Why God Cares What You Eat (And Why That's Not the Point)

Your 18Forty Parsha Guide is a weekly newsletter exploring five major takeaways from the weekly parsha. Receive this newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

You're standing in a grocery store aisle, phone in one hand, package in the other, squinting at a symbol the size of a fingernail. The *hechsher*. You've done this thousands of times, and the action takes perhaps two seconds. Yet that brief pause connects you to a system stretching back millennia, one that reaches into the most intimate corners of daily existence. Most religious obligations announce themselves. Shabbat arrives with candles, holidays with their distinctive rituals. Kashrut, by contrast, operates continuously and almost invisibly, woven into the fabric of ordinary life.

Vayikra 11:46-47 presents what initially seems like a dizzying catalog of biology: animals that chew the cud, fish with fins and scales, birds of prey, and creeping things. To contemporary readers, these lists can feel arbitrary, ancient taboos sitting uncomfortably alongside the Torah's serious moral imperatives. Why should a tradition concerned with justice and compassion devote such attention to hooves and scales?

The answer has little to do with hygiene or superstition. Kashrut operates as a technology of holiness, working simultaneously on multiple dimensions that the casual observer rarely perceives. It trains the mind to categorize and distinguish. It builds the capacity to resist instinct. It constructs necessary boundaries for identity while remaining in tension with Judaism's equally strong commitments to hospitality and engagement with the world. It has evolved from family tradition into global bureaucracy. And in an age that has stripped the physical world of spiritual meaning, it re-enchants the mundane act of putting food in your mouth.

By tracing these dimensions from the raw biblical text to the modern supervision agency, we discover that kashrut concerns more than what is on the plate. It shapes who is at the table, and perhaps more importantly, who the person eating is becoming.

1. Holiness as a Cognitive System: Training the Mind to Distinguish

The Torah concludes its dietary laws with a striking statement of purpose: "These are the instructions concerning animals, birds, all living creatures that move in water, and all creatures that swarm on earth, for distinguishing between the impure and the pure" (Vayikra 11:46-47). The Hebrew word for distinguishing is *lehavdil*, and its presence here carries considerable weight. The same root appears at creation when God separates light from darkness, and it returns at Shabbat's end when we separate holy from ordinary. Kashrut places that primordial act of distinction into the hands of every Jew who opens a refrigerator.

Rashbam on Vayikra 11:3 emphasizes that the text provides visible, external signs for making these distinctions. Split hooves. Chewing cud. Fins and scales. These are objective physical markers that allow anyone to render a clear judgment without esoteric knowledge or special training. The system takes the passive act of eating and transforms it into an active intellectual exercise, one that trains you to look, identify, and categorize before you consume.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her landmark work *Purity and Danger*, argues that "holiness" in Vayikra fundamentally means wholeness and clear category. Animals that defy classification create cognitive dissonance: Shellfish live in water but crawl on the bottom like land creatures; pigs have split hooves but fail to chew cud. These anomalous creatures violate the system's grammar. Their prohibition, Douglas suggests, is less about the animals themselves than about training human beings to recognize and maintain conceptual boundaries. Research in cognitive psychology validates this insight. The *Stanford Encyclopedia*'s entry on concepts surveys decades of work showing that categorization is fundamental to how minds make sense of reality. We cannot think without sorting inputs into categories.

Moshe Koppel, a computer scientist and Talmud scholar who has explored these ideas on 18Forty, has developed a framework for understanding halacha as a coherent system of meaning, much like a language. The dietary laws function as grammar within this system, creating a vocabulary of permitted and forbidden that structures how Jews engage with the physical world. Every time you check a fish for fins and scales, you rehearse the fundamental Jewish claim that distinctions matter, that holiness requires discrimination between this and that. The skeptic might ask whether this amounts to arbitrary list-making, and perhaps in content it does. In function, however, it proves essential. Kashrut sanctifies an innate cognitive capacity by directing it toward divine service, turning the ordinary act of eating into a training ground for imposing order on chaos.

2. The Training of Desire: Structure When Inspiration Fails

If the first dimension of kashrut operates on the mind, the second works on something more primal. "For I am the Lord your God: sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy" (Vayikra 11:44). The verse directly links restricting consumption to attaining *kedusha*. Holiness, in this framing, is something you achieve through active self-definition, and the dietary laws place that work in the arena of appetite.

