

On Being a Jew, Part 3

We left off our focus on the Sabbath last week with descriptions of its events, from the opening ceremonies at sundown on Friday to the closing prayers at nightfall on Saturday.

It is clear that the Sabbath is very special for Jews. It reminds them of the exodus and the Mosaic Covenant that God made with them, which was created to demonstrate four main things to the Israelites.

1. It was meant to show the Jews the high standard of behavior they needed to be considered holy.
2. They had only human ability to meet the demands of the covenant. Therefore, it was designed to show their inability to meet this standard without God's help.
3. Through the sacrifices, it was intended to depict the person of the Messiah and His work in providing salvation that would otherwise be impossible through animal sacrifices and offerings.
4. In this and the various rituals and ceremonies observed during the Sabbath, it was meant to highlight the special personal relationship between God and the Israelite and serve as a constant weekly reminder that nurtures that relationship. Failing to observe the Sabbath could eventually damage or even temporarily sever that special relationship.

Work Forbidden on the Sabbath

Deuteronomy 5:13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work,¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any **work**...

“Work” is the Hebrew word *melekha*, which refers to one’s occupation or business, although it is not exactly the same as the English word “work.” Rabbi Donin prefers to call it “tasks forbidden on the Sabbath.” The Mishna lists thirty-nine categories of activities as *melekha*.

Some common activities that are prohibited on the Sabbath according to the Torah:

- Cooking and baking, even if they don't require lighting a fire.
- Grinding, chopping, and straining.
- Washing clothes either by hand or with a machine.
- Knitting, crocheting, and embroidering.
- Sewing, pasting, or gluing.
- Constructing or repairing.
- Writing (and erasing), drawing, painting, coloring, and typing.
- Kindling or extinguishing a fire, maintaining an existing fire, striking a match, or smoking. This includes turning electric lights on or off.
- Cutting or tearing, but does not apply to food cutting.
- Fishing and trapping.
- Gardening or lawn care, such as digging, planting, fertilizing, weeding, watering, mowing, and plucking fruit or flowers, even on indoor plants.
- Carrying, pushing, or moving an object over six feet.

The Sabbath Stove

The prohibition against cooking does not mean that a Jew can only eat cold food on the Sabbath. A “Sabbath Stove” is arranged before the Sabbath begins. It consists of a sheet of tin or aluminum—any heat-conducting material—placed over the stove burners, which are lit at a moderate or low heat and remain on throughout the Sabbath. A kettle of water can also stay on the heat source during the Sabbath, kept warm for the entire period.

Other Forbidden Activities

- Buying and selling.
- Riding an animal.
- Boating.
- Playing a musical instrument.
- Switching electric lights on or off, or any other device such as a TV, telephone, or radio.
- Handling any item whose use is forbidden during the Sabbath.
- Wedding ceremonies.
- Journeying on the Sabbath more than three-quarters of a mile beyond the limits of the town or place where one is spending the Sabbath. This is known as the “Sabbath boundary.”
- Heavy jobs such as rearranging furniture in the house.
- Watching TV, even if it was turned on before the Sabbath began.
- Preparing for post-Sabbath activity.

- Engaging in exercises or other athletic activities.
- Reading business correspondence.

Sabbath Restrictions and Children

Young children should not be prevented from engaging in activities prohibited on the Sabbath until they are old enough to understand what is expected of them.

In the child's mind, Sabbath should symbolize joy and excitement. They are showered with extra attention, special treats, and desserts. Suddenly, everything feels meaningful through food, ceremonies, singing, and fellowship.

Suspension of Sabbath Rules

Breaking Sabbath rules is allowed under specific conditions.

- When a person's life is in danger, one has a duty to break the Sabbath.
- When a physician is called to provide emergency treatment.

Kosher

The Hebrew word kosher means fit, proper, or in accordance with religious law. It comes from the Hebrew word *kashrut*, which refers to the Jewish dietary laws. It is also used to describe a "kosher person," meaning someone who lives their life according to religious teachings in every aspect. Such a person is said to be "kosher." In both Hebrew and English, the word kosher can refer to anything that is correct or proper, but it is most commonly associated with food, and that will be our focus here. Kosher is not, however, an ethnic style of cooking. The food is either kosher or it is not.

