

## Chapter Eight

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# The Rabbinic food laws

One recognizable tradition of Jewish culture is their adherence to certain food restrictions commonly referred to as “kosher” or also “kashrut”. In fact, the word “kosher” has entered our common vocabulary to refer to anything that is considered legitimate, legal, or appropriate, such as, “This guy’s business dealings aren’t exactly kosher.” Through common current usage we have come to realize that the status of “kosher” refers to something approved by a recognized authority.

Regarding food, this authority can be two sources, the Word of God or the traditions of men. They do not always agree. The basic Bible definitions of what God has decreed are food are given in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. The lists are quite specific and are inclusionary and exclusionary, meaning they list items that are food and those that are not food. Pretty simple and unambiguous, right? Enter the rabbinical opinions and overlays and we end up with a confusing set of rigid rules and definitions.

As an example, let us look at the rabbinic concept of separating meat and dairy. Exodus 23:19 states “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.” This is repeated in Exodus 34:26 and Deuteronomy 14:21. That’s all the Word of God says about the matter. The rabbis, however, have extended the meaning to say we are not to eat any meat with any dairy together, so no cheeseburgers or a glass of milk with pot roast. If that were not enough, they say that separate cooking and handling utensils are needed to ensure there is no contact or cross-contamination between any meat and dairy products. Separate dishes and plates are also necessary. Some say that separate refrigerators are necessary to maintain a safe distance. Where does it stop? That is the problem with the traditions of men adding to the Word of God. It never does stop.

Going back to what the text actually says for a moment, there is a specific issue being dealt with and a specific remedy. Let me repeat the text of Exodus 23:19 which states “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

In the excellent book titled “Holy Cow! Does God Care About What We Eat?”<sup>1</sup> by Hope Egan, she wisely observes the following regarding the above verse: “*That’s it. That’s all the Torah says. Nothing else. This command appears in the Torah three times, signaling that God takes it seriously. Thankfully, most of us can easily say that we regularly obey it. Very few of us*

*boil young goats, let alone boil them in milk, let alone boil them in their mother's milk."*

A few comments may shed some light. This command comes within sections of the Torah that deal with the avoidance of pagan practices in the surrounding areas. That may be a clue. There is a theory that the surrounding Canaanite culture, which was thoroughly pagan, used to actually boil a young goat in its mother's milk and use this to bless the fields invoking the name of a pagan god of fertility. Milk as a source of life was perverted into a source of death by this practice. God did not want the Israelites to imitate the pagan practices of the surrounding nations or serve their gods. This is a plausible explanation and fits the context.

Another way to examine if these three texts really teach a complete meat/dairy separation is to see if that interpretation is in harmony with the rest of the Bible. Let us look at Genesis 18:7,8, "Abraham ran to the herd, and fetched a tender and good calf, and gave it to the servant. He hurried to dress it. He took butter, milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them. He stood by them under the tree, and they ate." Here we see faithful Abraham adhering to the custom of providing hospitality to the three angelic visitors by serving meat and dairy at the same serving. The text says, "They ate". Perhaps Abraham didn't read the rabbinic commentary about separating meat and

dairy or perhaps he got it right all along and the traditions of the rabbis are in conflict. I will let the reader judge between the Word of God and the traditions of men.

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1. The book *Holy Cow! Does God Care About What We Eat?* By Hope Egan is a fantastic and thoroughly researched work. It is a filling meal that truly satisfies, is seasoned with grace and served “well done”!