

A Rabbi was walking home from Shul and saw one of his good friends, a pious and learned man who could usually beat the rabbi in religious arguments. The Rabbi started walking faster so that he could catch up to his friend when he was horrified to see his friend go into a non-Kosher Chinese restaurant.

Standing at the door, he observed his friend talking to a waiter and gesturing at a menu. A short time later, the waiter reappeared carrying a platter full of spare ribs, shrimp in lobster sauce, crab rangoon and other treif that the Rabbi could not bear to think about. As his friend picked up the chopsticks and began to eat this food, the Rabbi burst into the restaurant and reproached his friend, for he could take it no longer.

"Morris, what is this you are doing? I saw you come into this restaurant, order this filth and now you are eating it in violation of everything we are taught about the dietary laws and with an apparent enjoyment that does not befit your pious reputation!"

Morris replied, "Rabbi, did you see me enter this restaurant?"

(The Rabbi nods.)

"Did you see me order this meal?"

(Again, he nods.)

"Did you see the waiter bring me this food?"

(Again, he nods.)

"And did you see me eat it?"

(Again, he nods.)

"Then, Rabbi, I don't see the problem here. The entire meal was done under Rabbinical supervision!"

Unfortunately, the reality of the kosher certification industry is not much more than a joke. I spoke yesterday about the kashrut of environmental responsibility. But today I want to let you know that there are times when even if it says kosher- it isn't necessarily kosher. I hope you all know the disgrace that has been brought to the honorable and sacred work of kashrut certification in the past year. For those who haven't heard the facts, I am ashamed to report them, but here they are:

As long ago as 2 years, the Agriprocessors kosher meat plant- the largest in the United States- was beset by rumors of unsafe conditions and extreme animal cruelty. Owned by the Rubashkin family, it supplies brands such as Aaron's Best and Rubashkin among other labels. When PETA, people for the ethical treatment of animals, had captured film of horrendous and unnecessarily cruel treatment of the cattle in the plant and numerous rumors of violations of workers' rights began to surface, the Rabbinical Assembly kashrut subcommittee of the Conservative Movement traveled to Pottsville, Iowa for an inspection. The Orthodox rabbis in charge weren't amused, I am sure, that their supervision suddenly wasn't good enough. Our movement simply issued suggestions as to how the concerns could be addressed.

But those concerns and suggestions were apparently ignored as the plant was raided on May 12 of this year. 389 illegal Guatemalan immigrant workers were detained. Then, just about 3 weeks ago, Iowa's attorney general brought 9,311 more criminal charges that accused the company of employing 32 workers under the legal age of 18. Many of the youths worked night shifts in dangerous jobs that exposed them to hazardous chemicals, according to the charges. Aaron Rubashkin, the Agriprocessors owner, who is a Hasidic Jew, and his son Sholom, the former chief executive of the Postville operation, were named as defendants in the criminal cases. To add further disgust to the situation, it has been alleged that the premises were also used for a secret, illegal methamphetamine lab unconnected to the slaughterhouse facility.

Meanwhile, always slow on the uptake of morally sensitive issues, Rabbi Menachem Weissmandl, one of the certifiers at the plant for the OU, said that he would remove his hashgacha, the seal of approval indicating rabbinic supervision, only if the company failed to follow strict procedures for shechita, slaughter, mandated by Halacha.

So there you have it. There may have been children and illegal foreign workers employed there; there may have been dangerous shortcuts taken on worker safety; there may have been fraud, deceit and avarice of all kinds which the attorney general of the state of Iowa could identify as morally and legally abhorrent, but the rabbis who worked there day in and day out, who probably saw the kids taken to the hospital with injuries and who knew the creative hiring practices of their employers; who maybe even knew of the drugs that were being concocted there- these rabbis uttered not a peep of protest; not their business.

When the Torah and Jewish law becomes little more than a superstitious set of rituals, when kashrut becomes only a matter of watching which knife is used and how long the beard is of the person who wields it; when it takes the secular attorney general to open the eyes of myopic rabbis- there is a word for such behavior. It is a hillul hashem. A desecration of God's name.

No amount of rationalizing will make this situation acceptable. And what is even more unfortunate, it is not entirely alone. Over the course of the past several years we have heard stories, here and in Israel, in which the cover of piety and halachic rectitude was used to cut moral corners, to shave off the ethical niceties and deal with the soulless body of the Judaism that remains. In Monsey, NY, a poultry purveyor who serves largely the ultraorthodox Satmer community and was considered a real tzadik was caught repackaging cheaper non-kosher chicken and selling it as kosher to his observant clientele. In Israel, where a conversion performed by a Conservative/Masorti rabbi would not be accepted and there are literally thousands of former Russians married to Jews who would like to be fully Jewish and accepted in Israel, there a number of rabbis were found to have been shaking down potential converts by refusing to convert them, no matter how pious, unless they paid \$10,000 cash- and for that amount of money no project of study or acceptance of the yoke of the commandments is apparently necessary. Those who would claim religious prerogatives to abuse the stranger and oppress the weak, those who would shun us as heretics and claim for themselves the mantle of Torah true, they are little more than scavengers on a lifeless Judaism, like vultures picking through a carcass that was once a dynamic living being. Caring only for their own sustenance, they think not at all of the good of the greater Jewish people. It is, even by