Some argue that at least some foods on the "banned list" are there because God is protecting His chosen people. Shellfish like crabs, oysters, and clams do not stay safe to eat for long without refrigeration, which was generally unavailable in Biblical times. Additionally, pork was known to carry and transmit trichinosis. Pigs are also famous for wallowing in mud, making them "unclean," but that is not the meaning of the term nor the purpose of these creatures being declared unclean.

Leviticus 11:46 This is the law about beast and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms on the ground, ⁴⁷ to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.

The above is the closing paragraph of Chapter 11 and follows a long list of animals designated as unclean to the Israelite. We tend to see “clean” and “unclean” in physical and literal terms. The pig is unclean because they wallow in mud, but that is not the meaning of the Hebrew words.

“Clean” is *tahor* and means clean or pure morally, physically, or ethically. “Unclean” in Hebrew is *tamé*, which means unclean, impure, and ethically, ritually, and religiously unacceptable. It is usually translated as unclean, defiled, or polluted. As you can see, neither word really refers to getting dirty with mud. Ask an observant Jew why he abstains from certain foods, and you will not get an answer relating to health issues. Rather, they will likely say it is because God says so. The objective is holiness, not health. God is setting His people apart from the world. “Holy” is the Hebrew word *qodesh*, which means to set apart or consecrate. In almost every instance where the food laws are referenced in the Torah, we find a call to holiness. For example:

Leviticus 11:44 For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground.

Deuteronomy 14:21 “You shall not eat anything that has died naturally. You may give it to the sojourner who is within your towns, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God ...

Exodus 22:31 “You shall be consecrated to me. Therefore, you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs.”

Rabbi Donin puts it this way:

“Holiness is not a system of piety that demands separation from society and self-denial of any legitimate human pleasures, nor the total

repression of any human drive. ... Holiness meant and means becoming master over one's passions so that one is in command and control of them, and not they in command of him. Such a holy one, trained to resist cravings for forbidden foods that tempt him, may also have strengthened his capacity to resist his cravings for forbidden sexual involvements that may tempt him too; it may also strengthen his capacity to resist forbidden, unethical actions that may hold forth the promise of tempting financial or status rewards. ... The transference of this religious discipline to other areas is not guaranteed, but there is no denying the inherent value in a religious discipline intended to train one to resist body drives and urges just to satisfy a craving or experience a pleasure." (Pg 100-101)

Of course, this definition of holiness stems from the Jewish understanding of the word within their religious context. It can be summarized like this: Holiness involves developing the willpower to resist temptation. Think of willpower as a muscle that can grow stronger with experience. Facing smaller tests builds confidence for bigger ones. We can express that as an "I" statement: "I can become stronger through experience." This is a physical and emotional challenge.

However, Christians in this Church Age have the advantage of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We don't rely on personal experience in the same way as believers in past ages, most of whom lacked the Holy Spirit. The Church Age believer has the Holy Spirit within to do whatever God calls us to do—BUT—like earlier believers, we must also develop a kind of "faith muscle" through experience. That experience involves seeing faith work as promised. We build confidence in the guidance and power of the indwelling Holy Spirit by seeing that our faith muscle delivers on its promise. This is a spiritual test.

Forbidden Foods

Leviticus Chapter 11 and Deuteronomy 14:2-21 list which animals, fish, and fowl are allowed to be eaten and which ones are not.

Only animals that chew their cud and have cloven hooves are allowed to be eaten. All others are forbidden. The animals considered unclean include the camel, pig, hare, and rock badger. The animals considered clean are sheep, goats, cattle, and deer.

Only fish with fins and scales are allowed. Common seafoods like lobsters, oysters, shrimp, clams, and crabs are not permitted. Swordfish and sturgeon are questionable because of their scale characteristics, but authorities have decided against including them.

Regarding fowl, no specific characteristics are listed to distinguish between permitted and non-permitted types. Instead, the Torah lists the prohibited fowl. It should be noted that most of the unpermitted species are birds of prey, such as vultures, ravens, hawks, owls, ostriches, pelicans, storks, and herons. Permitted fowl include chicken, turkey, ducks, and doves.

Amphibians and insects are not allowed, nor are any creatures that crawl or creep on their bellies. This bans snakes and “winged swarming things.”

All creatures allowed as food are called *tahor* (pure or clean) in the Torah. All forbidden creatures are called *tamé*, impure, unclean, or defiled. These are non-kosher animals, and there’s no way to make them kosher.

