

מבשרם לא תאכלו ובנבלתם לא תגעו ממאים הם לכם:

“You shall not eat of their flesh or touch their carcasses;
they are unclean for you.”—Leviticus 11:8

SH’MINI (“*Eighth*”)

LEVITICUS 9:1–11:47

T’S A DRAMATIC APPEARANCE. EIGHT DAYS later, Moses convenes Aaron, his sons, and Israel’s elders, and commands them to arrange a complicated series of sacrifices involving a ram, a he-goat, an ox, some calves, and a meal offering.

The entire Israelite tribe assembles as Aaron goes to work amid the blood, organs, and smoke of the sacrifices. As he raises his arms to bless the people, the Lord appears in the form of fire, which bursts forth to consume the burnt offering. At the sight of this spectacle, the Israelites scream, fall forward, and bow down to the ground.

Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu set a fire and load it with incense to make an offering that God has not commanded. The Lord sets them on fire, burning

them to death in an instant. Moses has to explain to Aaron that God meant it when speaking these words:

“Through those near to Me I show
Myself holy,
And gain glory before all the people.”
Aaron remains silent.

Moses instructs Aaron’s cousins Mishael and Elzaphan to dispose of the burned bodies and warns Aaron and his family against following the

traditional mourning ritual; if they tear their clothes or bare their heads, they will be struck down. The Lord takes a moment to prohibit Aaron and the priests from drinking alcohol before they enter the Tent of Meeting; they must be able to distinguish between the holy and the profane. The sacrifices then continue.

THE BIRTH OF KOSHER

God fills Moses and Aaron in on the details of kosher food. The Israelites are allowed to eat any animal that has real hooves, and that chews the cud. Camels, a hare-like animal called daman, and swine are expressly prohibited. Any fish can be eaten if it has fins and scales.

Birds of prey, including the eagle, vulture, black vulture, hawks, and falcons, are off-limits. Ravens, night-hawks, ostriches, seagulls, little owls,

great owls, white owls, cormorants, pelicans, bustards, storks, herons, hoopoes, and bats are prohibited.

All winged insects that walk are considered an abomination, though locusts, crickets, and grasshoppers are permitted.

A detailed list of animals deemed unclean is offered; it includes every beast that does not chew the cud or walk on paws. Anyone who carries the carcasses remains unclean until the evening and will have to wash their clothing.

God wraps up the legislation by reminding them of the intention behind the laws, declaring, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” It becomes the Israelites’ task to distinguish between living things that can be eaten and those that cannot.

DAVID SAX

Okay, this all seems pretty straightforward. No pigs, shrimp, oysters, or mussels. Steer clear of the baby goats boiled in their mother's milk, not to mention eels and sharks, crocodiles and geckos, hawks and vultures, and the rock badger (and I'm guessing that You're also implying all other badgers as well).

Now, here's a genuine product that's clearly on Your hit list: Baconnaisse, a spreadable mayonnaise, touted as a condiment and dressing, that tastes like the salted belly fat of the cloven-footed, hoof-parted, non-cud-chewing swine that are clearly verboten (right there in clause seven). It's made by J&D's, a food company based in Seattle whose slogan proclaims, "Everything Should Taste Like Bacon," and it works to fulfill that commandment with products like bacon salt, bacon popcorn, bacon gravy, bacon lip balm, and bacon-flavored envelopes (called MMMMMMvelopes).

Sounds like *treif* city to me. Cue the fire, bring on the brimstone.

Wait, it's kosher? Certified by the Orthodox Union to be consumed with meat, dairy, and parve foods? Seriously?

Okay, but how about the belly-crawling shellfish buffet offered by the idolaters at Dyna-Sea: crab salad and lobster rolls fit for a Kennebunkport summer's lunch, and pink shrimp curled around a martini glass, mocking You from their horseradish-spiked red cocktail sauce, colored the very fire of hell they're surely destined for.

Kosher, too? Certified by Kof-K for consumption with all foods. Oh, come on!

For close to three thousand years, Your chosen people have largely followed the dietary laws, avoiding the unclean creatures, making delicious brisket out of the clean ones, all while pretending You never

really mentioned the whole edible-insects thing (locusts, crickets, and grasshoppers are perfectly kosher, because they have jointed legs, though the fried-cricket market of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, has yet to take off).

Then, in the mid-twentieth century, some among Your faithful realized that the devout were deprived, and, like Soviets trading a month's supply of toilet paper for a pair of Levi's, they would pay handsomely for the illusion of transgression wrapped in the legal safe ground of kosher certification.

“Look,” these people say, “it's certified, within the letter of the law, kosher as a matzo. What's the harm in eating a Whopper at the kosher Burger King in Costa Rica, or McNuggets at one of several kosher McDonald's in Israel? If eating a Reuben sandwich with kosher corned beef and a slice of soy-based cheese was a sin, wouldn't that be there in the *Sh'mini*? Wouldn't there be a clause saying that we shall not eat foods that *pretend* to be unclean, even though they aren't?”

Decades from now, a bar mitzvah buffet at a kosher banquet hall will resemble a Roman feast, once the tempeh tipping point is breached and test-tube experiments with embryonic protein cultures yield remarkably tasty kosher animal flesh. We'll bypass the mock shrimp scampi wrapped in mock bacon, and head straight for the mock alligator jambalaya, mock eagle-egg sliders, and the *pièce de résistance*, an entire roast mock suckling pig, apple and all, carved with great flourish, in an act of legally certified, morally questionable mockery that the devout will eat with a greedy ferocity, grease painting their lips, as they turn to a shocked-looking elderly relative and say:

“Don't worry, it's perfectly kosher.”