

**YOU SHALL NOT BOIL A KID IN ITS MOTHER'S  
MILK:  
BEYOND EXODUS 23:19**

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The separation of meat and milk is a deeply ingrained prohibition and the cornerstone of the kosher kitchen. When food products are mixed, the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts. Paradoxically, when a kosher milk product is mixed with a meat product, the sum of its parts is nil – it is uneatable.

The genesis of the ban is a verse in Exodus 23:19, *You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk*. The exact same verse is repeated in Exodus 24:26 and in Deuteronomy 14:21. In the case of the kid boiling in its mother's milk, three phrases using the same exact language is an invitation to delve more deeply into the text.

The rabbis could make such an expansive reading since to them a biblical text was to be read neither literally nor on the surface level. "Kid" came to cover animals and fowl ranging from the bison to the turkey. "Boil" was expanded to eating and deriving any sort of benefit from the meat. "Mother" ceased to be limited to a parent. "Milk" was to include all dairy products. Meat must be kept apart from milk to the extent that separate dishes and kitchen utensils are required. The rabbis finally added a time element by requiring a period of time to elapse between the eating of meat and milk products.

In order to expand the prohibition separating meat and milk, rabbis focused on Leviticus 23:27: *When an ox, or a sheep or a goat is born it shall stay seven days with its mother*. The reference to a mother and children of three different species was indicative that the Torah prohibition included oxen, sheep and goats and was not limited to parent-child relationship.

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Why did the text not say milk and flesh (as Onkelos translated it into Aramaic)? The 19th century commentator Samson Raphael Hirsch addressed this question:

[T]hese words forbid the cooking of . . . beef, mutton, or goat flesh . . . with the milk of the cow, sheep or goats. [unclean and wild animals, and fowl are not included . . .]. The text chose kid and its mother's milk to sharply define the objects affected by this prohibition. It would be difficult to express "the meat of a kosher animal" in the "milk of a kosher animal" with equal brevity and precision . . . If, however, kid and its mother milk may still seem insufficient, as it could be taken to restrict the prohibition to the flesh of its own mother's milk, that idea is countered by the consideration that the Torah gives an extreme example – even this emphasis in the original flesh and milk, which after all were so intimately connected together are to be kept apart in cooking.<sup>1</sup>

When the Mishnah was codified, the corral included all the animals. The disagreement among the rabbis was limited to whether the particular animal was included because of an exegesis of the Torah or by rabbinic legislation. Rabbi Yosse stood apart from the crowd. He could not fathom the move from mammals to egg-layers. However, in time, the prohibition of fowl and milk became the uniform practice. On the other hand, the waiting period between eating meat and milk produced a patchwork of customs. Maimonides set a period of six hours. The Tosafists held that it was sufficient to finish the meat meal and say grace which gave rise to a custom of waiting an hour. Rabbi Isserles, the Rema, wrote that in 16th-century Poland the custom was to wait one hour, although he considered this wrong.<sup>2</sup>

## WHY THE SEPARATION OF MEAT AND MILK?

What is the reason for these laws? Among the laws of the Torah, they fall into the category of *hukkim*, laws for which there is no obvious explanation. And there is no encouragement for seeking an explanation. There was also a very practical reason. As a medieval commentator noted:

[F]or fear that people would rise up who considered themselves very wise, and becoming overwise they would say, "This harm which the Torah said exists in that thing is only in that place . . . or

only for a man whose nature is thus-and-so. Then some fool may be foolishly persuaded by their words. Because of this, their reason was not revealed, to help avoid this stumbling block.<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides had an opposing viewpoint. He believed that it was possible to discern a reason for every law and provides an explanation for the prohibition:

Idolatry had something to do with it. Perhaps, such food was eaten at one of the ceremonies of their cult or one of their festivals. A confirmation of this may . . . be found in the fact the prohibition . . . when it is mentioned the first two times occurs near the commandment concerning pilgrimages. . . . It is as if it had said: when you go on pilgrimage and enter the house of the Lord your God, do not cook there in the way they used to cook.<sup>4</sup>

Even accepting Maimonides' rationale, Gershom Scholem, a 20th-century scholar, concluded that rational reasons for the law would not help to increase the enthusiasm of the faithful:

[H]e would be a bold man who would maintain that his theory of the 'mitzvot' was likely to increase the enthusiasm of the faithful for their actual practice . . . . If the prohibition against seething a kid in its mother's milk and many other irrational commandments are explicable as polemics against long forgotten pagan rites . . . how [would this persuade someone] to remain faithful to practices of which the antecedents have long since disappeared?<sup>5</sup>

The enthusiasm and "reason" for the followers of the Lurianic Kabbalah was *tikkun olam*. Historian Jacob Katz writes:

[T]he kabbalist views such observances as a sort of mechanism for setting the machinery of the upper spheres in motion. Each tiny particular of each commandment was linked in this scheme to a specific point in the divine system, and anyone who performed the commandment was thereby directing the operation of that system. This turn determined not only the fate and reward of the individual, but also the advancement or retarding of the perfection as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Many commentators based the prohibition on humanitarianism. To cite Abraham Joshua Heschel:

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[T]he goat . . . generously and steadfastly provides man with the single most perfect food he possesses: milk. It is the only food which by reason of its proper composition of fat, carbohydrate, and protein can by itself sustain the human body. How ungrateful and callous we would be to take the child of an animal to whom we so indebted and cook it in its very milk which nourishes and is given to us so freely.<sup>7</sup>

The focus on the "goat" prompts the Zohar to cite the goat as the culprit – as being a foreign element in Israel's spiritual system. As Eli Munk explains:

