

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO KASHRUT

The Jewish dietary laws (kashrut) to those unfamiliar with them may seem somewhat daunting, but they are really fairly simple. The word “kosher” (in Hebrew *kasher*) means fit or proper. The Torah (*Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*) delineates which animals are kosher. Among mammals only those which have a cloven hoof and chew their cud are deemed kosher. This includes cattle, sheep and goats, but excludes, for example, pigs and horses. In the category of sea creatures, only those which have fins and scales are acceptable. This excludes, for example, shellfish, catfish, squid and shark. As for birds, the Torah only explicitly mentions those species which are prohibited without listing characteristics. Interestingly, all the creatures prohibited are birds of prey. Domesticated fowl such as chickens, geese, ducks and pigeons are among those which are permitted. The Torah also prohibited the consumption of animal blood so all blood from fowl and meat must be properly removed.

Rabbinic law developed a specific manner in which kosher animals are to be slaughtered (*shechitah*). Animals are killed by a quick slit of the jugular vein with a knife that must be kept extremely sharp. The purpose is to minimize the suffering of the animal. The killing is done by a ritual slaughterer (*shochet*) who receives special training. The laws of *shechitah* and the prohibition against eating blood do not apply to fish.

The Torah three times commands, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (*Exodus* 23:19; 34:26; *Deuteronomy* 14:21). This prohibition became the basis for later rabbinic laws on the separation of meat and milk. Not only are milk and meat products not to be eaten together but a kosher kitchen must have separate dishes, utensils, dish drainers, sponges, etc. for milk and meat. Some foods such as eggs, fish, grains, fruits and vegetables are considered neutral (*pareve*).

The laws of Passover are complex and will not be discussed here. Every pre-Passover issue of the Or Shalom Horizons contains a digest of these laws.

People “keep kosher” for many reasons. Some may see it as a divine commandment from God. For others it is a concrete way to bring Jewish identity into their lives on a daily basis. I see *kashrut* as a way of sanctifying even the most mundane activity, transforming a basic biological need into something holy. *Kashrut* also teaches reverence for life. It makes us more aware of the fact that we are taking life in order to sustain ourselves by restricting what we may eat and how we may kill it.

Deciding to keep kosher is an important step in living a fuller Jewish life. Maintaining a kosher home cannot help but enrich your Jewish identity. Such a decision is best carried out in stages rather than all at once. So, for example, you might begin by ceasing to eat shellfish and pork and not mixing meat and milk products. The next step could be buying only kosher meat and fowl. The next step would be ensuring that all processed food items in your house have a *hekhsher*, a registered symbol indicating the product is kosher. You will be amazed to discover how many food products are indeed certified as kosher. The final step involves changing and organizing your kitchen to be kosher by having separate dishes, cutlery and utensils for meat and milk. It is not necessary to entirely re-equip your kitchen as it is possible to purge and clean utensils, dishes, and cutlery and render them kosher (*kashering*). Most appliances can be kashered as well. I would be happy to personally advise and assist anyone in this process.

Recommended reading:

The Jewish Dietary Laws: by Samuel Dressner and Seymour Siegel,
Rabbinical Assembly, New York, 1982.

Making Your Kitchen Kosher: A Step by Step Guide, Women’s League
for Conservative Judaism, New York