



Defining Purity and Impurity

Parshat Sh'mini, Leviticus 6:1- 11:47 | by Mark Greenspan

“The Dietary Laws” by Rabbi Paul S. Drazen, (pp.305-338) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

A few weeks before Passover reports came in from the Middle East that a cloud of locust had descended upon Egypt mimicking the eighth plague of the Bible. When the wind shifted direction the plague of locust crossed over the border into Israel. There was great excitement in Israel when some rabbis announced that the species of locust that had invaded Israel were actually kosher! Offering various recipes Rabbi Natan Slifkin announced that there was no reason that Jews could not adopt the North African custom of eating the locust. Slifkin wrote: “I have eaten locusts on several occasions. They do not require a special form of slaughter and one usually kills them by dropping them into boiling water. They can be cooked in a variety of ways – lacking any particular culinary skills I usually just fry them with oil and some spices. It’s not the taste that is distinctive so much as the tactile experience of eating a bug – crunchy on the outside with a chewy center!” Our first reaction to the rabbi’s announcement is “Yuck!” Yet his point is well taken. While we might have a cultural aversion to locusts there is nothing specifically un-Jewish about eating them. The Torah speaks of purity and impurity with regard to food. Kashrut has little to do with hygiene, health, or culinary tastes. We are left to wonder what makes certain foods tamei and others tahor? What do we mean when we speak about purity with regard to kashrut?

The Torah Connection

These are the instructions (torah) concerning animals, birds, all living creatures that move in water and all creatures that swarm on earth, for distinguishing between the impure (tamei) and the pure (tahor), between living things that may be eaten and the living things that may not be eaten.

-Leviticus 11:46-47

By classifying certain living creatures as tamei, “impure,” the laws of Leviticus 11 and of Deuteronomy 14 place them in a broad “avoidance category” thereby helping to ensure that they would not be used as food. These laws became part of an elaborate system of purity and impurity affecting the sanctuary and the priesthood as well as the lives of the individual Israelites, their families and the community as a whole. Avoidance of the impure is a prerequisite for the attainment of holiness. Conversely, impurity is incompatible with holiness: It detracts from the special relationship between God and the people of Israel and threatens Israel’s claim to the land...

-Baruch Levine, The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary, Leviticus

Uncleanness is regarded by heathen cults as a destructive power, bringing evil and sickness on man, a power hostile and dangerous to the gods, to holiness. Uncleanness originates in the evil powers that fight the good ones in God and man. Uncleanness is bound up with the forces of death, sickness and darkness in the world of evil spirits that aim at destroying man. ... In the Bible uncleanness does not figure as a power at all; it is purely a state, a religious aesthetic situation...all power and activity were concentrated in the domain of holiness...in the Bible, uncleanness is not regarded, per se, as a source of danger and it is not bound up with the demoniac activity.

-Yehezkiel Kaufmann, *The History of the Israelite Religion*, ()

Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore, involves correct definition, discrimination and order. Under this heading, all the rules of sexual morality exemplify the holy. Incest and adultery are against holiness in the simple

sense of right order. Morality does not conflict with holiness, but holiness is more a matter of separating that which should be separated than of protecting the rights of husbands and brothers...developing the idea of holiness as order, not confusion, this list upholds rectitude and straight dealing as holy, and contradiction and double-dealing as against holiness.... We have now laid a good basis for approaching the laws about clean and unclean meats. To be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity and perfection of the individual and the kind. The dietary rules merely develop the metaphor of holiness on the same lines.

- Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; reprint, New York: Routledge 2013)

I maintain that food forbidden by the Torah is unwholesome. There is nothing among the forbidden foods whose injurious character is doubted except pork and fat. Yet, also in these cases, doubt is unjustified; for pork contains more moisture than necessary for human food, and too much of superfluous matter. The principle reason why the Torah forbids swine flesh is to be found in the circumstances that its habits and its foods are very dirty and loathsome...the fat of the intestines makes us full, interrupts our digestion, and produces cold and thick blood...it is more fit for fuel than for food.

- Moses Maimonides *Guide for the Perplexed* III, 48

God forbid that I should believe that the reason for forbidden foods is medicinal! For were that so, then the books of God's Laws would be in the same class as any of the minor and brief medical books...Furthermore, our own eyes see that the people who eat pork and insects and such...are alive and healthy to this very day...moreover the more dangerous animals...which are not even mentioned at all in the list of prohibited ones. And there are many poisonous herbs known to physicians which the Torah does not mention at all. All of which points to the conclusion that the Torah of God did not come to heal bodies and seek their material welfare, but to seek the health of the soul, the cure of its illness.

-Don Isaac Abarbanel, Commentary Parshat Sh'mini

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said: From where do we derive that a person should not say, "I loathe pig's flesh," or "I do not desire to put on shatnez (a forbidden mixture of linen and wool)." Rather he should say, "I desire it; yet what can I do since my Father in Heaven has decreed upon me against it." Scripture states, "I have set you apart;" your being set apart from them should be for My name; one should separate himself from transgression and accept upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.