The kid . . . is the insignia of Esau (Rebecca covered Jacob's arms with the skin of young goats so that he would appear like Esau). Hashem is like the mother who gives milk to the children of Israel to give them life. Introducing a foreign element, Esau, will inevitably diminish the covenant with Hashem . . . . And, so Esau, represented by the kid, is forbidden to be connected to Israel.<sup>8</sup>

As in the cases of cruelty, the symbolism is limited to the goat. There is an additional theory. The Jews are instructed to be a "Holy People." The word for holy and separate are the same – *kadosh*. Robert Alter sees the desire for clear separation and its converse the abhorrence of mixtures to be an essential part of Judaism:

[T]he horror of the hybrid to the Hebrew imagination, whether it is an animal that straddles two realms, a human transvestite, or even a fabric woven of linen and wool, [the law forbids it in one way or another]. In precisely this regard, [there is a] diametric contrast with the Greeks. . . . Greek literature from Hesiod revels in monstrosity, savors the piquant hybrid character of the man-god, the man-beast, and androgynous, metamorphic figures . . . . [B]iblical literature, [in contrast] prefer[s] realms to be distinct and generic identities . . . . [T]he decisive break between Judaism and Christianity came when the founders chose to see Jesus as a God-man, for such a hybrid violated a basic assumption of the Hebrew imagination . . . in everything from theology . . . to social institutions and dietary laws.<sup>9</sup>

The theology is in the text:

*You shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind, You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material (Lev.19:19).*

*A woman must not put on man's apparel, nor shall a man wear woman's apparel . . . . (Deut. 22:5).*

*You shall not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed, else the crop . . . and the yield of the vineyard may not be used. You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together. You shall not wear cloth combining wool and linen (Deut. 22: 9-11).*

The connection between separation and sanctification with relation to the dietary code has been set forth by Leon Kass:

The principle for separating the clean from the unclean is none other than separation itself. The principles important in Genesis I – place, form, kind, motion, and life – are all at work in Leviticus 11 . . . .

[T]he criteria used to identify the clean and the unclean refer to their form and means of motion and . . . what they eat to live – specifically whether they eat other animals or not. Ruled out are creatures that violate any of the principles of creation – place, form, motion and the original dietary code. Ruled out are [to take one example] . . . Creatures that violate proper locomotion such as those that live in the water but walk on land (lobsters) . . . those with too many legs (centipedes) or no legs at all (that go on their belly, e.g. snakes and worms) and those who go on their paws (and thus use their hands as feet) . . . .

[T]hrough obedience one reduces the distance between the holy and the profane by sanctifying the latter through obedience of the former. The low is made high – or at least higher – through acknowledgment of its dependence on the high, the high is "brought down". . . and given in concrete expression . . . . The humdrum existence and the passage of time are sanctified when the hallowed separateness of the Seventh Day is brought into human life and commemorated as the Sabbath. Likewise the commonness of eat-

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ing is sanctified through the observances of divine commandments whose main principle reminds the mindful eaters of the supreme role of the Holy One.<sup>10</sup>

To my mind, the significance of *You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk* is the strict distinction to be made between blood and milk. The Torah repeatedly prohibits the eating of blood. The key in the process of kashering is the removal of any sign of life. The animal is deprived of life in an anything but a natural manner. In a single cut by a sharper-than-razor knife the main arteries are severed rending the animal unconscious and permitting the blood to be drained from the body. The meat then undergoes further processing. The meat is soaked and salted and rinsed to remove any evidence that this was a living being. When the process is finished, it is truly "dead meat."

Milk, on the other hand, is the symbol of life, sustenance and growth. As the previously cited Zohar noted: "Hashem is like the mother who gives milk to the children of Israel to give them life." The dietary laws can be viewed as the first rung on the ladder of holiness. The introduction to the dietary laws in Deuteronomy 24:3 is preceded by the statement, *You shall not eat any abomination*. The milk and meat prohibition is preceded by the statement for *you are a people consecrated to the Lord*.

We are moving beyond kosher to a higher level. The rabbis by a sensitive reading have gone beyond the Torah text beckoning Jews to go beyond being a ritually correct nation to being a holy people that are cognizant of the sharpest separation that exists on God's earth – between the realm of the living and the domain of the dead.

## NOTES

1. *Pentateuch - Exodus*, trans. Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1982) p. 403.
2. John Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied - A Social History of Jewish Food* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993) p. 198.
3. Aaron Ha'Levi, *Sefer Hachinuch* Section 73, trans. Charles Wengrow. (New York: Feldheim, 1978) p. 287.
4. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, part 3, 48:599, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963)
5. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd revised edition (New York: Schocken Press, 1961) pp. 20-30.
6. Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis - Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. Bernard Dov Cooperman (New York: Schocken Press, 1982) p. 190.

7. Samuel H. Dresner, Seymour Siegel, David M. Pollock, *The Jewish Dietary Laws*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Rabbinical Assembly of America and United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1982) pp. 32-33.
8. Eli Munk, *The Call of the Torah - Devarim*, trans. from the French by E.S. Maser (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1955) p.155.
9. Robert Alter, "In the Community: A New Theory of Kashrut," *Commentary* (August, 1979) Vol. 68 (2) p. 46-52.
10. Leon R. Kass, "Why the Dietary Laws?" *Commentary*, Vol. 97:6 (June, 1994) pp. 42-47.

**עשה תורתך קבע**

**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR**

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF  
CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

2004

April	Numbers	17 - 36
	Deuteronomy	1 - 8
May	Deuteronomy	9 - 34
June	Joshua	1 - 24
	Judges	1 - 3
July	Judges	4 - 21
	I Samuel	1 - 6
August	I Samuel	7 - 31
	II Samuel	1 - 4