A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Shemini)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

Several years ago, we ran a couple of back-to-back Isralight weekend retreats in Orlando, Florida, which afforded me the opportunity to take a long-overdue vacation with my family in Disney world. For our children, who had just spent the better part of a year dealing with the day to day challenges of living in Israel post-Oslo, and especially watching their father constantly in and out of the army reserves, Disney World must have seemed like a fantasy world, and I was most curious to see how they would respond to the many educational challenges Disney World presented.

At the end of our first fun-filled day, as we were making our way out of the park we passed through the shops and gift stores strategically situated at the exit. The Disney company cleverly places all of the toys and treats right near the park exit, and I am sure many a parent, anxious to get back to their hotel rooms after a long day on their feet, succumb to children's desires for one last treat. My children were no different, and as we neared the park (and candy store) exit, they grabbed candy bars and lollipops off the easy-access racks, with eyes full of pleading for one last treat at the end of a fun-filled day.

I noticed a girl behind the cash register smiling as she eyed the familiar sight of a parent debating whether to allow one last indulgence in order to avoid the battle of wills that would obviously ensue in the event I had other ideas about my children's desire to fund our local dentist.

However, glancing quickly at the various treats in my kids' eager hands, it was quite obvious that none of the candies and treats had any seal of kashrut (thank G-d...!), and I promptly told my children that the candies weren't kosher, at which point they put all the candy back on the racks. I didn't really think much of this little scene until I looked up and saw the shocked look on the face of the cashier.

"What did you just tell them?" she asked.

She was looking with particular disbelief at our then four-year-old Adi, who had immediately deposited her 'horde' of sweets back into the rack.

I wasn't sure what she meant: "What do you mean?"

To which she responded:

"Every day, I watch hundreds of parents either give in or do battle with their children over whether or not to buy the candies that they want. You wouldn't believe some of the shouting and crying matches that take place here at the end of the day. In fact we sometimes get letters asking us to move these racks for that very reason. But in the entire year I have been working this shift I have never seen children so calmly place the candy back on the racks, so I was wondering what you told them that made them all change their minds?"

At which point I explained: "We are Jewish, and I told them this candy isn't Kosher." Adding: "And please don't tell the Park to put kosher candy here...!"

For me, the entire Disney experience was worth it for that one moment. I had never really considered what an extraordinary vehicle Kashrut is, in teaching children the value of self-restraint.

But in truth, this does not really resolve some of the many challenging questions that arise regarding the concept of *kashrut* in general, and kosher food in particular.

This week's portion, *Shemini*, contains one of the most central mitzvoth in Jewish life: the mitzvah of *Kashrut* (keeping kosher).

"Dabru' el B'nei Yisrael le'mor: zot ha'chayah asher tochlu mi'kol ha'be'hemah asher al ha'aretz: Kol mafreset parsa ve'shosa'at shesa, prasot ma'alat gerah' ba'be'hemah, otah' to'chalu'...."

"Speak to the children of Israel saying: these are the creatures that you may eat from among all the animals that are on the earth: Every animal that has a split hoof and chews and brings up its cud, that (is the animal) you may eat...." (VaYikra (Leviticus) 11:2-3)

Specifically, the Torah shares with us here what we can and cannot eat: which fish, birds and animals are parts of a Jewish lifestyle, and which are in fact anathemas to it. All of which begs the question: why are we so concerned with what we eat?

Would we not be better served focusing on what comes *out* of our mouths, and worrying a little less about what goes *into* them? Why is *kashrut* so important?

For example, Jewish tradition teaches that in addition to not eating meat and milk together, one is meant to wait a number of hours after eating meat, before again eating dairy products. When someone has eaten meat and is not yet able to eat dairy, the colloquialism is that he is 'meat' or fleishig'. Once he can eat milk products again, the vernacular describes him as 'milchig' or 'milk'.

Rabbi Avraham Twerski shared that once, when he was a little boy about five years old, he desperately wanted an ice cream. His mother responded to his fervent request by telling him he was 'fleishig', or 'meat', to which he immediately responded:
"Give me an ice cream and watch how fast I can become 'milchig' ('dairy')!

What is the nature of this particular mitzvah and our seemingly obsessive pre-occupation with it?

There are many questions regarding the mitzvah of kashrut, and while time and space will not allow us to deal with all of them, there are at least a few worth considering.

First of all, why are some animals, such as 'lions and tigers and bears' (oh my!) rendered unkosher, whereas others, such as cows and sheep and deer, are considered kosher for eating? After all, meat is meat; are we a holier people eating cow burgers than we would be if we had pork chops?

