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Ethics Sigi Ziering

This year, our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of kashrut. Each month, an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about the food we eat: the preparation of food, the people who prepare our food, the food and restaurants that are deemed kosher. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

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¹ Leviticus 11:45.

Kashrut: Reining in Expenses

RACHEL KAHN-TROSTER

One of my favorite pieces of modern halakhah on the ethics of Jewish eating comes from the Mishnah Berurah. Commenting on the idea that Shabbat should be an *oneg*, a celebration, it states that, traditionally, this was understood to mean that meat and wine would be part of the meal. This Mishnah goes on to say that one does not have to eat meat on Shabbat, just food that is celebratory and of a higher quality than the food one eats every day. Moreover, the Mishnah Berurah teaches that one should eat simply during the rest of the week so that one has the means to eat more lavishly on Shabbat. I like the logic here, which ensures the prominence of Shabbat's holiness while encouraging modesty at other times.

But observing kashrut often feels as if we are celebrating Shabbat every night, both in terms of the foods we eat and the prices we are charged. Keeping kosher is expensive: Kosher meat, wine, cheese, and packaged goods are more costly than their counterparts without a *hekhsher*, or certification. And eating in a kosher restaurant also comes at a premium. The stricter one is with kashrut (and there have been ever increasing strictures in some communities, such as the requirement to filter water), the more products there are that require kosher supervision — thus adding to the cost. This is particularly acute at Passover, when prices rise still higher and many pantry staples must be bought fresh. Food for Pesach can cost hundreds of dollars for a festival that lasts one week. While it is true that additional labor is involved in the production of some kosher food, too often the additional expenditure feels like price gouging of a

captive market. Cost can also be a deterrent to others who may want to begin keeping kosher. On the other hand, kosher producers have the right to make a profit, and they must charge enough to pay their workers a living wage.

Kosher vegetarians and vegans, who eliminate many or all forms of animal protein from their diet, suggest one option for keeping the costs of kashrut down. Vegetarian and vegan

Adopting guidelines for the kosher catering industry might also lessen some of the financial burden at our simchas.

eating, which are primarily plant-based, have a significantly smaller environmental impact than eating higher up on the food chain. Some vegetarians point to the Torah as a guide: In the ideal world of the Garden of Eden, humans were vegetarians who took no lives in order to eat. Only after the biblical Flood were human beings permitted to eat meat. After describing which animals are forbidden, God says, “You shall be holy (*v’hiyitem kidoshim*), because I am holy (*kadosh*).”¹ Certainly, part of that holiness is separateness in eating — separating Jews from their neighbors by the foods we eat. Another aspect of that holiness might be in the intention of how and how much (not just what) we eat. Going against prevailing American norms, Jewish eating should be countercultural, encouraging simple, whole-foods eating and smaller meals rather than “fast food” and oversized portions.

While an argument in favor of a plant-based diet that is both kosher and less expensive is persuasive — in essence, circumventing much of the kosher industry — it is unrealistic

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scribe any part of my father's life. They truly are symbols, objects whose meaning goes beyond their content.

I would like to think my mother saved these books because after having thrown away everything else, she finally hit the brakes and realized what she had been doing. But more likely, they were kept as a reflex of her paranoia that 37 years later, someone was going to show up with a financial claim on her savings.

I began that day with a dread of having to slog through things. By the middle of the day, when I realized that anything meaningful to me (like a jewelry tray or a photo album) would not turn up, dread turned to anger. It was only when we accidentally stumbled on that old briefcase that the first stirrings of what would eventually emerge as forgiveness and compassion — that were difficult to summon while my mother was alive — arose quite naturally and

even peacefully.

Only two things of symbolic value made the trip home. One was a relatively decent if not inspiring copy of a painting of the seashore, and one was a cheap, battery-operated travel alarm clock. The clock signified time; death reminds us of transience. The waves returning to the sea similarly remind us that what appears separate is, in fact, connected.

Minimally, the myth of Avram smashing the idols suggests that the bond between parent and child inevitably must be sundered. In our understandable attempt to maintain memories, it is perhaps only following a death that what we once thought to be an “idol” turns out to be a “symbol.” The sad wisdom that accompanies such discoveries is that we learn that what we thought we had to shatter in order to break free we now realize we might have kept whole and still emerged into independence. 

One of Judaism's greatest strengths is its democratic character. Our body of laws and emphasis on study create a meritocratic system with few barriers to entry, and Jewish legal history shows that, oftentimes, communal tradition determined halakhah. This non-hierarchical paradigm should also result in an expansive communal discussion: All should have a voice in our tradition and the right to express their opinions.

Opinions, however, need to be constructive. Arguments and polemics that aim only to destruct or divide us should not enter into our communal discussion. The

assertion that anyone is a self-hating Jew, or — indeed — that anyone is less of a Jew as a result of an opinion he or she holds on Israeli policy, for example, does not serve any productive purpose for us as a people.

We can question our traditional norms and conventions; we may criticize, argue, or even find basic ethical faults with each other's positions. However, excluding or ignoring the other rather than engaging has no place in the Jewish conversation and should not be tolerated.

Ben Sales is the editor-in-chief of *New Voices* magazine, and a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis.

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to assume that most Jews would adopt such a vegetarian diet and lifestyle. Jews who keep kosher eat much the same way as most Americans — and for the majority, this means that the core of our diet is made up of meat, processed dairy products, and packaged goods. Busy families who are pressed for time might not resonate with the message that the key to keeping kosher at a lower cost is cooking more frequently from scratch. And putting the burden of cost control on families would also shift the locus of responsibility from the kosher industry, relieving them of the need to keep prices down and to make their business practices transparent. Certification of kashrut should be a trusted acknowledgement that the

product is both ethically produced and ritually prepared according to the laws of kashrut.

At the community level, adopting guidelines for the kosher catering industry might also lessen some of the financial burden at our simchas. Individually, we can also take steps to refine our own eating in manageable ways. Taking our cues from the Mishnah Berurah, we might try to distinguish our everyday eating more clearly from our *oneg* meal on Shabbat. If we eat more simply and less expensively most days, our diets will be more environmentally sustainable, healthier, and cheaper. This will send a message to the kosher industry that we can observe kashrut without luxuries. And on Shabbat and holidays, we will eat with a true sense of sacredness and celebration. 