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*Appetite Satisfaction on a Higher Plane
Is Definition of Kashruth*

It was a great rabbi who first said he wished that Jews would be as concerned about that which comes out of their mouths as they are concerned about that which goes in. Indeed, I suspect that those who denigrate the Jewish dietary laws - including Jewish novelists and humorists - are more often guilty of slander and derision of human beings than those who observed them.

Our sages point out that precisely because the Torah wants to sanctify the human mouth, and its power of speech, that the dietary laws in Leviticus are followed almost immediately by the laws pertaining to leprosy - which the tradition regarded as divine retribution for the abuse of the power of speech. (Chapters 13 and 14)

Without trying to rationalize all of the many rules, one can readily discern how these rules contributed to the survival of our people and dignified and sanctified the existence of individual Jews. It is an indisputable fact that awareness of one's Jewishness - Jewish identity - was induced in Jewish children almost from the cradle by dietary laws. They learned from their earliest years what Jews may and may not eat - only because they are Jews. It was not Jewish history, or Jewish suffering, or Jewish ethics, or Jewish values that made them conscious of their separateness. This came later. In the beginning - it was the Jewish table.

Because of their separateness in the matter of food, Jews were compelled to seek each other out. When they traveled they had to look for Jewish hospitality. When they settled in communities they had to search for a shohet (a ritual slaughterer) and a kosher butcher. Sociologically speaking, the ties with their own people were forged and strengthened in connection with the most powerful of all instincts - the need for food.

Furthermore, they learned from childhood the meaning of self-discipline. For a disciplined people we have been. That was one of the secrets of our survival. But the self-discipline also evoked a special kind of pause - one always had to pause before gratifying the appetite and ask whether one may or may not eat what is placed before one. Was the food forbidden or permitted? One did not partake impulsively.

Leo Baeck once said that according to Judaism the real godlessness is thoughtlessness. A Jew simply does nothing without First thinking - does God approve or disapprove? It was not a "here and now" philosophy but a philosophy which insisted that one think of consequences - now and tomorrow and the day after.

Needless to say, the aversion for Jewish dietary laws today is due to a strong desire to abandon Jewish separateness and Jewish identity and especially any kind of curb on one's instincts - gastronomic or sexual.

However, there is still another important aspect to Jewish dietary laws - and other Jewish rituals - which one ought to appreciate.

Many years ago, I wrote, and I now quote: satisfaction of his natural desires shall be achieved on a higher plane - a reflection of the divine soul which man has. We do not eat as cavemen. The preparation and the serving of food must appeal to our eye as well as to our stomach. Aesthetic considerations play an enormous role - the floral settings, the dishes, the table ornamentation. In sexual intercourse, too, our erotic tastes and deportment are more refined - we hope - than those of beasts.

What the Law sought to achieve was to add considerations of holiness to the aesthetic. Satisfy the appetite, but do it in accordance with the divine will. The gratification of the instinct is thus transformed from an animal-like performance to one charged with dignity and sanctity. To the value of the beautiful we add the value of the holy. Eat and sleep and clothe yourself - even shave and build your home - as God willed that you do so.

Be aware of God even as you fulfill your basic needs and requirements. In that way you will transform acts that are presumably without spiritual value into acts that are religious in character - acts that link you with the Infinite. In that way, too,

you will avoid the feelings of guilt and even disgust with yourself that frequently accompany the satisfaction of appetites.

The Talmud makes this point clear in a beautiful text discussing the purpose of the Torah - and the Torah is the Law. The Torah is compared to a drug; not an opiate of the masses, as Karl Marx thought, but quite the contrary, a life-giving drug.

“Twere as if a man had severely wounded his son and placed a poultice upon the wound, saying, ‘My son, so long as this poultice is on your wound, you can eat and drink and bathe as you please, and you need not fear. If you remove it, however, the wound will become ulcerous.’”

“Thus spoke God unto Israel. ‘My son, I have created Satan but I have also created Torah. Study and observe the Torah and you will not only be saved from Satan; you will become his master.’”¹

Apparently, God had handicapped man by endowing man with instincts that could lead to evil. However, God gave us Torah. So long as one lives within the Law one can eat and drink and cohabit - one can satisfy one’s basic impulses - but their satisfaction will not be the fulfillment of man’s animality as a result of which he may even forfeit his self-esteem, but rather the dignification and sanctification of those self-same drives which would otherwise be regarded as the hallmarks of his depravity.

¹ *Kiddushin* 30b.