Rambam in *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:35 states explicitly that dietary laws are designed to subdue the appetites and train the body in self-control. He understood kashrut as breaking the cycle of instant gratification: When you cannot eat whatever you want whenever you want it, you practice mastery over impulse. Contemporary behavioral science validates this medieval insight. Wendy Wood's research on habit formation demonstrates that willpower alone proves weak and unreliable. What actually works is environmental friction, rules that make certain actions harder and redirect choices before conscious decision-making kicks in. Kashrut creates precisely this friction.

Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz on 18Forty has discussed how halachic structure provides what willpower alone cannot: a framework that sustains observance even when inspiration fades. You don't need to feel holy to keep kosher; you keep kosher, and the structure does its work regardless of your emotional state. David Bashevkin's *Sin·a·gogue* explores this dynamic further, examining how religious life centers on struggle and how structure holds us when motivation cannot. The discipline sustains you when inspiration runs dry.

Yet Ramban on Vayikra 19:2 issues a crucial warning against confusing the tool with the outcome. He describes the *naval birshut haTorah*, the scoundrel who operates entirely within the Torah's technical permissions. One can follow every kashrut rule while remaining a glutton, gorging on permitted foods, obsessing over gourmet kosher restaurants, making appetite the center of life under religious cover. The laws create possibility for discipline; they do not guarantee it. Why would God care if you eat a cheeseburger? The question assumes God cares about the cheeseburger itself. Perhaps what matters is your autonomy. Every time you say no to instinct, you reclaim a small piece of agency from your biology. The muscle of refusal grows stronger with use, but only if you understand what you're training for.

3. The Sociology of Separation: Boundaries in Tension with Hospitality

The discipline kashrut cultivates in the individual extends outward into the social realm. "I am the Lord your God who has set you apart from the nations. So you shall set apart the pure beast from the impure … You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine" (Vayikra 20:24-26). The text makes explicit what the dietary laws accomplish socially: eating differently produces living differently.

Rashi on this verse makes the connection even more direct: If the dietary separation did not exist, neither would the communal separation. The laws are not merely symbolic of distinction. They are the mechanism that produces it. This claim deserves careful consideration rather than reflexive acceptance or rejection. Paul Rozin's research on disgust and commensality provides empirical support for understanding how food prohibitions function as sociological firewalls. "Commensality," the act of eating together, is a universal human bonding ritual. Groups that cannot eat together remain separate in ways that transcend ideology or conscious choice. Kashrut makes certain kinds of social absorption structurally difficult through the simple mechanics of shared meals.

Dara Horn on 18Forty has discussed the modern discomfort with Jewish distinctiveness, noting the enormous cultural pressure to universalize, to minimize difference, to fit seamlessly into surrounding cultures. Horn argues that distinct boundaries prove necessary for survival as a minority culture. The pressure to erase particularity is itself a recurring historical threat, often more effective than outright persecution in dissolving Jewish identity.

Does this framing sound xenophobic or tribal? The accusation deserves engagement rather than dismissal. Judaism simultaneously commands hospitality, love of the stranger, and engagement with the broader world. The tradition that builds walls through kashrut also builds bridges through *gemilut chasadim* and *tikkun olam*. These values exist in genuine tension, and honest engagement with kashrut requires acknowledging that tension rather than resolving it too quickly in either direction. Kashrut provides a form of selective boundary, one that enables engagement in most spheres of life while maintaining core distinctiveness in the intimate realm of eating. A small people with a particular mission cannot maintain that mission if they dissolve entirely into surrounding cultures. The social awkwardness of kashrut is the mechanism of preservation, but preservation serves engagement rather than replacing it.

4. From Text to Tech: When Tradition Becomes Bureaucracy

The cognitive, behavioral, and social dimensions of kashrut emerge relatively clearly from the biblical text. The fourth dimension, institutional development, requires tracing how a system designed for agricultural communities evolved to govern globalized food production. Vayikra 11:32-38 already hints at this complexity, introducing laws concerning vessels, water, and absorption. When an impure creature falls into an earthen vessel, the vessel must be broken. When it falls into an oven, the oven becomes impure. Seeds that become wet can receive impurity; dry seeds cannot. Rashi on Vayikra 11:35 explains why earthenware vessels cannot be purified by immersion: The impurity absorbs into their porous walls in ways that water cannot reach. These laws move kashrut beyond simple animal identification into questions of physics, contact, and transfer that require expertise to navigate.

