

Should We Be Kosher?

The Parashah for today includes the dietary laws for the children of Israel. I have spent many hours in prayer and study on this issue. I have gathered enough material to cover several weeks' worth of teaching. Although, I have condensed it down to the bare essentials to share with you this morning, I'm not sure that the Lord has finished revealing to me the fullness of His Torah on this subject. However, what I am sharing with you this morning is what I firmly believe is best for us at this stage of our discovery of our Jewish roots.

The distinction between "clean" (suitable for eating) and "unclean" animals goes all the way back to Noach in B'resheet Chapter 7(Gen 7:2, 3). Although these laws may have had some relationship to health and hygiene and to the avoidance of pagan practices, they were primarily intended to teach Israel the concept of distinction. Just as certain creatures were clean and therefore acceptable to eat, Israel was God's chosen people, acceptable for a relationship with Him. They were, therefore, to live holy lives. They were to be reminded daily, at each meal, that they were a separated people who were not to live like the Gentile nations around them.

Let's pray:

Avi-nu, Mal-ke-nu, Our Father, Our King, I pray for ears to hear, hearts to understand, a divine revelation of and the will to do Your Word.

In addition to the dietary laws given in Vayikra 11 and repeated again in D'varim (Deut.) 14, one of the more perplexing sayings of Scripture is the regulation not to boil a goat in its mother's milk. This regulation is repeated three times in Sh'mot 23:19 and 34:26, and in D'varim 14:21. Commentators don't agree on the rationale for this regulation, but the prohibition may have been because of the religious practices in which the Kena'anites cooked goats in their mother's milk in a fertility rite. Based upon these verses, rabbinical kosher rules prohibit the eating of meat and dairy products together. Let me categorically state that this is man's law and not God's law. Man's law does not bind us! Yes, we can enjoy a cheeseburger and still be kosher in the Messianic community.

What Does "Kosher" Mean?

The word kosher is used to designate a food that is "right, proper, or fit to eat." There are two kinds of kosher observance: biblical and rabbinical. Biblical kosher observance involves a simple and clear-cut distinction between "clean" and "unclean" creatures for dietary purposes. As I indicated earlier, this form of kosher goes back to the time of Noach. Rabbinical kosher observance is much more complicated and has many, many different levels. It has evolved over many generations. The complex, highly evolved body of rabbinic rules and requirements for keeping kosher is known as kashrut (pronounced CASH-root). Kashrut regulates not only what one may eat, but also how it is to be prepared and when it may be eaten. Here, we are only concerned with Biblical kosher regulations.

Slaughtering: Kosher Versus Non-Kosher

I do have to note, however, that the method used by Orthodox Jewish people for generations to slaughter their meat is much more humane and sanitary than the methods employed in non-kosher meat packing plants even today. The laws regarding kosher slaughtering are so sanitary and

effective that kosher butchers and slaughterhouses have been exempted from many USDA regulations.

What Is and Isn't Kosher?

Again, rabbinical kosher observance is extremely complicated. To Orthodox Jews, it is not just a set of rules but a way of life. Anyone wishing to study the vast body of rabbinic customs regulating kashrut can go to websites like the ones at www.kosher.org or www.kashrut.com.

However, we are concerned only with biblical kosher observance, which recognizes prohibitions against (1) eating meat with blood still in it; and (2) eating creatures classified as "unclean" and therefore not considered food.

Prohibition Against Blood

After the Flood, when Adonai blessed Noah and his family and told them they could now eat meat, He added this stipulation: *"Only flesh with its life, which is its blood, you are not to eat."* (Gen. 9:4). That is, they could not eat meat without first draining the blood out of it. In the Mosaic Covenant, this principle was upheld. The Israelites were instructed always to drain the blood from animals they hunted for food (Lev. 17:10-14).

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 also imposed this same restriction in the Brit Hadashah. It forbade new Gentile believers from eating the meat of "strangled" animals - that is, animals from which the blood had not been properly drained or any food offered to idols.

Unlike the other kosher laws, which are not completely explained, the reason for the prohibition against consuming blood is given in Scripture. The Lord told Israel: *"For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for yourselves; for it is the blood that makes atonement because of the life."* (Lev. 17:11).

You can imagine how shocked His Jewish listeners must have been when Yeshua used the metaphor about drinking His blood in John Chapter 6. They knew the Law strictly forbade such a thing. But the Lord was making the point that only through partaking of His blood (that is, His death) can we share in His life (John 6:53-55; 1 Cor. 11:25-27).

Do any of you know why Noah was allowed to eat meat after the Great Flood?

Prohibition Against Eating "Unclean" Creatures

The pertinent passages in Vayikra 11 and D'varim 14 tell us which animals Adonai considers suitable for human consumption.

Mammals that qualify as kosher food must chew their cud and have a split hoof. This includes the ox, beef, sheep, goat, deer, antelope, and other similar animals. Some animals either chew the cud or have a split hoof, but not both - including the camel, the rock badger, the rabbit, and the pig. They are not kosher. Any animal that walks on paws, like a dog or cat, is also not kosher (Lev. 11:27).

