

# The Kosher laws: A brief introduction

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg

“For over three thousand years, Judaism has taught that how we eat and what we feed ourselves are sacred and communal matters – sanctifying us, educating us, nourishing our identity, and fortifying our morality. We need that sustenance no less than our ancestors did. Our meals can feed our spirit, too, through the same simple guidelines that have shaped Jewish eating and Jewish living since the beginning of our people.” (Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, *It's A Mitzvah!*)

The recipes in this book are all kosher - meaning they can all be prepared according to the Jewish dietary laws. These introductory comments include an overview of the laws of Kashrut, as well as an assortment of quotations from various sources, traditional and modern, that address the question of why keeping kosher has been such an important part of Jewish tradition for centuries.








**Only certain species of animals may be eaten.** The Bible lists criteria for Kosher and non-Kosher animals. Kosher mammals must have a cloven hoof and chew their cud; thus cattle, goats, and sheep are kosher, while pigs and rabbits are not. Kosher sea animals must have both fins and scales, excluding all mollusks and crustaceans (clams, oysters, lobster, crab, etc.) as well as some species of fish (e.g., catfish; shark). Kosher birds are not predators or scavengers; kosher fowl include chicken, turkey, goose, and duck.

**The animals must be slaughtered in a particular manner.** The laws of Kashrut demand that animals be slaughtered in the most painless manner possible, by an expert trained in the laws of Kashrut who is sensitive to the sanctity of life. (There is no special procedure for the ritual slaughter of fish; they are just removed from the water in the same way as all other fish.) Additionally, the meat must be prepared in a certain manner, through the removal of as much blood as possible from the meat before it is cooked, as blood is considered the primary symbol of life. (For the same reason, eggs with blood spots in them are not kosher.)

**Meat products may not be eaten at the same meal with milk products,** based on the Biblical commandment “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” Observant Jewish households have separate sets of dishes, pots and pans, and utensils for dairy and meat meals and will wait a prescribed period of time (usually, 3 hours or 6 hours) between a meat meal and a dairy meal.

**All fruit, vegetable and grain products are kosher, as are dairy products and eggs.** Thus the *Kashrut* system is clearly, first and foremost, a system for monitoring the consumption of meat. (There is some controversy over cheese, wine, and grape juice, so many observant Jews will buy these products only when they are certified as kosher.)

**Many products available in the United States have a symbol on the label indicating that they are certified as kosher by a rabbinical supervisor.** Such a symbol is the best guarantee that the product contains no non-kosher ingredients and that only kosher utensils were used in its

production. The following are some examples of such symbols: , , , , , , . The presence of the letter “K” on a food package often means, but does not necessarily mean, that the food is produced under rabbinical supervision. Feel free to consult your rabbi for any questions relating to the Jewish dietary laws.

## WHY KOSHER? - A Variety of Perspectives

“The major Jewish dietary laws rest on a single premise: *Eating meat is a moral compromise*. There is a difference between eating a hamburger and eating a bowl of cereal.” (Rabbi Harold Kushner, *To Life!*)

“The content of *kashrut* has puzzled many analysts... Perhaps the most interesting analysis—because it went to the heart of what the entire halakhic system was about – was the one that argued that the entire system of distinctions concerning food was an integral part of a culture that focused on distinctions.” (Rabbi Arthur Waskow, *Down-To-Earth Judaism*)

“Why [kosher] land animals must chew their cud and have split hooves is a fascinating question, but it is irrelevant to *Kashrut*’s moral purpose of limiting our killing and eating of animals. It is analogous to asking why red lights signify “stop” and green lights mean “go.” There may be psychological or other reasons for the choice of these colors, but they are irrelevant to the primary purpose of traffic lights, which is to guide traffic. Red and green may have been selected arbitrarily. Similarly, the signs of kosher animals may be regarded as having been arbitrarily selected. ....Given Judaism’s goal of limiting the number of animals Jews could kill to eat, some signs delineating kosher and non-permitted animals had to be selected.” (Dennis Prager and Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*)

“There is no clearer visible symbol of life than blood. To spill blood is to bring death. To inject blood is often to save life. The removal of blood which Kashrut teaches is one of the most powerful means of making us constantly aware of the concession and compromise which the whole act of eating meat, in reality, is. Again, it teaches us reverence for life.” (Rabbi Samuel Dresner, *The Jewish Dietary Laws*)

“For thousands of years, the dietary laws have created a potent bond, solidifying Jewish identity, forging a link with Jews throughout time and across the globe, and strengthening family and friends into communities devoted to a more humane order on Earth.” (Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, *It’s a Mitzvah!*)

“There are creatures well-known for their destructiveness like vipers, adders, and scorpions not mentioned in the list of animals forbidden by the Torah. All this merely teaches us that the Divine law did not come to take the place of a medical

handbook.” (Don Isaac Abravanel, Spanish-Jewish scholar and statesman, 1437-1508)

“We [observant Jews] are a nutritionist’s dream. We are acutely conscious at the point of eating—we stop to recite a blessing before placing anything in our mouths. We wait prescribed periods between meat and dairy. Our very notion of food is linked with limitation and self-discipline. Add to this the value we assign to life and health, and you have the ideal candidate for improved health through dietary modification. (Kenneth Storch, nutritionist, 1980’s)

“The philosopher Epictetus states that if one placed the following two words on his heart, he would be certain not to sin: ‘sustine et abstine,’ i.e., ‘endure and abstain’ from pleasures. The numerous mitzvot and statutes accustom man to exercise self-control. (Samuel David Luzzato, Italian Jewish writer, 19th c.)

“The Jew is unable to look upon the sport of hunting simply as an opportunity to get out into the open air, flex his muscles and “renew his contact with nature.” He views the deliberate shooting of an animal for no reason other than “sport” with utter abhorrence and sees in it the aggressive instinct in man coming to the fore. He knows that in the repeated act of killing, man himself may become a killer. Judaism recognizes this as a very real danger which confronts man. But it neither offers pious platitudes of condemnation, nor does it confess helplessness. It has devised the laws of Kashrut as a habitual system of spiritual discipline which trains the Jew each and every day to have reverence for life, even though life must be taken to provide him with food.” (Rabbi Samuel Dresner, *The Jewish Dietary Laws*)

“Why ritual slaughter? Far more appropriate for man not to eat meat. Torah requires a troublesome and inconvenient procedure in the hope that the bother and annoyance of the whole procedure will restrain him from a strong and uncontrollable desire for meat.” (Keli Yakar, 16th century Bible commentary)

“Eating is one of the important functions of life. It begins as a biological act, a means of satisfying hunger. When we invite a friend for dinner, a new dimension is added to eating; it becomes a social act. It helps to cement friendship. ...On the Sabbath, or even more, on Passover at the Seder, eating becomes a religious act, an act of worship, with the table becoming an altar to God. Religion thus raises the biological act into the dimension of the holy. Hence the connection in the Torah between the dietary laws and holiness.” (Rabbi Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*)

**For more information on Kashrut, please consult:**

Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, 1979, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, NY

The most thorough reference book for Jewish law through the lens of the Conservative movement, including extensive treatment of the laws of Kashrut.

Samuel H. Dresner and Seymour Siegel, *The Jewish Dietary Laws: Their Meaning for Our Time and a Guide to Observance*, 1982, Rabbinical Assembly, New York, NY

Philosophical discussion as well as a practical guide.