

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
**DECEMBER 10, 2011**  
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*Hindquarters and Kosher Pig; Is Food Jewish?*

I looked back over the sermons I've delivered in recent weeks since the end of the holidays and I saw that I had spoken about Gilad Shalit, Steve Jobs, Mitt Romney, Maimonides, Barack Obama, Bibi Netanyahu, Nickolas Sarkozy, Elana Kagan, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Leonard Garment, Henry Kissinger ... and I must tell you the truth: I felt like I'm the biggest yenta in the whole world! So this morning I wanted to do something "light." It's been a difficult week, so I'm not going to talk about a person; I'm going to talk about a "thing." And what thing is central to the life of every Jew? Food! And if you don't believe me, come to Beth Tfiloh – or most any shul – on any Shabbat and stand in the corner and watch as the people come in for Kiddush. It looks like the running of the bulls in Pampalona. What one minute before looked like a group of well-dressed, respectful, mild mannered, Shabbat worshippers ... all of a sudden turns in to a wild mob, ready to kill anyone who stands in their way of getting a piece of kugel. It's unbelievable! And it can only be matched by the tuna fish and egg salad that people put into their pockets for a little snack later on at home. And it is never enough! It's like the Jewish woman sitting in a restaurant with her husband complaining, "The food here is so terrible and the portions are so small."

So today let me teach you a little something about Jews and food. Today I want to tell you of one of the lowest points in history when it comes to Jews and food ... and one of the highest points as well.

One of the lowest points took place in today's Torah portion where we are told the story of our patriarch, Jacob, preparing himself to encounter Esau. That night he finds himself all alone and is confronted and wrestles with some sort of divine being. When dawn breaks Jacob

emerges victorious but limping because his hip has been broken or dislocated. As remembrance of that, the Torah tells us: “*Al kein lo yochlu b’nai Yisroel es gid hanasha* – therefore the children of Israel shall not eat the *gid hanasha* – the sciatic nerve – in an animal.” And there went filet mignon! There went some of the tastiest areas of an animal. And I can’t begin to tell you how important this law is. Of all the 613 mitzvot in the Torah, in the entire book of Genesis there are only three. The first is: Be fruitful and multiply. The second is the commandment regarding circumcision. And the third is this: the prohibition of the *gid hanasha*. This is the first negative commandment in the entire Torah. And it is hard to really understand why ... Jacob limped, so we can’t eat chateau briand?

So let me explain to you ... the reality is, we can eat chateau briand. And we can eat filet mignon! And we can eat the tenderloin. And we can eat the meat of the hindquarter of the animal. The only thing we can’t eat is the sciatic nerve and some of the fat surrounding it. But – and here comes the big “but” – it’s not easy removing the sciatic nerve. It requires real expertise. And the person who must do this must be not only extremely skilled but extremely God-fearing. And the truth is, the rabbis over the centuries really didn’t trust that this was going to be done right, and besides the procedure is extremely costly. And so, to avoid any problems and to save money, it became traditional for the entire hindquarter of the cow to be sold to a non-Jew. But there have been times in history when, in fact, we went through the process of what’s called in English “porging,” in Hebrew, “*Nikkur*” – in Yiddish, “*Traiber*” and indeed to this day there are some Sephardic communities in Israel that still continue to do this, and eat the meat that is not available to us.

But after all is said and done, it is still hard to understand why. Jacob limped ... and we have to suffer! And the truth is there really is no easy way to understand the connection. And indeed Maimonides – the ultimate rationalist – says the reason why we don’t eat the sciatic

nerve is because God commanded us not to ... and that's it! But that's not "it" for other commentators ranging from the Sforno, who says the symbolic significance of this mitzvah is to teach a Jew that a physical handicap should not discourage him in his fight for survival ... to the Chinuch, who says this commandment itself is a symbol of Israel's survival; just as Jacob emerged victorious from a dangerous foe, Jews should have faith that we will continue to do just that over the centuries. But perhaps it is Chizkuni, a 13<sup>th</sup> century French commentator, who provides the most meaningful explanation when he says that the Jew is forbidden to eat the sciatic nerve as a punishment – a penalty – to remind us that Jacob fought this battle alone. How could his sons have allowed him to remain all alone that night? A penalty to all Jews down through the ages up until the present time, who leave their elderly parents alone without a visit or a phone call, or leave their people alone without any signs of support ... A low point to remember.

But in recent weeks a high point in Jewish food was reached when Israel's Chief Rabbinate announced that it would allow for import in to the country an organic goose raised in Spain, which tastes exactly like pork. Bacon and eggs here I come! And if you find that statement shocking coming from me, let me add: I'd like it on top of a cheeseburger! You think it is surprising to hear that coming from a rabbi? Well, it's not! Our sages teach us, and I quote: "Reb Elazar ben Azaria says: a man should not say 'I do not desire to eat the flesh of a pig ...' but he should say: 'I do desire it. But what can I do? My Father in heaven has decreed against it.'" Yes, you're not supposed to say: I would never eat it because it's disgusting. The real test of one's commitment is to *want* to eat it! But not to because God told you not to!