Haym Soloveitchik, who has explored these themes extensively on 18Forty, analyzed a fundamental shift in his landmark essay "Rupture and Reconstruction." Traditional practice was "mimetic," learned by watching parents and grandparents. You trusted your grandmother's kitchen because you had watched her your whole life, absorbing standards through observation rather than explicit instruction. Modern practice has become "text-based." You trust the label, the book, the rabbi you've never met. The explosion of kashrut stringencies in recent decades reflects this shift from embodied tradition to codified rule. Tamara Morsel-Eisenberg's scholarship traces how fluid local traditions gradually hardened into written codes, how what grandmothers once decided by intuition now requires certification agencies and global logistics.

Max Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, described how religious charisma inevitably evolves into bureaucracy. The prophet gives way to the priest, and the priest to the administrator. Kashrut has followed this trajectory precisely. What began as family practice became communal custom, then rabbinic ruling, then certification agency. The OU symbol on your cereal box represents the endpoint of this rationalization process. Yet the Talmud itself anticipates pleasure within even a highly structured system. Chullin 109b records Yalta's observation that for everything God forbade, He permitted something similar. Forbidden blood finds its counterpart in permitted liver, forbidden pork in the *shibuta* fish that supposedly tastes like it.

The industrial certification complex can feel soulless, with anonymous rabbis in factories thousands of miles away determining what you can eat. This represents the genuine trade-off of modernity: We lost the intimacy of the mimetic kitchen but gained the ability to maintain holiness within a globalized food system. The steam pipe in a factory requires the same careful thought the Torah applied to earthen vessels, even if the scale and impersonality feel foreign to the original context.

5. Re-enchanting the Ordinary: When Eating Becomes Awareness

The final dimension returns to where we began: the individual standing before food, deciding what to consume. "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Devarim 8:3). Physical sustenance alone does not sustain human beings; we require meaning. Kashrut insists that eating itself can become a form of service, a way of connecting to what transcends the material.

The Tanya, in *Likutei Amarim* Chapter 7, develops a mystical framework for this claim. Permitted food contains divine sparks that can be elevated through proper intention, while forbidden food cannot be elevated and drags the soul downward. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Vayikra 11:44 offers a complementary perspective, emphasizing that dietary restrictions address the person, not merely the body. They constitute a call to holiness rather than a health manual.

Charles Taylor's magisterial *A Secular Age* describes how modernity "disenchanted" the world. The physical became merely physical; matter lost its spiritual density. Taylor calls this process "excarnation," the removal of spirit from flesh. Rituals like kashrut work against this tide. They "re-enchant" the mundane by making physical acts thick with meaning. Consider what kashrut actually does in daily life. You're at a business lunch, colleagues ordering freely, and you find yourself scanning the menu differently. Maybe you order the tuna sandwich, maybe a salad, maybe just fruit. The food itself hardly matters. What matters is the pause, the moment of awareness. Even minimal observance interrupts automatic behavior and forces consciousness of Jewish identity precisely when you're embedded in the secular world.

Rabbi David Fohrman on 18Forty has discussed how Torah rewards careful attention, how meaning emerges through close reading rather than casual engagement. The same principle applies to kashrut. The micro-level discipline of checking a label or declining a dish creates capacity for larger faithfulness. Grand moral commitments are easy to profess and difficult to practice. The small disciplines create the muscles that make larger ones possible. Is checking for a *hechsher* really a spiritual act? In a disenchanted age, that two-second pause represents something genuinely radical. It asserts that the physical world possesses spiritual density, anchoring you in a story larger than your appetite. The pause interrupts the automatic, and in that interruption, holiness becomes possible.

Kashrut has survived across millennia because it works on all these dimensions simultaneously, the cognitive and behavioral and social and institutional and spiritual. The *hechsher* you barely notice connects you to Mount Sinai and to the factory floor, to your ancestors and to your grandchildren. What appears to be arbitrary food rules reveals itself as an architecture of holiness, built one meal at a time.

Questions for Reflection:

1. **When has drawing clear distinctions helped you make sense of chaos in your life, and when has rigid categorization limited your growth or understanding?**

2. **Does the social friction kashrut creates feel like a barrier separating you from meaningful engagement with the broader world, or does it function as a protective boundary for your identity?**

3. **What other ordinary physical acts in your life might be transformed by applying a layer of mindfulness or intentional restriction?**

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