And what about the way in which we determine which animals are kosher? Imagine you were in the desert, and extremely hungry (but your life was not in danger as you could then eat anything....) and an animal wandered across your path but you were not sure whether it was in fact a kosher animal.

Assuming you had a handy-dandy set of ritual slaughter knives with you and knew all the laws of ritual slaughter (*shechitah*) such that you could render this animal able to actually be eaten (kosher only means something is potentially able to be used, but there still might be a process such as *shechitah*-ritual slaughter, needed before meat might actually be eaten), there are two signs the Torah gives us which would allow you to determine whether indeed this was actually a kosher animal:

It must have split hooves, and it must chew its cud. Think about it; in order for an animal to be considered kosher it must digest its food, subsequently regurgitate it, and then chew it and digest it all

over again. Why on earth is this the measure of an animal being kosher? How does eating animals that literally eat their own regurgitation make us, somehow, a 'holier people' *(Vayikra* 11:45)?

And this is not enough, it is not considered kosher unless the animal also has split hooves; what is so special about split hooves?

What is the significance of these two details, and what on earth have they to do with being Jewish? Why are we so obsessed with what we eat?

Even more perplexing are the instances where food items that are technically kosher become unkosher simply through 'guilt by association'.

Take for example, super-duper kosher meat. Years ago, meat was either kosher, or *glatt* kosher. *Glatt*, which is Yiddish for *chalak*, or 'smooth', refers to a particular law that Sephardic Jews view as obligatory and some Ashkenazi Jews may adopt as an added stringency.

Technically speaking, if a kosher animal is actually riddled with diseases or internal blemishes that would cause it to die an unnatural and untimely death, it is deemed unkosher (called '*Treif*') even though it is properly ritually slaughtered. The classic example is an animal that is mauled before death; technically we are meant to eat meat that is killed through ritual slaughter, and not meat which would have died anyway.

One specific example of a sign of '*Treifut*' are lesions or bubbles on the lungs of large animals, however, one cannot know whether an animal indeed had such lesions until after it is slaughtered and opened up, and the question is whether you are then obligated to check the lungs (feeling whether they are smooth, hence the name *glatt* or *chalak*) or whether you can rely on the assumption (known as a *chazakah*) that they were indeed smooth as most animals' lungs are.

It is worth noting that meat which was *not* checked in this fashion (i.e. not *glatt*), is post facto considered kosher meat by all the authorities. This law, or *halacha*, applies only to large animals; there is no such thing as glatt kosher chicken, and certainly the occasional packaging indicating glatt kosher pizza or even (as I once encountered on an airplane) glatt kosher water is ridiculous.

Later, someone came up with the concept of calling meat 'mehadrin' which means extra-special (or extremely beautiful), and I imagine this was the result of a need to classify a particular rabbinic supervision some felt to be extremely vigilant. Still later, I started seeing restaurants and meats packaged with the title 'mehadrin *min* ha'mehadrin', or 'the most special of the special'. And recently I came across a restaurant in Meah She'arim (a Jerusalem neighborhood) with the grandiose sign on its window: "***super*** mehadrin *min* ha'mehadrin"!

So imagine you have decided to go all out, and you are serving this super-duper kosher (!!) meat. And imagine you also have super kosher milk.

There is in fact such a thing as kosher and non- kosher milk. It goes without saying that pig's milk (and milk from an unkosher animal) is not kosher. But there is a long-standing tradition which many still follow to only drink milk from either a Jewish dairy (such as in Israel) or from a dairy where rabbinic supervision oversees the milking to ensure that no pig's milk is being passed off as cow's milk.

(Today, there are many rabbis that consider this law as no longer necessary, since it would be so against the interest of a dairy to risk using pig's milk for obvious financial reasons, however, this is not necessarily true for milk shipped in from some countries like Mexico, where pig's milk may be much

cheaper to produce, and there are also many authorities that consider this a tradition that cannot be broken...)

So you have this super-kosher milk, and super kosher meat, and a little milk accidentally spills inside the pot with the meat, and the entire pot is rendered unkosher! Why? Why isn't this mixture extra-super duper kosher? Didn't anybody ever tell G-d it all gets mixed up inside anyway? What can possibly be the purpose of this need to separate milk and meat?

In order to respond to some of these issues, we first need to arrive at an understanding regarding mitzvoth (commandments) in general, as well as the relationship between our understanding of them, and our obligation to fulfill them.

As we begin, there is an underlying premise that needs to be understood. While the attempt to understand why we do what we do is indeed valuable, as we shall see, it is important to distinguish between the relationship we develop with mitzvoth, and the underlying reason we fulfill them.