Products derived from non-kosher creatures are also not considered kosher. Eggs from non-kosher birds are forbidden. Oil from non-kosher fish is not kosher. The only exception is honey from bees, perhaps because honey is produced from flower nectar.

Additionally, any food known to be harmful is prohibited, even if it is otherwise allowed under kosher rules.

“You shall not eat anything that has died naturally. You may give it to the sojourner who is within your towns, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a holy people to the LORD your God...”
(Deuteronomy 14:21).

The authorized method of slaughtering an animal is detailed in the Oral Torah. It is the only acceptable way for clean animals and birds to maintain their *kashrut*.

The method of ritual slaughter is designed to cause as little pain to the animal as possible and to remove as much blood as possible. It involves rapid back-and-forth cuts to the throat with a well-sharpened knife. This quickly severs the trachea, the esophagus, the two vagus nerves, along

with the carotid and jugular arteries. Physiologists, pathologists, and other qualified scientists have declared this Jewish method to be absolutely humane. Furthermore, it has the effect of stunning the animal almost immediately. This method also has the distinct advantage over most other methods of ensuring rapid blood drainage before it can congeal in the meat.

Speaking of Blood

The Torah prohibits eating blood, even from kosher animals. This does not apply to fish blood.

Leviticus 7:26 “Moreover, you shall eat no blood whatever, whether of fowl or of animal, in any of your dwelling places. ²⁷ Whoever eats any blood, that person shall be cut off from his people.”

Two methods are used to remove the blood from kosher animals. One is to soak the meat in a bath before cooking, commonly called “koshering.” The second is to cook the meat over a flame or electric heat that drains the blood. It is not acceptable for the meat to cook in a pan where its blood seeps, and the meat is cooked in its own blood.

Koshering by Broiling

The second method of koshering involves broiling the meat on a grill or spit that allows the blood to drain during cooking. The raw meat is first washed thoroughly and lightly salted. When nearly done, it should be washed in clean water to remove any remaining blood. It can then be returned to the heat to finish cooking.

Koshering by Soaking

The meat must be thoroughly rinsed in clean water. After soaking for half an hour, the meat should be dried and coated evenly with a layer of coarse salt of the appropriate grain size. This is sold as “kosher salt” in stores in the US. Finer grains are too small to effectively draw out and absorb the blood from the meat. The meat is placed in a pan that has not been used for other purposes. The pan with the salted meat is tilted to let any excess blood drain off. The meat remains in this salt for half an hour, then it is rinsed thoroughly in clean water. All of this should be completed within 72 hours of slaughter. Ground meat must be koshered before grinding.

Packaged frozen meat labeled as kosher will have been soaked and salted to ensure it is kosher.

Meat and Milk

Exodus 23:19 “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

Exodus 34:26 “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

Deuteronomy 14:21 “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

These three passages led the rabbis to forbid the consumption of meat and dairy products. The warning is mentioned three times in Scripture, showing its importance. The ban on cooking a young goat in its mother’s milk might stem from Canaanite religious practices, where goats were cooked in milk as part of fertility rites. God wanted His people to avoid anything associated with idolatry. Alternatively, the prohibition could be against the inhumane treatment of young goats. During the Feast of Ingathering (Exodus 23:16b), the Israelites might have been tempted to imitate Bedouin customs of cooking young goat meat in goat’s milk, even though the young goats should have remained with their mothers. In essence, the prohibition may have been a way of telling the Israelites not to take something meant to promote life—like goat milk—and use it to destroy life. This idea could be the foundation for the Jewish custom of not mixing milk products with meat.

Meat and milk cannot be cooked in the same vessel, even if not at the same time. Any vessel used for one cannot be used for the other. This includes cooking vessels, dishes, and tableware. Vessels that are used for both then become non-kosher.

A specific time period must pass after eating meat before consuming dairy products. Opinions vary on the duration, ranging from three to six hours. The purpose of this interval is to allow any fatty residue that may cling to the palate and not rinse away, as well as any meat particles lodged between the teeth and not rinsed out, to deteriorate.

The opposite is not true after eating dairy. You can eat meat if you rinse your mouth out with water and eat some neutral solid food, like bread.

Rabbi Donin explains,

“The reason is that dairy products do not possess the fatty qualities of meat or become lodged between the teeth in the same manner. Should there be a dairy product of which this is not so, such as hard cheeses, then the same waiting period is required.”

