

## Kashrus, Kedusha, and “Cooties”

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The English word “impure” cannot do justice to the Hebrew word “טמא,” and טומאה is clearly something to avoid at all costs. Like cooties. Every kid knows about “the cheese touch” in the book Diary of a Wimpy Kid. If you touch the cheese -- or if you touch a person who touched the cheese -- it will forever contaminate your innermost essence. Perhaps one of the worst punishments recorded in the תורה is that the מצרע must call out to passers by “טמא, טמא” so that others will avoid any type of contact with him. The word appears in the חומש (in various conjugations) almost 200 times, while the form “קדש,” referring to “holiness,” appears only a few more times than that!

Most of the Toraitic mention of כשרות appears in this week’s Torah reading, פרשת שמני, where we find general, broadbrush parameters for our kosher laws. Most of the laws of כשרות, however, appear in various places throughout the Talmud, our orally-transmitted and invaluable companion to the written Torah. In fact, there is an entire tractate (חולין) devoted almost exclusively to the laws of keeping kosher! The Halachists, such as the מחבר and the רמ”א, the Sefardi and Ashkenazi fathers of Jewish law codification, penned volumes that for generations almost every rabbinical candidate must learn prior to receiving סמיכה (ordination).

Practically speaking, כשרות is complicated. Having just gone through the kashering process for פסח, where the knuckle scrapes and arm burns have yet to heal completely, and the panic over how to debug enough romaine lettuce for all to eat at the seder still grips our psyche, we can appreciate its complexity. The numbers of questions I personally answered as to how to kasher one’s sinks and countertops and what does and does not require kosher certification was staggering.

The Torah gives a singular reason for these complicated laws: כי קדוש אני ולא אלקיכם והייתם קדשים, כי קדוש אני ולא תטמאו את נפשתיכם בכל השרץ הרמש על הארץ (Because I am the L-rd your G-d. You shall be *kodesh*, because I am *kodesh*, and you shall not make your souls *tamei* through [eating] any of the [טמא] creatures that roam on the Earth.)

Wow! That’s pretty strong stuff. I would want to take extreme care to protect my נשמה -- my soul, my essence, what makes “me” into “me.” Just as I insist upon the finest medical advise by consulting with the most qualified physicians, and just as I look for the clearest legal advise by relying upon well-trained lawyers, so too, when it comes to what I put into my family’s mouths, I ought to seek out and demand the best נשמה-protecting and טומאה-avoiding advise by consulting with only the most experienced, seasoned experts in the field of kashrus.

ברוך ה’ we have in our community experts in the practicalities and legalisms of kashrus to consult with and to rely upon. Organizations such as the Orthodox Rabbinical Board (the ORB) exist for the sole purpose of guiding us in the proper way to protect what is most important to us, our inner essence, our נשמה.

On this Shabbos, Parshas Shemini, let us take a moment to express our good fortune at having such professionals here and readily available to help us make the best decisions for us, for our families, and for Klal Yisroel.