There are really three different categories of mitzvoth as distinguished by the Torah: *Mishpatim*, *Toroth* (sometimes called *Mitzvoth*), and *Chukim*.

A *Mishpat* is a law, or mitzvah, that is readily comprehensible, and which we most probably would have come to on our own, even without the Torah. Theft, as an example, is a law found in many societies, who arrived at the logical and practical conclusion that it is in the interest of society to have a social contract preventing one person from taking that which belongs to someone else.

A *Torah* is a mitzvah, which we would most probably never have arrived at on our own, but which is eminently logical once considered. Shabbat, as an example, which suggests the value of one day of rest a week, is something which we might not have considered on our own, but once the Torah gave us this mitzvah, is quite easily understandable, which may be why so much of the world influenced by Judaism has adopted this practice in one form or another.

A *Chok*, however, is a law which is completely incomprehensible, and which we most certainly would never have adopted but for the fact that the Torah commands us to do so. A fine example is the prohibition of *Sha'atnez*, which precludes us from wearing wool and linen in the same garment. Or the mitzvah of *Parah Adumah*, the red heifer, which, in the time of the Temple (the *Beit HaMikdash*) allows those who have come into contact with a dead body on some level, to become pure through a ritual using the ashes of a burnt red heifer. There are many who assume that because *Chukim* are commandments which are impossible to completely comprehend, that it is somehow misguided or even wrong to attempt to fathom the principles guiding them.

The ***Sefer HaChinuch*** (Book of Knowledge), in addressing this issue suggests that there are those who will say: *"Tzaddik be'emunato' yichyeh", "a righteous person lives by his faith alone*", meaning that ours is not to question why.

"To them do I respond", says the **Chinuch**:

"*K'sil ba'choshech ye'halech", "A fool walks in darkness"!*

In other words, just because there are things we cannot understand does not mean we should not try to explore the message at all. Indeed, even **Maimonides**, in discussing these *Chukim*, (see the end of *Hilchot Me'ilah*) suggests:

“Ve’ra’uy le’hitbonen bahem.”
“It is worthy to examine them....”

This leaves us with a very important distinction: what we are exploring here is not the *reason* for fulfilling the mitzvoth. Indeed, if I was to discover tomorrow that everything we will suggest here is in fact completely mistaken I would still continue to eat kosher food. The *reason,* on a personal level, I ‘keep kosher’ is not because it makes sense to me. The *reason* for fulfilling a mitzvah is a belief that the mitzvah is given to me by G-d. If I believe Hashem (G-d) created me and loves me, and wants only the best for me, then once I believe mitzvoth are essentially a communication from G-d, it goes without saying that I want to fulfill these mitzvoth.

(*The question of whether the Torah is a Divine communication, a critical question, to be sure, is beyond the purview of this article.)*

This actually is part of an important question, which speaks to the nature of our relationships in general, and that is the question of trust. Perhaps the most important part of any healthy relationship is the level of trust that exists between its partners.

The more I love someone, and know that they love me, the more I am willing to trust them. And this means that when someone I love deeply asks something of me, I trust them enough to believe they would never want to hurt me, and this is certainly true of one’s relationship with G-d.

Indeed, very often, our hesitation to fulfill what we perceive G-d to be asking of us is either because we do not really believe (or temporarily ignore) the fact that it is actually Hashem who is doing the asking, or we do not completely trust that G-d wants what is best for us. And while this is also a separate topic for discussion, it is at least important to note that what we are exploring then, is not the reason for fulfilling mitzvoth. That is purely a matter of faith.

The question we are considering here is, given that I believe there is a reason to fulfill mitzvoth, how important is it for me to develop a *relationship* with those same *mitzvoth*?

The question is not what I need to give to a *mitzvah,* but what a *mitzvah* gives to me. In truth, this relates to what a *mitzvah* is all about. Many translate the word *mitzvah* as ‘commandment’, a word that does not exactly engender a desire to deepen a relationship with either the commandment or the commander. But mitzvah is also related to the word ‘*tzavta*’ which means togetherness, as well as the linguistic form *‘tzivuy’*, also known as the imperative. (I.e. when I want to tell someone in Hebrew to sit, I say “*shev*!” or “*sit!*’ which is known as the *tzivuy* or imperative form.).

Perhaps then, a *mitzvah* is an imperative, which allows me to come together with myself, the world around me and with G-d. All of which leaves us wondering how a *mitzvah* does this?

