

A PERSONAL VIEW OF KASHRUT

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Kosher observance entails many things. Each Jew who considers himself or herself to be “observant” calibrates the areas and degrees of that observance.

There are many theories about *kashrut*'s origins—anthropological, sociological, moral, health-related. Torah doesn't offer any explicit reason other than God's command. Presumably, there are many factors. I'm more interested, however, in the outcomes of the practice than its origins.

“Keeping kosher” is commonly associated with not eating pork and shellfish, but it was my evangelical Christian naturopath who convinced me to avoid both pigs and shellfish because they have inefficient digestive systems and retain toxins and allergens. I realized that kosher observance may have given Jews an adaptive advantage in terms of well-being and longevity, since our circulatory, neural, lymphatic, and digestive systems are healthier than those of others who eat toxin-filled foods.

There may be health reasons for separating meat and dairy, too. Vegans don't consume dairy products (along with meat), and there are naturopathic reasons for avoiding dairy, particularly homogenized/pasteurized milk products. Many naturopaths believe that the process of producing dairy products damages the food, making people less able to absorb nutrients. There's also a view that eating meat and dairy together makes our bodies less able to break down foods in our digestion than if we ate them separately, clogging our systems and raising cholesterol levels.

Beyond health, there are other reasons for maintaining kosher awareness. For one thing, it makes consumers and eaters more conscious of what they ingest. (My wife has long quipped that “organic” is the New Age “kosher.”)

Keeping kosher is what Jews have always done and are commanded to do. While that's not enough for me, I originally stopped eating pork in order to maintain my connection to my ancestors and my tradition. I think there's value in doing so.

There's another reason that's difficult for non-Jews to understand. Kosher and Sabbath observance have always distinguished Jews from others. Being different is part of what it means to be Jewish. Jews are, frankly, notoriously contrarian (even enjoying breaking their own rules) and don't follow the crowd. The Jewish path is a less traveled one.

This “otherness” gives us a different perspective and allows us to see connections others don't. It's what has allowed Jews to help make the world a better place. Look at the Jewish Nobel prizewinners, artists, and humanitarians—well beyond the miniscule percentage of Jews in the population. Sadly, this very habit of life and mind that has advanced the world is what offends non-Jews and makes non-Jews suspicious of us. Despite this, Jews (religious and secular) continue to live distinctively, often without realizing they're doing so.

I don't view Judaism as solely a religion, but rather as a way and philosophy of life that has made one people take an “alternate route” for three millennia. For me, what distinguishes Jews isn't the obvious, but an array of things that most don't notice. These include non-religious elements, such as pursuit of learning, challenging authority, taking pleasure in debate, love of good food, and humor. Jews have, and will, adopt the cultural influences around us. One of the distinctive characteristics of Jews has been our capacity to adapt what it means to be Jewish and still remain Jews. We're protean, able to take on different roles and appearances, but still keep a Jewish perspective and way of life, wherever we go. That's what continues to make me Jewish—not dietary law, per se.

I value thinking about food and believe that *kashrut* encourages this. My personal understanding of *kashrut* isn't very traditional. For me, kosher dietary practice means being conscious of food, how it's grown, raised, and prepared, and where it comes from. It also includes the humane treatment of animals. Organic practices are a form of *kashrut* for me, and I consider free-range/non-hormonal chickens more truly kosher than chickens prepared according to rabbinical standards. If I could easily obtain and afford kosher/free range/non-hormonal chickens, I would prefer them.

That's my highly idiosyncratic understanding of *kashrut*: it preserves ancient traditions that possess great wisdom, and, together with modern organic foods, it makes sense to me.