- *Sifra, Sh'mini, Rashi 20:26*

Reflections

One of the most confusing ideas in the book of Leviticus is the concept of *tumah* and *taharah*, impurity and purity. This book is referred to as *Torat Kohanim*, the Law of the Priesthood; it encourages the descendants of Aaron (*kohain/kohanim*) as well as the people of Israel to strive to live in a state of purity. But what is impurity? What makes something "pure" or "impure?" For us *tamei* evokes notions of dirt, defilement, and even disease. It is no wonder that contemporary Jews often confuse the dietary laws with matters of health and hygiene. Rather than encouraging observance this rationale actually becomes an obstacle to the dietary laws. If the reason we don't eat pork is that it causes trichinosis or other diseases then one can argue that today when all meat is supervised by federal regulations and there is no longer a fear of this disease it is no longer necessary to observe these laws.

The notion of *tumah* and *taharah* is much broader than simply hygiene. They are applied to intimate relations, moral integrity, clothing, and cultic matters. The *Torah* assumes the existence of these states of being but

does not explain where they originate. Bible scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers all speculate on the existential nature of *tumah* and *taharah*.

Baruch Levine suggests that impurity is simply an “avoidance category;” it is what one must avoid in order to strive for holiness in one’s life. Similar to Yehezkiel Kaufman’s analysis of impurity, *tumah* does not exist as a separate entity, associated with the demonic or evil realm. Both Levine and Kaufman attempt to remove the demonic from the realm of impurity; yet when one considers attitudes toward the non-kosher, particularly pork, one begins to wonder whether their explanation is more apologetic than realistic.

Mary Douglas, both an anthropologist and a devout Catholic, offers a different explanation that accounts for the extreme response to the pig. For her, impurity has something to do with a world view. The biblical/Jewish world view is built on separate categories and orderly distinctions. Some animals are pure because they have certain characteristics. Animals that fail to have those characteristics are impure. Kosher quadrupeds for instance must have a split hoof and chew their cud. Those that fail to have those characteristics are non-kosher/impure. The pig however is particularly abhorrent because it confuses the categories of pure and impure; it has a split hoof but it does not chew its cud. In other words it looks kosher on the outside but isn’t on the inside. A separation of categories is one thing; the confusion of categories is considered much worse.

Finally we have Maimonides and Abarbanel. They each see impurity and purity in very different ways. Moses Maimonides, the eminent scientist and rationalist, understands kosher and non-kosher animals as related to matters of health. Abarbanel, who lived several generations later, rejects this explanation; based on objective observation he argues that eating non-kosher food cannot possibly be related to matters of health since those who eat pork are no less healthy than those who avoid it. For Abarbanel purity is a spiritual matter much as the Talmud suggests when it states that one should not avoid pork and other forbidden foods simply because they are repulsive to one’s taste. These laws have to do with obeying God’s will and not what is tasteful or distasteful.

So what should we conclude from this? Next time someone offers you a fried locust, try it – you might like it!

Halakhah L’ma-aseh

1. *While all living creatures must consume nourishment, we human beings are different because we have the ability to add new dimensions to even the most mundane aspects of life by making them holy. The opportunity, that chance to add a level of sanctity to the everyday act of eating is the essential element of keeping kosher. Keeping kosher forces us to stop and think about what we eat, when we eat, even about what plates on which we eat and what pots and pans in which we cook. In turn, this effort to ensure that we are following the rules appropriately forces us to focus on God’s structure for living and eating, and, in so doing, allows a spark of holiness to illumine our everyday lives.*
2. - *The Observant Life*, pp. 306
3. *It also bears mentioning that the reverence for life engendered by the dietary laws has contributed over the generations to the development of a tradition that demands humane treatment of all living creatures.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 306
4. *Finally, many people have long felt there is a disconnect between scrupling mightily regarding the observance of the law while demonstrating an apparent disregard for the health, safety and dignity of food industry workers. Responding to the*

dissonance, the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism began in 2006 to work together to create Magen Tzedek, a system intended to certify adherence to ethical standards with respect to the treatment of workers in the food industry.

- The Observant Life, pp. 307

Questions to Ponder

1. What connection might there be between certain physical characteristics of animals and the notion of purity and impurity?
2. Don Isaac Abarbanel dismisses Maimonides' argument about impurity out of hand. How would Maimonides' argument stand up today? How would Abarbanel's argument stand up today?
3. Are there areas of kashrut in which hygiene and health may actually be an issue?
4. Douglas suggests that there is actually a connection between dirt and impurity. What is it?
5. To what other areas of life can we apply the notion of impurity?
6. How might purity and impurity apply to the use of the internet?
7. Which argument is most convincing to you for promoting the observance of the dietary laws?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan