Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Shemini

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Shemini

Kashrut: Holiness through Separation

Introduction

Parashat Shemini concludes with the Torah's first comprehensive presentation of the laws of kashrut. The chapter distinguishes between animals that may be eaten and those that are forbidden: land animals must possess both split hooves and chew their cud; fish must have fins and scales; many birds and most creeping creatures are prohibited.

Yet the Torah provides remarkably little explanation for these distinctions. It lists the laws in detail but offers almost no direct rationale for them. This silence has prompted centuries of interpretation as Jewish thinkers have sought to understand the deeper meaning behind the dietary laws.

Several complementary approaches emerge from Jewish interpretation across the centuries. Some interpreters emphasize possible physical or psychological effects of different foods. Others focus on the religious discipline created by these laws. Still others highlight the ethical and theological vision reflected in the Torah's restrictions on human consumption of animals.

Together, these perspectives suggest that the laws of kashrut transform one of the most basic human activities—eating—into a domain of holiness.

Explanations for the Laws of Kashrut

Health Explanations

Some commentators suggested that the dietary laws may promote physical health. Rashbam (on Leviticus 11:3) and Rambam (*Guide of the Perplexed* III:48) propose that certain animals are prohibited because they are harmful to human beings.

At first glance, this approach appears plausible. Some non-kosher animals do indeed carry diseases—for example, pigs can transmit trichinosis, and hares may carry tularemia. Shellfish and other bottom feeders bring various health risks.

Nevertheless, this explanation encounters significant difficulties. The Torah itself never mentions health as a reason for these laws. Abarbanel further observes that many poisonous plants are not prohibited by the Torah. If the primary concern were human health, it would be surprising for such dangers to go unaddressed.

Rabbi Yitzhak Arama (*Akedat Yitzhak*) adds another challenge: many non-Jewish populations that consume these animals enjoy perfectly good health. While dietary restrictions may incidentally promote health, this was likely not the Torah's primary concern.

Moral and Psychological Influence

Another explanation focuses on the moral and spiritual influence of the animals themselves. Ramban (on Leviticus 11:11) and Abarbanel suggest that the Torah prohibits the consumption of predatory animals because their violent nature might shape human character. In this view, people are influenced by what they eat.

This idea finds support in a broader pattern within the Torah's laws. All predatory land animals are excluded from the list of permitted species. The Torah may be teaching that those who aspire to holiness should not nourish themselves from creatures defined by aggression and bloodshed.

At the same time, this explanation cannot fully account for the entire system. Several herbivorous animals are also prohibited, which suggests that additional considerations must be involved. Fish predators, moreover, are permitted under the Torah's criteria of fins and scales.

Discipline and Spiritual Formation

A third approach shifts the focus from the nature of the animals to the spiritual discipline created by kashrut. Ibn Ezra (on Leviticus 11:43) explains that these laws protect Israel from impurity and preserve their sanctity. By carefully distinguishing between permitted and forbidden foods, the people cultivate constant awareness of holiness in everyday life.

Other commentators develop this idea further. *Akedat Yitzhak* and Shadal understand the dietary laws as a form of obedience that trains Israel to accept God's will even in ordinary matters. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch similarly stresses that kashrut elevates the physical act of eating into a spiritual practice.

The Torah itself hints at this idea in its conclusion to the chapter:

“For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy… For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44–45).

Holiness in the Torah frequently emerges through acts of separation and distinction. Just as God created the world by separating light from darkness, land from sea, and Israel from the nations, so too Israel learns holiness by distinguishing between what may and may not be eaten.

The Ethical System of Kashrut

Modern scholarship has also explored the ethical vision reflected in the dietary laws. Professor Jacob Milgrom (*Anchor Bible*) argues that kashrut forms part of a broader moral framework governing the human consumption of animals.

Limiting Human Domination

According to the Torah’s creation narrative, human beings were originally commanded to follow a vegetarian diet: “I have given you every seed-bearing plant… and every tree with fruit… they shall be yours for food” (Genesis 1:29). Only after the Flood was humanity permitted to eat meat (Genesis 9:3). Even then, the Torah immediately imposed restrictions.

The dietary laws therefore limit humanity’s domination over the animal world. Although people may eat meat, they may do so only within carefully defined boundaries.

This idea may also extend the distinction between clean and unclean animals already mentioned in the story of Noah. Noah offers sacrifices only from clean animals, and the Torah later restricts Israel’s diet in a similar way.

Excluding Predators

The Torah’s exclusion of predatory animals reinforces this ethical vision. Creatures that live by violence and bloodshed are not considered suitable food for a nation called to holiness.

This pattern lends additional support to the earlier interpretation of Ramban and Abarbanel that predatory behavior plays a role in determining which animals may be eaten.

Conclusion

The laws of kashrut transform eating into an arena of religious meaning.

Some explanations emphasize the possible physical or psychological effects of food. Others highlight the discipline created by obedience to divine law. Still others emphasize the ethical framework that governs humanity’s relationship with the animal world.

At the heart of the system lies the Torah’s call to holiness. Just as God created the world through acts of separation and distinction, Israel is called to cultivate holiness by learning to distinguish between permitted and forbidden.

Eating, one of the most ordinary activities of human life, thus becomes an opportunity to practice sanctity. Through the laws of kashrut, the Torah teaches that holiness is not confined to the sanctuary. It extends into the rhythms of daily living, shaping even the food that sustains us.