Flying creatures that are not kosher include the eagle, vultures, owls, ravens, and other birds of prey and bats (Lev. 11:13-19).

Among the insects, only the locust, katydid, cricket, and grasshopper (i.e., winged creatures with four primary walking legs and two extra hind legs for hopping) are kosher (Lev. 11:21). The Brit Hadashah says that John the Immerser survived in the wilderness by eating locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4).

Among water creatures, only those with fins and scales are kosher. Anything else - including shrimp, lobster, scallops, crabs, and other bottom - dwelling sea scavengers - are not kosher. Note that some fish have fins but not scales (like catfish, shark, and swordfish), and are therefore not kosher.

The final category of unclean creatures is those *"...small creatures that swarm on the ground..."* (Lev. 11:29), including such scrumptious delicacies as weasels, mice, lizards, geckos, and chameleons. According to Leviticus 11:41, every creature that slithers around on the ground is detestable and should not be eaten. I guess that means I can't go out and eat worms after all!

Clearly, the bottom line for most of us Western Gentiles is that eating pork (or as they call it in Israel, 'white steak') and shellfish is unclean and NOT kosher.

The Purpose of Kosher Laws

According to Jewish tradition, the kosher laws fall under the category of Chukkim ("statutes") - that is, laws for which no specific reason is given. We are expected to obey simply because He said we should. No other reason is needed or even offered. We should do so because we love Adonai. Clearly, Vayikra 11:44 instructs us to be holy and not defile ourselves by eating that which is unclean.

Did the Brit Hadashah do Away with the Kosher Laws?

We have already seen that the distinction between "clean" and "unclean" creatures did not originate with the Mosaic Covenant. However, Moshe amplified and clarified that distinction for dietary purposes. We read: *"Such, then, is the law concerning animals, flying creatures, all living creatures that move about in the water, and all creatures that swarm on the ground. Its purpose is to distinguish between the unclean and the clean, and between the creatures that may be eaten and those that many not be eaten."* (Lev. 1:46-47)

The Brit Hadashah does not dwell on the kosher laws, because it assumes we know they are still in effect. Animals that were not suitable for human consumption in the Torah are still not suitable for human consumption. Even under the New Covenant, a cockroach still carries bacteria and disease. Shellfish are still high in purines (a substance which we now know causes certain forms of arthritis) and they are scavengers that feed off the refuse that settles to the bottom of the ocean. Buzzards still pick rotting flesh off the bones of dead animals. The biological makeup of these creatures has not changed simply because Yeshua died on the execution stake and we have a new covenant.

In the Book of Revelation, the frog is still said to be "unclean" (in agreement with Leviticus 11:10), and there are still "unclean" birds (Rev. 16:13; 18:2). Therefore, the distinction between creatures that are "clean" (i.e., intended for food) and "unclean" (not intended for food) was not done away with in the Brit Hadashah.

Sometimes people point out that Scripture says everything Adonai made was "good" (Gen. 1:31). Yes, this is true; but it doesn't say everything He made is food. Do you see the distinction? Everything He made is good and has a purpose. But not everything He made is intended to be food for us.

What Do the Proof Texts Really Say?

The traditional Christian view is that the kosher laws are not applicable to the Messianic Community. This view is based on several key Brit Hadashah passages, along with the interpretations of some early "church fathers" and other commentators.

Before we swallow this view hook, line, and sinker, we should remember that these are the same "church fathers" that gave us Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny! Some of them also believe the Church replaced Israel (Replacement Theology), so canceling the kosher laws was just another anti-semitic means of distancing the Church from her Jewish roots.

However, is this really what the Brit Hadashah teaches? Have unclean creatures like rats, mice, spiders, snakes, cockroaches, cats, pigs, oysters, crabs, frogs, rabbits, and dogs really been approved under the New Covenant for human consumption? Let us examine some key proof texts often used to prove that the kosher laws have been canceled.

Mark 7:19: *"Thus he declared all foods ritually clean."*

Yeshua did not abrogate the laws of kashrut and thus declare ham kosher! Since the beginning of the chapter, the subject has been ritual purity as taught by the Oral Torah in relation to n'tilat-yadayim and not kashrut at all! There is not the slightest hint anywhere that foods in this verse can be anything other than what the Torah allows Jewish people to eat.

Acts 10:9 – 28: This is the story of Kefa's vision of the sheet lowered from heaven containing clean and unclean animals. He was instructed to get up and eat. He replied that he had never eaten unclean food.

Traditional "Christian" Interpretation: The Lord was showing Kefa that the kosher laws do not apply to Christians. Unfortunately, most people stop at verse 15, which states: *"Stop treating as unclean what God has made clean"*.

A Better Interpretation: It is misleading to stop reading in Verse 15 because Kefa himself provides the correct interpretation a few verses later: *"He said to them, 'You are well aware that for a man who is a Jew to have close association with someone who belongs to another people, or to come and visit him, is something that just isn't done. But God has shown me not to call any person common or unclean...'"* (Acts 10:28).

Adonai used the clean and unclean animals as an illustration to teach Kefa an important lesson. However, the lesson was not about food, but about people. Did Kefa say, "Adonai has shown me that I should not call any food unclean"? No, he realized that was not what the Lord was showing him. At this pivotal point in church history (Acts 10), the Messianic community learned that believing Gentiles were to be accepted and welcomed as full-fledged members of the Family of God.

Romans 14:14-15: *"I know – that is, I have been persuaded by the Lord Yeshua the Messiah – that nothing is unclean in itself. But if a person considers something unclean, then for him it is unclean; and if your brother is being upset by the food you eat, your life is no longer one of love. Do not, by your eating habits, destroy someone for whom the Messiah died!"*

Traditional "Christian" Interpretation: To mature Christians, nothing in itself is "clean" or "unclean." We are free to consume anything we wish. However, the Jewish Christians in Rome were "weaker" (spiritually) than the Gentile believers. They were still bound by the Law and wanted to keep the kosher laws. Therefore, Sha'ul said the Gentiles should voluntarily abstain from consuming unclean foods and thereby avoid offending their "weaker" Jewish brethren. Now there is an anti-semitic position.

A Better Interpretation: Again, if we read the entire chapter, it interprets itself. (Remember: A text taken out of its context becomes a pretext!) In Verse 2, Rabbi Sha'ul defines the weaker brother as one who eats only vegetables - not one who keeps kosher! The question, then, was not what was kosher and what was not, but whether it was acceptable for a believer to eat meat at all. In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, Sha'ul discusses this issue extensively and sets the record straight. His remarks here in Romans 14 have nothing to do with kosher laws, but with the eating of meat that had been offered to idols. Remember, neither Jew nor Gentile believer can eat meat offered to idols.

Colossians 2:20-22: *"If, along with the Messiah, you died to the elemental spirits of the world, then why, as if you still belonged to the world, are you letting yourselves be bothered by its rules? – 'Don't touch this!' 'Don't eat that!' 'Don't handle that!' Such prohibitions are concerned with things meant to perish by being used [not by being avoided!], and they are based on man-made rules and teachings."*

Traditional "Christian" Interpretation: Believers are not subject to dietary restrictions.

A Better Interpretation: The precise nature of the Colossian heresy is a matter of debate among theologians. It no doubt involved a religious system, which blended certain aspects of Jewish law, Gnosticism, and pagan mysticism.

In Judaism, there are literally thousands of man-made rabbinical rules and regulations dealing with ritual impurity and kashrut. They have evolved over many centuries, are extremely detailed, and go far beyond the bounds of Adonai's original (and relatively simple) kosher laws as outlined in the Torah. These certainly qualify as "man-made rules and teachings."

However, the kosher laws themselves - specifically, the guidelines regarding clean and unclean foods - did not come from men, but from Adonai, the Author of the Torah. Therefore, the biblical kosher laws are not "man-made rules and teachings" condemned here by Rabbi Sha'ul.

1 Timothy 4:3,4: *"They forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods which God created to be eaten with thanksgiving by those who have come to trust and to know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing received with thanksgiving needs to be rejected."*

Traditional "Christian" Interpretation: Rabbi Sha'ul condemns the practice of abstaining from certain foods for religious purposes and shows that every creature Adonai made is "good" for food because it is has been "sanctified," or cleansed by the Word of Adonai and prayer. Therefore, the kosher laws are no longer in effect for Christians.

A Better Interpretation: Abstinance from foods does not mean observing kashrut, although the false teachers being warned against here probably did incorporate elements of the Jewish dietary laws into their ascetic practices. Everything created by God is good, but not everything created by God is food. Therefore, this verse does not abolish the Jewish dietary laws.

Sha'ul's comments were not aimed at biblical kosher laws at all, but at pagan teachings like those of the spiritists, who claimed that the consumption of animal flesh was a hindrance to contacting the spirit world, or the Theosophists and Hindus, who avoided meat because they believed the souls of departed ancestors, were reincarnated in cattle and other animals.

Summary

Should Christians eat only clean creatures? I believe the answer is obviously - YES, if we really want Adonai's best for our lives.

If we don't keep kosher, will it keep us from going to Heaven? Absolutely not! In fact, it might even help us get to there a little sooner. Everything in the customs that Adonai gave to Israel was designed to constantly remind the people they had a special relationship with Him, and were called to walk in fellowship with Him. Are we not called to the same fellowship?

As I stated at the beginning, Adonai is still revealing to me the fullness of His Torah. The question for me is this: If I have been grafted into the true vine and if I intend to dwell in the land of Israel during the Millennial reign, then should I not follow Adonai's statutes on clean and unclean foods?

In closing, turn with me to I Corinthians 10:23. [Read 10:23 – 32] For me, this sums up the answer for us as Messianic Believers. All I can ask is that you consider what I have said, pray about it and please, please, please do not bring pork or shell fish to Oneg.