Two sinks, or separate basins set into one sink, are required for washing cooking and eating utensils: one for kosher utensils and one for non-kosher utensils. If modern electric dishwashers are used, two would be required. However, this rule can be met if you use separate racks for dairy and meat utensils and allow the machine to run through an empty washing cycle between dairy and meat cycles.

Even dish towels fall under this rule of separation. A common practice is to use different colored towels for meat and dairy utensils.

There are no objections to their use of modern butter and milk substitutes that look and taste like the dairy products they replace in meat dishes. However, one must avoid “the appearance of transgression.”

Water glasses, because they are non-absorbent, can be used for meat or dairy. Pyrex and similar cooking dishes, since they are used over high heat, may be absorbent and should be kept separate when used with meat or dairy.

In conclusion, these food laws would remind Israel of her unique status before God. No Israelite could eat without being aware that, in every part of his life, he was to be dedicated to God. Similarly, an Israelite’s diet acted as a testimony of his relationship with the Lord in the presence of Gentiles.

Old Testament Food Laws Still Required?

In the New Testament, God abolished the food laws of the Old Testament

Mark 7:14 And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him. ¹⁶ If anyone has ears to hear, let him

hear!” ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

However, Christians should show their unique relationship with God through the purity of their lives. They can also demonstrate their faith and special connection to the Lord by sincerely thanking God at mealtimes, acknowledging Him as the Creator and Provider of all food.

1 Timothy 4:4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

What is the Reasoning Behind Kosher Food?

The Bible clearly states what the kosher laws are for, but only hints at why. As a result, Jewish and Christian thinkers have proposed several complementary reasons. Here are the main lines of reasoning, from Scripture and tradition:

God's Holiness and Separation

At its core, kosher laws are about making distinctions. “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:44–45) The food laws set Israel apart from the other nations. Every meal reminds them that even daily life—eating—is performed in the presence of God. You literally can’t forget you belong to the LORD. Kosher represents daily, embodied holiness.

Obedience Without Full Explanation

Many kosher rules lack clear explanations (e.g., no pork, no shellfish, no mixing meat and dairy). In Jewish thought, this teaches two lessons:

- God’s wisdom is higher than human reasoning
- Obedience is not based solely on understanding

The laws are often referred to as *huqqim*—divine decrees followed because God commanded them.

Life vs. Death Symbolism

A significant biblical theme related to kosher food is reverence for life.

Examples:

- Animals must be slaughtered properly; blood (a symbol of life) is forbidden (Leviticus 17:11).
- Animals that consume carrion or are linked to death are forbidden.
- Mixing milk (life/nurture) and meat (death) is symbolically avoided in later Jewish interpretation

Kosher laws teach Israel to value life as sacred.

Moral Order and Creation Boundaries

Many animals that are banned don't fit easily into their categories.

For example:

- Fish without fins and scales
- Birds that are scavengers
- Animals that don't both chew cud *and* have split hooves

Some scholars observe that kosher animals symbolize order and wholeness, while non-kosher animals blur boundaries. This reflects God's creation order in Genesis.

Health is Secondary, Not Primary

Some people argue that kosher laws were primarily about health, such as avoiding parasites in pork, shellfish toxins, and spoilage during storage.

This may be *partly* true, but:

- Scripture never presents health as the main reason.
- Many unhealthy practices weren't banned.
- Some banned foods are perfectly safe if prepared properly.

So health benefits exist, but they're not the primary biblical rationale.

Covenant Identity

Kosher laws served as a boundary marker of the Mosaic Covenant.

- Sharing meals would mean fellowship.

- Different food laws resulted in limited social integration.

This maintained Israel's spiritual identity and protected against assimilation into pagan worship practices.

Why They're Not Required Now

It's worth noting:

- Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:18–19)
- Peter's vision (Acts 10) showed the law's temporary, pedagogical role
- Paul taught food laws were a "shadow" fulfilled in Christ.
- **Colossians 2:16** Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

So Christians see kosher laws as:

- Purposeful and good.
- Temporary.
- Fulfilled, not meaningless.

The food laws trained Israel in holiness until Christ came.

In Short

Kosher food laws were about:

- Holiness and obedience.
- Respect for life.
- God's created order.
- Covenant identity.

They weren't arbitrary, but they also weren't solely about health. They shaped a people to live consciously under God's rule, even in something as simple as eating. They served as ongoing daily reminders that God was Holy and He expected those who were His to also be holy.