

“You are what you eat” – Parashat Shmini, April 9, 2021

In the fall of 2015 my husband and I really threw our extended family for a loop. After a great deal of consideration and discussion with one another, we announced to our family that we were no longer eating meat or dairy. Ken has since relaxed this a bit by including a little dairy, and we both will eat some fish from time to time as well. Once our extended family got used to this it was okay, and gracious adjustments and accommodations were made. And, we came to find out that we have a number of friends who had made the same decision that we had.

You are what you eat. The first usage of this phrase is likely to have come from the 1826 work *Physiology of Taste*, in which French author Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote: “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.” His work is a historical, philosophical, and epicurean collection of recipes, reflections and anecdotes on everything and anything gastronomical. He spent his days eating through the food capital of Dijon France, and *The New Yorker* commented that his book is “Still the most civilized cookbook ever written.”

There’s debate about this phrase “you are what you eat” – one study says we should minimize carbs, another says no sugar, another says fruit isn’t so good, another says fruit is wonderful. And, I’ve never seen a carrot lover turn orange.

But I think that there is something to what Brillat-Savarin said: “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.”

I often get questions about kashrut – eating meat...what’s up with the mixing milk and meat, and what kind of meat can we eat, and why?

We have some basic rules that we can derive from our Torah portion.

Fish is okay, as long as it has fins and scales. (Lev. 11:9-12)

Birds – no talons. What birds have talons? Birds of prey, predators. Don’t eat any of those.

Beasts – cloved hooves and chew their cud. These are animals that graze, sometimes over rocky land for which a flexible, cloved hoof can help them traverse the terrain, and chew their cud. Why? Because they eat various types of grass, which are hard to digest, hence the need to chew their cud.

In looking at this, I think that we can come to a general observation on the kinds of birds and meat that we eat. We don't eat birds or beasts that are meat eaters – these are predators that live by hunting other birds and smaller animals.

And the big question, what about milk and meat? A cheeseburger is not kosher. The rabbis of the Talmud talk about this, but a good way to remember is that milk nurtures life, especially new life. Meat comes from the death of a bird or animal. We don't mix life represented by milk with meat that comes from death.

So are we what we eat? No, but how consciously we eat and what we eat says something about us.

Being human is more than just being physical creatures. Being physical, we must feed ourselves, typically three meals a day. But we aren't only physical. We are soulful, aware, spiritual creatures as well, imbued with the breath of the Divine. (Gen 2:7). In Psalms it says, "Ner Adonai nishmat adam," "the human being is the candle of God." (Proverbs 20:27) Our soulful life is interconnected with our physical life for as long as we live, and we often care for our body first – because we have to - and care for the soulful aspect of our life later.

When we select our food with the teachings of our Torah in mind, we choose to live in a way that can nurture both our body and our soul. How we eat has the potential to remind ourselves of our relationship with all life, with our world which sustains us, and with our connection to the Divine, the Source of Being.

Shabbat shalom,
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