

Dear Rabbi,

We have always kept kosher, to some degree. I am often challenged by friends who ask why do I need to choose this antiquated dietary system, when today there are many dietary systems, based on modern research, that are far healthier than kosher. Although kosher may have kept us healthier in the ancient world, why do we need to continue that today when there might, in fact, be even healthier systems?

Francis W.

Dear Francis,

Although there may be health benefits to the laws of kosher (see "The Maker's Diet"), those benefits are not understood as G-d's motivation for giving us the laws of kosher, or *Kashruth*, despite what some scholars claim. The law against consumption of pork, for example, is explained by some scholars as an attempt to avoid extracting trichinosis. One of my colleagues writes that the existence of about a billion Chinese, who eat pork as a staple of their diet, would seem to indicate that pork eaters are not in any imminent danger of extinction. Although Jews may have avoided trichinosis by refraining from the consumption of pork, beef can be a source of tapeworms. Anthrax, which can be a fatal disease, is transmitted by cattle, sheep and goats - all kosher animals.

One of the classical biblical commentaries, R' Don Isaac Abarbanel, writes "...is our Torah merely a concise medical guide...? We see that those who eat the pig, and all forbidden animals and birds are healthy, great in number and without weakness or disease...And if these laws are only for the purpose of health, what of all the poisonous herbs and plants ... which are not prohibited by the laws of kashruth?"

The word kosher actually means proper, or acceptable. It refers not only to foods, but to other objects, such as a kosher Torah scroll refers to one with no mistakes or letters missing, rendering it fit to be read from in a synagogue. The Torah doesn't actually use the word "kosher" to describe what is permitted or non-kosher for the prohibited. Rather it calls kosher animals "*tahor*", pure, and unkosher ones "*tameh*", or impure. (See Leviticus/Vayikra 11:4-8, 47). These are moral and spiritual terms, not terms referring to them being unhealthy or dirty.

The term "*tameh*", usually translated as impure, literally means "sealed up"; impermeable to illumination. The literal meaning of "*tahor*" is the opposite, to be "opened up" in a way that the light can shine in. The Kabbalists explain this to mean that we have different potential spiritual states, at times our hearts can be "sealed up" and it's very difficult to connect to higher, spiritual realms. At other times, we are open, like a window that the sunshine can shine right in, and we connect to the spiritual light of the Al-mighty.

We are what we eat! If we consume foods that were allowed by G-d, those He considered to be *tahor*, we become Jews who are elevated, pure, and wide open to be connected to that higher spiritual light. If, however, we consume foods which are *tameh*, that is what we become. Our hearts become sealed, making it very difficult for anything truly spiritual to penetrate in an everlasting way of deep connection and permanence.

The reason that one food is *tameh* and another *tahor* - kosher or unkosher - is beyond our comprehension. (It's not a function of being blessed by a rabbi, or even its price, contrary to popular opinion). It falls under the category of those mitzvos called "*chukim*", or decrees we fulfill only because they were decreed by G-d, not because we have a real understanding of why they affect us as they do. One of the many benefits we gain, however, is that our lives, and how we eat, doesn't work on auto-pilot, because we constantly have to think about what we eat, to see if it fits into G-d's laws. By so doing, we fuse holiness into this very mundane area of life, and our very eating, our sustenance, becomes a G-dly, spiritual act which helps transform us to be the holy people we are charged to be. (For more, see "Gateway to Judaism" pp. 293-308.)

p.s. Believe it or not, you can even create a healthy, kosher diet!