

You are to sanctify yourselves and you shall become holy ... and you should not contaminate yourselves ... to distinguish between the contaminated and the pure and between the animal that may be eaten and the animal that may not be eaten. (11:44,47)

A significant portion of *Parashas Shemini* is devoted to the laws of *kashrus*. Added laws are stated in *Parashas Re'eh*. This indicates the critical importance for a Jew to observe the kosher dietary laws. As in all *mitzvos*, both positive and prohibitive, Hashem has His reason for their commandment. The Torah alludes to the idea that, in order for us to maintain our sanctity, we must adhere to the dietary laws. *Sforno* writes, since Hashem is holy, He wants His people to likewise be holy, so that they will be eternal, perceive their Creator, and follow in His path. This can only be achieved if we abstain from forbidden foods. In other words, keeping kosher is not just another *mitzvah*. It defines us and, without it, we are unable to achieve sanctity ever.

The *Mesillas Yescharim* writes (*Perek* 11): "If you defile yourself by consuming them (forbidden foods), you will ultimately become personally defiled by them. This is because forbidden foods introduce impurity into the heart and soul of a person." *Ramchal* indicates that forbidden food has such a contaminating effect on those who consume them that they are in a sense more harmful to the person than illicit relations and theft. Furthermore, even in those extenuating circumstances when *halachah* permits ingesting a medication that has forbidden components in it, it can still have ramifications of *timtum ha'lev*, obstruction of the heart, which blocks a person's ability to achieve full sanctity. To put this in practical layman terms: We will be unable to reach the heart and mind of a Jew who is alienated from Torah and *mitzvos*, as long as his diet consists partially of forbidden foods. He just simply cannot relate to the *kedushah*, sanctity, that is part and parcel of Judaism. It is not enough for a Jew to be morally good; he must strive to achieve sanctity in such a manner that it influences and defines his every activity.

Rav Yaakov Halperin, a Torah activist in Bnei Brak who was very close with the *Chazon Ish*, sought to establish a cemetery in the Bnei Brak area which would cater only to *Shabbos* observant Jews. It was 1942, and Bnei Brak's observant community was just beginning to grow. He was able to purchase fifteen dunam of land near the Zichron Meir neighborhood, and he presented his case for the *Chazon Ish's* approval. The *gadol ha'dor*, preeminent leader of the generation, responded positively, albeit with definite stipulations, which were later publicized in the media.

The following were his criteria: "It has been a number of years since the observant community in Tel Aviv approached us concerning the establishment of a cemetery in Bnei Brak reserved only for observant Jews. This cemetery will not permit burial of those who are not *Shabbos* observant, who deny Hashem as the Divine Author of the Torah, or who consume prohibited meat such as rabbit or pork." Interestingly, the clause concerning *kashrus* was distinct from *Shemiras Shabbos* and *Torah*

m'Sinai. It was as if the sage was underscoring the prohibition against forbidden foods as unequivocal.

When asked why the *Chazon Ish* seemed to underscore *kashrus* over the other two, the *Brisker Rav, zl*, replied, “*Kashrus* is the *yesod ha'yesodos*, foundation of all foundations. To remain a true Jew requires adherence to the laws of *kashrus*... A person who does not keep kosher will have an obstructed heart that will block any wisdom from entering. As a result, his spiritual cognition will be impugned in such a manner that it will affect his total spiritual/religious demeanor/observance.”

The following vignette gives us a glimpse into the centrality of *kashrus vis-à-vis* the Jewish faith and its overriding effect on the Jewish psyche. The owner of a well-known kosher hotel in Netanya was confronted with a predicament. His hotel catered only to the strictly observant. The *kashrus* adhered to the highest standards. One day, a clearly non-observant couple arrived at the hotel and asked to register for a room. They indicated that they were paying cash up-front, no credit cards. The owner asked why they insisted on paying prior to their stay. They replied that they were planning on leaving on *Shabbos* afternoon, and, at that time, the office would surely be closed.

The owner, shaken by their response, told them that he did not think that his hotel was geared towards them. Perhaps he could help them in securing a room in another hotel. The couple replied that they had already been all over and had been unable to find a suitable room anywhere. Realizing that this issue would not go away, the owner said that he must discuss their registration with a noted scholar. “I will ask him if there is a problem with accepting your registration at our hotel if you will be leaving on *Shabbos*.”

At that time, one of the guests at the hotel was none other than the *posek ha'dor*, preeminent *halachic* decisor of the generation, *Horav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, zl*. The owner proceeded to the *Rav's* room and knocked on the door. As usual, *Rav Elyashiv* was immersed in his learning. The owner presented his query. *Rav Elyashiv* thought for a moment and replied, “What difference does it make to you if they will keep kosher for a few days?” (In other words, if, as a result of their staying at the hotel, they would keep kosher, then, by all means, let them stay!)

When the owner informed the couple of *Rav Elyashiv's* response, they were visibly moved. They became emotional, and tears came to their eyes. They explained that they were raised as *Gerrer chassidim* and had, for a good part of their lives, adhered to Torah and *mitzvos*. The tragedy of the Holocaust gave them reason to question Torah and *mitzvos* and, ultimately, the Creator. “We are very pleased that the *Rav* decided in our favor, and, as a result, we will not leave on *Shabbos*.” The story ends with the couple eventually returning to full observance of Torah and *mitzvos*. *Rav Elyashiv's* practical application of *halachah* and the significance of *kashrus*, even if but for a short period, turned the tide for this couple and started them on the road of return.