the admission of Rabbi Menachem Genack, Rabbinic Administrator of OU Kosher, a great Hillul Hashem- a desecration of God's name. Are all of the charges in the case of the Rubashkin family true? Is it fair to blame the OU for all of the violations which the USDA inspectors missed as well? Can the entire Orthodox rabbinic establishment be held responsible for every abuse by every rabbi? Maybe not. But even so and even given all of the ways in which we benefit from the accomplishments of the OU in making kosher food more accessible than ever before- there comes a point at which we must allow our revulsion to overcome our gratitude.

Some of you, when you heard about this may not have been shocked. You may be thinking even now- Rabbi, you're so sweet- surprised that someone with a buck on the line would go for self interest over professed piety. We know the stories, and they are not new. Nor do they belong to one movement, or one religion alone. There was the reform rabbi in New Jersey who allegedly hired a hit man to kill his wife. There is the ostentatiously orthodox Jack Abramoff and his notorious business dealings. Whether it is a rabbi a priest or a minister, it should come as a shock to no one that self righteous hypocrisy plagues many religious institutions. No matter its style or flavor, from the TV preachers to the scandals of the Catholic Church, no one is immune. No one should take comfort in the fact that the newest disgrace on the front page of the paper belongs to someone else; don't think that anyone can self righteously sit back and say, "it's not our fault." The truth is that Ralf Waldo Emerson had it right when he said: "Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins."

The obvious question now is what can be done and who is to blame? Aside from the apparent and unmistakable culprits, the fault could be imagined to lie in some measure with many. We all, as Americans, are responsible for a mess of immigration law which invites the abuse of the stranger. As passionate advocates for the State of Israel, we are responsible for tolerating the ongoing situation in which the Jews of the Jewish State are the only western community of Jews who do not enjoy full religious freedom. As consumers of products of all types- from kosher meat to tennis shoes, from landscaping companies in Fairfield County to international corporations which we invest in that blithely use near slave labor around the world- we have a moral responsibility to ask questions and to understand our purchasing power as a voice of our conscience.

But in a more specific sense, we in the Conservative movement have a very real obligation we must accept. We are responsible too because we have not created a market for kosher goods. We have benefitted from the market created by others and we have relied upon others to be our moral eyes and ears, our moral voice in the marketplace. Until we are able to speak loudly as a body of consumers who make moral choices with our pocketbooks, we are nearly voiceless in this crisis.

Thankfully, some Conservative rabbis have begun addressing the ethical side of the ledger and have started to demand of ourselves that we do more than blame the OU or others for their failures. Rabbi Morris Allen of Minnesota has been leading the charge

for us to create our own Hechsher. This Conservative movement symbol of kosher certification will not simply be another mark of a bunch of rabbis doing business. It will not just be another soulless industry dedicated to rabbis' full employment. *Hechsher Tzedek* seals, indicating the true Kashrut of justice of the product in question, will be placed on certified kosher foods that were produced in plants that operate within Jewish ethical standards. Kosher production facilities will be checked in six areas: fair wages and benefits, health and safety, training, corporate transparency, animal welfare and environmental impact. As Rabbi Allen has said, "We need to be in a world where we can say that keeping kosher is the way in which I demonstrate not only a concern for my relationship to God and Torah but the Jewish concern for our relationship to the world in which we live." I have signed up to be one of the founding rabbis supporting this cause and believe it is the mission of our time. Jewish life can be made to speak to our children and ourselves, only when we recover what appears to be nearly lost: the belief that what we do is of ultimate meaning.

Probably the first modern philosopher, the first thinker to challenge humanity to think without the assumptions of tradition and faith, was a Jewish man named Baruch Spinoza. The Jews of Holland were scandalized by his ideas, in large part because he claimed no allegiance to Jewish law and tradition, and he was excommunicated for his heterodox views. His critique 350 years ago was that Jewish law was nothing more than a meaningless series of ordinances whose function had long ago ceased, at the time of the destruction of the Temple and the termination of an independent Jewish sovereignty. He