There are various ways of viewing a *mitzvah* and understanding its message, but the one that comes most to mind is that of the **Rambam** (Maimonides) in the *Moreh Nevuchim,* the Guide to the Perplexed.

The Rambam suggests that the first question is to define the goal: what is our goal as a Jewish people? Why do we even need a Jewish people?

Jewish tradition teaches that we are meant to be an “*Or la’Goyim*”, a “Light unto the Nations”, to quote the prophet Isaiah. Somehow, we are meant to be partners with G-d in creating a more ethical world, and in order to do this we have to become ethical role models, both as a nation, and as individuals.

Now, every goal has to have a system. If you want to elect a president, for example, you can't just run into the streets and scream "elect George..." you have to have a system. And in a successful system, every piece of every stage of that system is a part of achieving that goal.

So, if the goal of Judaism is a more ethical world, and mitzvoth are the system by which we achieve that lofty goal, then it stands to reason that every single piece of every mitzvah carries with it an ethical message that is designed to make me a better person and the world a better place.

Rabbeinu Bachya Ib'n Pekudei suggests in his monumental work the ***Chovot Ha'levavot***, it is a necessary part of the fulfillment of any mitzvah that I involve not only my body with its performance , (whether tying tefillin with my hands or eating matzah with my mouth), but my mind as well. The challenge of developing a relationship with a mitzvah to the extent that it becomes a part of my journey to becoming a better human being lies in finding the ethical messages that are hidden within the practical ritual of any given mitzvah.

As an added piece of food for thought, **Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch** suggests that because symbols are abstract and do not usually adequately communicate the message of a given mitzvah, the Torah uses symbols which help us to elucidate the messages hidden within.

For example, when a driver approaches a stop sign, the most important detail is to know that he has to stop. But the reason the sign is red, is because studies have shown that subconsciously, the color red is associated with danger, and actually causes a person to slow down. So, if a person took the time to slow down and consider the nature of the *symbol* of a red stop sign, he would gain a message that would most probably make him a more careful driver.

And this is our challenge; Judaism wants us to slow down and appreciate the messages that these mitzvoth hold. All of which, finally, brings us back to kashrut.

Why do we choose not to eat certain animals? What meanings are hidden in the strange signs that tell us when an animal is and isn't kosher? Why does the Torah tell us not to mix milk and meat? Most of all how does the fulfillment of all the details of this complex series of mitzvoth make me a more ethical person, and the world a better place?

One of the challenges we face as human beings is the constant tension that exists between the physical and spiritual aspects of who we are. On the one hand, we are physical beings not really much different from animals. We need to eat and sleep and in general have needs without which we cannot function. In the end, these needs and desires limit us and challenge us with the perspective that if we are not really much more than animals, then we are physical beings in a physical world, and might as well enjoy ourselves.

On the other hand, there is a side of who we are which goes far beyond the physical. The definition of all things physical is that they are limited (hence G-d cannot be physical because he would be here and not there), but there is a side of us that goes beyond the physical; the part of our selves that yearns to give and to love, and to grow spiritually. These things have no limits, and they are a reflection of the fact that we are created in the image of G-d, and are in a partnership with G-d to create a world where the limited reality we see, gives way to the unlimited reality, which awaits only our perception.

This tension between the physical and the spiritual, the limited and the unlimited, is perhaps the greatest challenge of our journey here on earth.

Ultimately, Hashem created us with this tension, but yearns for us to rise above our limitations, channeling even the physical sides of our beings towards the unlimited-ness of a relationship with G-d

and a higher purpose. And in truth, this is the same yearning we have in all of our relationships. We long for our children to rise above their physical limitations and connect with a higher purpose, just as we hope our partners and significant others succeed in getting beyond the physical, narrow and limited outlook on life and see a much higher and unlimited reality.

We don't want our children to thin k that only strength, height, and speed are important, but that there are values and gifts that go far beyond those limited in the physical, and we hope that in building relationships of love, that our partners are not stuck in how much we earn, how big our homes and cars are, or for that matter how old we look, but rather that they succeed in getting in touch with who we really are, sharing our dreams and not just our S.U.V.'s.

There is, however, one reminder that in the end, on a certain level, we are still physical, limited beings. The great reminder that in the end we are mortal beings is death. And with this reminder, and the specter of its approach, comes the danger of considering that if in the end, we are here today and gone tomorrow, then what is the point? Why not just "eat, live, and be merry, for tomorrow we die"? Indeed, **Ernst Beckett** in his Nobel Prize winning book *Denial of Death*, makes this very point. He suggests that much of what we do is colored, often subconsciously, by our desire to deny our own mortality.

