving its plant-like potential from place to place. In effect, the uniquely animal part, i.e. the ability to locomote, is pressed into the service of the more basic functions of reproduction and nourishment. It is an example of a higher, more advanced potential serving a lower one, rather than the reverse. This combination is reenacted every time we combine meat with milk.

Humans add a third level - deep and discerning thought - to the other functions. This gives Man the gift of free will, which allows him to make responsible moral choices, which is what life is all about.

Man's very posture points to the way the three parts of Man are to function. The digestive and reproductive functions occupy the nethermost parts of his torso; atop them are the animal-like functions. Sitting atop both is the head, seat to the uniquely human capability of penetrating intellect. Man's structure suggests a mandate, that his human gifts master the lower functions.

Under no circumstances should his mind and thought become the lackeys for the advancement of the goals of his lower instincts. Those must always look upward for guidance. This is the opposite of what happens in animals, which in turn is symbolically expressed through combining milk and meat: the two functions are joined, but the lowest prevails.

Distancing Man from the unholy alliance of the animal nature pressed into the service of the plant is vital to his progress. The Torah does not stop at banning ingesting such material. Instead, the three places in which meat/milk is banned each refer to a different way of using them. They may not be eaten; they may not be cooked, prepared. Indeed, subverting the higher potential of the animal is so foreign to the message of the Torah, that any benefit at all from such an alliance is forbidden to us.

It is no accident that the three mentions of a meat/milk mixture each come at the conclusion of a major section of law. Each mention is a suitable summary of the law, pithily reminding us that Man's purpose places Reason above all other functions. This statement is especially appropriate at the end of a section like Mishpatim. Enforcement of so many of the social statutes in our parsha cannot be left to human agencies in so many cases. They are effective only when Man keeps in front of him a mission statement placing all his resources at the disposal of his highest function - the polar opposite of what happens when we mix meat and milk.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Shemos 23:19
 2. Vayikra 11:43
 3. Vayikra 11:44
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