

This week's Torah portion, *parashat Shemini*, gives us guidelines as to which living creatures are pure or impure; which we can eat and which we can't; what's part of a 'balanced diet' and what we should abominate and find disgusting.

We recognize these dos and don'ts as the laws of *kashrut* – keeping kosher. But oddly enough, the Torah never uses that word. In the entire Tanach, in fact, it only occurs a handful of times, and never in direct reference to food. In the Tanach, kosher means "proper" (or occasionally "successful").

As we all know, the definition of "proper" changes from generation to generation, culture to culture, and often household to household. One of my professors refers to this as "family rules." You get invited to someone's home for dinner: you walk in, wipe your feet on the mat so you don't track in any dirt, hand your host the cheesecake you brought for dessert, and then take a seat in the dining room, courteously avoiding the head of the table – only to realize later that everyone else has **taken off** their shoes, your host is vegan, and you're sitting in Grandma's chair! You followed all the rules of politeness you grew up with, but *your* family rules were a little different than your host's.

The Torah, though, isn't dictating our customs here. It's just outlining some hard and fast "yeses" and "nos" so we can all start on the same page. So what might the "family rules" have looked like for our ancestors? What was considered "proper" when the Israelites wandered the desert? What did they have on their seder tables?

Well – no ham, of course; no roasted vulture; no braised rabbit; and no catfish. Also, nothing cooked in a pot that a dead lizard fell into. In fact, if a dead lizard falls into your oven – the Torah advises you to smash the oven. I might be ok with that... I used to have a pet iguana, and I'm not sure I could eat roast beef or chocolate cake that shared an oven with Lizzy.

BUT you may be surprised to know that, while camel definitely was NOT on the menu for that first seder in the desert, the Israelites *might* have stowed a few dried locusts in their bags after the eighth plague ended. And while we debate today whether it's "proper" to have rice and beans on Passover, the Israelites may have been slurping down grasshopper stew. Even with our grocery stores under-stocked at the moment, I'm doubting any of you tried that recipe this year.

I know many of us – and a majority of Reform Jews – don't adhere to the dietary laws as written in the Torah, or as dictated by later rabbinic law. But that doesn't mean that *kashrut* is meaningless. Not

only do we have our own individual or cultural norms of what we find disgusting, we also have larger moral issues to consider. Ethical *kashrut*, if you will.

If you eat meat, was the animal raised with access to the outdoors? Do you consider the carbon footprint of your diet? When you have fruits or vegetables, do you know whether they were sustainably sourced to protect the earth? Were the workers who grew, harvested, and produced your food well paid? In addition to the orange on our seder plates, which represents marginalized groups like women and those in the LGBTQ community, many families are also adding a piece of fair trade chocolate – a reminder that while we may have been freed from slavery, there are others in our world who still suffer from unfair and harmful working conditions.

Now that Pesach is over and we can put the words “kosher for Passover” out of our heads for a while, let’s not let go of the word “kosher” too easily. I don’t think it’s feasible for us to research the business practices of every company we purchase from, and we’re not likely to completely overhaul our diets, but staying mindful of what’s “proper” can help set us, and the generations to come, on a path towards establishing updated dietary “rules” that treat every living being on earth a little more like “family.”