Thus, Judaism takes very seriously the impact of our contact with death, and every time we come into contact with death the Torah has us take pause and consider the implications. This is true of our mourning process, where Jews do not immediately go from the cemetery back to the board-room, but take seven days of *Shiva* to process and consider the implications of such an intensely physical experience. The laws of *Niddah* (for women) and *Zav* (for men) are also a reflection of this idea. Essentially, the woman's menstrual cycle is a breakdown of the uterine lining, and represents the loss of what might have been potentially the creation of life (as is true of a man's un- natural seminal emission), and Judaism suggests that this contact with death deserves its time. Indeed, the end of this process has the person who has been through this experience immersing in the waters of the *mikveh*, the Jewish ritual pool, because water represents life (as it gives life), and ultimately, after a period of consideration and reflection, death always gives way to life.

Meat, in the end, represents death. Not only because an animal has to die for us to eat it, but also because the flesh is such a strong physical symbol of our own mortality.

Originally we were not meant to eat meat, as a close look at the Torah makes abundantly clear. In *Bereishit* (Genesis) 9:3, as a part of the new, post-flood Noachide laws, G-d tells Noah after the flood that man may now eat from animals, saying that we can eat meat "*just like the vegetables and grasses*" a direct reference to G-d's initial statement to Adam (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 1:29-30) where human beings were permitted to eat "*vegetables and grasses*", whiles meat from animals was expressly forbidden.

Indeed, the fact that what was once forbidden (meat) is now permitted, suggests that the events leading up to the flood were the background for this change, implying that because we sunk to such a level of evil, we would now be better off eating meat (perhaps as an outlet for human violence?) but that in an ideal world we would be vegetarians.

However, we pay a price for the fact that we now come into contact with death on such an intense level, and as such, if we are going to eat meat, at least, suggests the Torah, we should consider carefully what sort of meat we do eat. And this is why all the meat which is Kosher, comes from animals which are themselves *herbivores*.

Jews do not eat carnivorous animals, either because on a mystical level we are better off not taking into ourselves the energy of animals that kill other animals (a much more intense contact with death...) or

because by choosing to eat only herbivorous animals we have the opportunity to struggle with the moral messages which are the basis for this decision.

Interestingly, **Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch** suggests that this may well be the reason why one of the signs of a kosher animal is that it chews its cud, which is the mark of a much more complex digestive system, itself necessary to allow an animal to eat and digest an herbal diet. (It is much easier, and indeed more 'base' for animals, including our selves, to digest meat.)

And, some zoologists have suggested that the hoof least likely to be used as a weapon (the mark of a carnivore...) is indeed the cloven hoof.

As for the mixing of milk and meat, (a topic that could be the subject of its own), it is worth noting that while meat in the Torah represents death and cruelty (as with *Eisav*, who is the man of the hunt and is the epitome of cruelty and destruction in the Torah), milk represents mercy and life.

Indeed the image of the baby suckling at the mother's breast is the literary and biblical excample par excellence' of mercy. And this may well be the message behind the Torah telling us not to mix these two items.

We live in a world where man is everything, and we have the power to create and destroy on levels previously not even imaginable. It behooves us to remember that while we may have a clear idea of what is right and what is wrong, sometimes what we perceive to be kind may really be cruel, and what we deem to be cruel may really be kind.

For example, King Saul (in the book of Samuel) cannot kill Agag, the Amalekite King, despite the evil kingdom he spawned. Seeing the once mighty king desperate and begging, Saul cannot bring himself to kill Agag. But tradition tells us that this same Agag is the ancestor of *Haman* the *Agagite*, of Purim fame, who very nearly butchers the entire Jewish people in what would have been the first true holocaust, as a result of Saul's 'merciful' act. So what we may perceive to be kindness may actually be tremendous cruelty. This is a struggle many Israeli soldiers struggle with. As an example, acting on my conscience in not killing an Arab rock-throwing child fifteen years ago, may well have been a merciful act. But who knows where that child may have ended up? And if that child ended up being one of the bombers who killed innocent civilians, was the original act kind or cruel?

Every time we sit down to a meal, or choose to wait a few hours before eating dairy products, we have the enormous opportunity to consider these questions and ideas. And every time we succeed in making this a part of our every-day experience we allow ourselves, on some small level, the gift of becoming better and more sensitive human beings, which of course is the goal of the entire process.

May we all be blessed to be partners in transforming the world we live in which has seen so much cruelty, into a place of love and kindness, joy and peace, one day at a time until we can all partake of that magnificent BBQ in Jerusalem, one day soon. (*A guy can dream, right?)*

Shabbat Shalom,

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