The question is, now that I'm going to be able to eat a meat that tastes like pork ... should I? So here comes one of our Beth Tfiloh polls. By a show of hands, how many of you see nothing wrong with eating a kosher goose that tastes like a *chazer*?

The reality is, this question was raised when Baco Bits came out and fake shrimp came out. Indeed, in some ways this whole issue is even older. Centuries ago a question was asked about the manna that God provided from heaven for the Jews after they left Egypt. The manna, we are told, could miraculously taste like anything the eater desired. And the question was asked: what if the eater wanted it to taste like ham? One great scholar, the Chiddushei HaRim, asserted that the manna could not possibly assume the flavor of forbidden foods. Another great scholar, the Chida, on the other hand, said that it could. And the Chida sites a fascinating incident in the Talmud about Yalta, who was the wife of Rav Nachman. One day she pointed out to her husband that every item that God prohibited has a permitted counterpart. For example, God prohibited blood but He permitted liver. He prohibited the flesh of a pig, but permitted the brain of the shibuta, which was a fish whose brain tasted like pork. And based on this, she requested – in fact, she demanded – that she be able to sample the taste of meat cooked with milk. And in response, her husband ordered up some broiled udder.

So it would seem from here that if you have a kosher way of producing that which is forbidden, it is perfectly permissible. But it can be argued, on the other hand, that while something like a pig tasting goose is permissible, that does not mean that you are obligated to eat it! And indeed, it is reported that this is just the approach that Reb Moshe Feinstein, the great halachic decisor, took when asked about things like Baco Bits and fake shrimp. He stated: “*Mentchen fregen mir vegen di naye essens, tzu zai zainen kosher tzu nit. Ich entfer zai as di essens zainen kosher ober der hechseher iz nit (tzu vos darf ah yid di alle essens).*” For the hard of hearing, let me repeat: “People ask me regarding the new foods whether they are kosher or not. I answer them that the foods are kosher but the hechsher – the rabbinic approval – is not. (Why does a Jew need all these foods?)” But it must be noted that an equally highly thought-of halacha decisor for the ultra-Orthodox

world these days, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, says that there is no reason to hesitate from using these foods.

The fact of the matter is, there is nothing Jewish or non-Jewish about the taste of a pig. In fact, according to some authorities when the Messiah comes, the pig might become kosher – that’s why it is called the “*chazer*” which has in it the root of the word “*yachzir*” – “will turn” – to kosher. And the fact is, there is nothing Jewish or not Jewish about the taste of a cow’s sciatic nerve. In fact, we are told that it has no taste. But we do have to be careful that we not allow ourselves to cross over lines that rob our tradition of all meaning. Such a line was crossed recently when Michael Pezzula and Melanie Low got married. Their wedding ceremony, as reported in the Washington Post, contained a rabbi and a ketubah and a chuppah with the seven blessings recited followed by the breaking of a glass at the end of the ceremony. The only problem is, Melanie is a Chinese Episcopalian and Michael is a Catholic! They just thought it would be rather “funky” to have a Jewish themed wedding! And having a rabbi there only goes to strengthen those who claim that rabbis will do anything to make a buck! After all, that rabbi has said, he has also officiated at a Doctor Seuss themed wedding! What’s so terrible about this, you might ask? Well, as the article described it, the ceremony ended with the rabbi placing a glass on the ground for the groom to break ... “reminding the couple and their guests that love is fragile and must be protected.” And here I thought it had something to do with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem! And the rabbi’s concluding words being, “When the glass is broken we shout ‘*mazel tov*’ and that means the ceremony is over and the bar is open!”

You know what that rabbi and couple did with the Jewish wedding ceremony many of our people do with the Christian Christmas. We try and redefine it so that we can make it our own. There will be a lot of Chanukah parties taking place this year on Dec. 25 ... and that’s okay,

as long as Chanukah is celebrated and not Christmas ... as long as there is a menorah and not a tree or even both.

The month of December brings with it not only Christmas but also Chanukah; a holiday which reminds us that lines are to be drawn. There was much from Greek culture that we Jews adapted into our own. The name “Alexander” is a Hebrew name but it was taken from Alexander the Great ... and that was okay. But when the Greeks tried to slaughter a pig in the temple, that crossed over the line.

And so, we Jews will continue not eating the entire hindquarter of the cow to make sure we don't step over the line with the sciatic nerve. But bring on that *chazer*-tasting goose for which I'm willing to wait on-line. And let all of us live up to the immortal words of the prophet, Michah: “All the nations may walk in the name of their God ... we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever. Amen.”

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