would not have been surprised that rabbis were capable of misusing their power. In fact, he saw most religious authority as preying on the fears and superstitions of the ignorant. The idea he introduced which still haunts much of Jewish life is that Judaism is a system of law, not a true religion, an attempt to connect with eternal truths. It is an empty body of statues, without the inner soul that could give this body life. The great philosopher and theologian of the Conservative movement, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, attacked Spinoza as having “injected into Jewish thought the idea that Judaism is not a religious but a legal system. And this doctrine has been coursing through the body of modern Jewish thought like a venom.” But every time a hechsher appears to be interested in minutia while leaving aside morality, every time it is the lesions in the lungs of the animal which are checked but not the living standards of the workers who produce the meat, Spinoza celebrates a small victory. Because the argument he put forward, one that Heschel rightly pointed to as being the definitive danger of modern Judaism, it is proven right again. The unwitting accomplices in this de-spiritualization of Jewish life are the very OU inspectors who were quoted as saying, “We supervise plants throughout the globe. We rely on the local - state or federal - authorities to manage these issues. We don’t have the ability or the expertise to do it. Our focus is on what we know - the Shulchan Aruch, the halachos of kashrus.” That is just what Spinoza said. And he was put in Herem. While they, of course, recognize that the ethical treatment of animals- tzaar baalei chaim- and the ethical treatment of workers- Halon et sechar sachir, one must surely pay a worker his living wage in a timely and respectful manner- that these values come from the Torah, somehow they just don’t get it. It is not that ritualistic kashrut is the law and these other issues are nice things to which we should be sensitive. It is that

kashrut, and Judaism itself, depends upon ethics for its meaning. As the Biblical prophets such as Isaiah and Amos put it, even the sacrifices themselves, offered punctiliously by the priesthood in Jerusalem, is little more than a treif bar-b-que if they are offered in the midst of immorality and corruption. If we don't get this right, we don't understand the basics of what this covenant is all about.

And the solution, ultimately to this tragedy rests with every one of us: Every shopper who looks the other way when he goes to Walmart; every kosher food consumer who buys food while trusting too much in unexamined rabbinic certification. And if you don't keep kosher (yet), don't think you are off the hook. This is one of the absolutely crucial pillars of Jewish identity and meaning. Any community, such as ours, with thousands of Jews consuming literally tens of millions of meals a year, but with not a single kosher institution in our midst should be engaged in profound self reflection. Every one who doesn't buy kosher food because they figure that it is not their thing abdicates this crucial pillar of spiritual and communal meaning and leaves it to others, maybe those with other values, to represent Jewish life. We all are unwitting accomplices in the stripping of the core of the Torah, lovingkindness and justice, from the practice of Judaism. We all believe in this. We all want it. So when will we actually support these ideas with our economic and personal choices? If we do, the benefits will be not only the success of the Hechsher Tzedek project, but the revitalization of Jewish life more broadly. We all will be able to proudly say that being Jewish is, as the old Hebrew National ad used to say, answering to a higher authority. It is a source of deepest connection, not just for a few

pious, but for all of us. No matter what kind or level of kashrut you observe, or if you don't even keep kosher at all- you can make it a point to buy kosher meat and other kosher products, and to demand the ethical foundation of kashrut be observed as well. If we all do this together, the industry will belong to each and every Jew who wants such values to be those for which our community is known.

In this morning's powerful and terrifying parasha, the word of God commands a ritual act which would have shocked the conscience had it been carried out. The murder of Isaac as a test of faith would have been grotesque in the extreme. It was the call of God, as recorded in the Torah, true. But it simply could not be, and Abraham knew it all along. He promised the boy on the way to the mountain, I don't know how- but somehow God will change God's mind. Somehow this won't really happen. Then, following through to the end, tying the boy down, reaching for the knife, lifting it up- Abraham's heart must have been racing, yet his mind appears to have been clear. Certain that the story would end well. And of course when that unnamed angel, that source of wisdom beyond language arrived at his ear, rang inside his mind and conscience, he knew. The ethical was to be primary. The sustenance of the faith would require courage and self sacrifice, it would require dedication and devotion, but never would it demand- or permit- moral ambivalence. Never could it tolerate a neutral acceptance of the intolerable. Such actions, or inactions in our case, are not faith or devotion. They are the dereliction of our duty as members of a covenanted community to God's will.

All of us- no matter our level of kashrut- we are all responsible. And the time for us to stand up and be counted among the disciples of Abraham is right now. Enough jokes. Enough painful ironic laughs about the lapses of our leaders. Let's take up the challenge of our time and live out the ethical in our entire lives- how we eat, how we shop, how we live. Whether our diet is made up of mu-shu and teriyaki or knockwurst and pastrami- only we are capable of restoring the essence of our Torah as we understand it to the core of Jewish life. Tomorrow, after yom tov is over, go shopping. But begin by asking the difficult question. Not, "does this product have an OU or a Khof K?" But "is this really kosher?" There is no more urgent question we can ask. Being a Jew is not only what we do here on these sacred days- it is the lives we commit ourselves to live for the rest of our year. It is the world we pledge to help perfect; a creation that so desperately needs our hands, our voices, our wallets and our values- each and every day.