Chapter 1

What Is Kosher?

Kosher is the anglicized version of the Hebrew word *kasher,* meaning "fit" or "proper." Food is kosher when its ingredients and the means of its manufacture or preparation have adhered to a certain set of stringent and demanding laws and restrictions. You can't make foods kosher just by saying prayers over them. Nor does it have the same meaning as "kosher-style," a phrase used to describe certain ethnic dishes or food preparations (such as "kosher" dill pickles or "kosher-style" delicatessen) or foods derived from eastern European Jewish cuisines.

Kosher means adhering to the Jewish dietary laws—some nearly 3,500 years old—that have their origins in passages of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). These were later elaborated on by rabbis who, in the Talmud, added further requirements and restrictions. (The *Talmud*—Hebrew for "learning"—is the massive encyclopedia of Jewish thought, commentary, and civil and religious law compiled in the first few centuries of the Common Era.) The word *kosher* itself does not appear in the five books of Moses, although it can be found a few times in later books of the Bible. But even here it does not refer to food specifically but to the "fitness" of items used in religious rituals.

The kosher dietary laws and rules, known as *kashrut* (also spelled *kashrus* or *kashruth*), govern many aspects of food preparation, cooking, and consumption for observant Jews. They include instructions

for the ritual slaughter of animals, which foods are permitted, and which are prohibited. Although the purpose of these laws may have had a positive effect on health (see Chapter Seven), their original purpose was religious, an act of devotion and affirmation of faith that expressed spiritual and moral values. They provided a diet for the soul as well as for the body. The dietary laws imposed a type of self-discipline on one of the most basic elements of life—eating.

In Jewish teaching, eating is regarded as a hallowed act. The twentieth-century religious philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) wrote that kashrut hallowed the everyday by turning a natural function, eating, into something holy. Kashrut also teaches a reverence for all life. There are many admonitions in the Torah forbidding cruelty to animals, including the mandate not to "cause pain to any living creature." The Torah preaches compassion and respect for all living things, going so far as to prohibit eating animals killed by hunters, adding that animals should not be killed for anything other than food or self-preservation.

Some of the dietary laws are stated clearly in the Bible; others took on interpreted meanings through the writings and commentaries of generations of Talmudic rabbis who refined and commented on the biblical injunctions. No explicit reasons are given in the Bible for many of the prohibitions and mandates in the dietary laws. The observant accept this apparent arbitrariness because they are commanded by God to do so. The dietary laws are considered divine directives that need no rationale or explanation other than that following them leads to holiness. (The Hebrew word for holiness is *kedushah*, which is derived from the word *kodesh*, meaning "separateness.") As *The Jewish Book of Why* by Alfred J. Kolatch explains, "Whatever was holy was something apart, to be set aside. To be a holy people, Israel had to be apart, separated from their idol-worshipping neighbors. The dietary laws were instituted as one means of making the Jewish lifestyle different from that of their neighbors." Through the ages, the dietary laws have helped define Jewish life, giving the Jewish people a cohesive yet distinct identity.

The basic dietary laws include the following:

• *A prohibition against mixing meat and milk:* "You shall not seethe a kid in its mother's milk" (Exod. 23:19; also Exod. 34:26 and Deut. 14:21). This commandment, which is mentioned three times, led to the rule against cooking or consuming both meat and milk or dairy products together at one meal. As with other dietary laws, the Bible offers no reason for this prohibition, although some scholars think it may have derived from an abhorrence of pagan practices or rituals (offering meat boiled in milk was both a pagan form of hospitality and a pagan form of worship) or as an extension of the commandment against cruelty to animals. For what could be more indifferent or cruel than first to kill an animal and then mix its flesh with the liquid that gave it life?

• *A prohibition against the consumption of blood:* "You shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh; for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof" (Lev. 17:14). There are numerous mentions in the Bible of blood as the symbol of the essence of humankind. In Judaism, eating or drinking of blood is considered a desecration of life itself. This belief led to a key element of kosher food preparation—the removal of blood from meat. The early rabbis concluded that when animals are killed for food, care should be taken to remove or drain as much blood as possible before the meat is cooked.

• *A list of permitted animals:* "Of the animals you may eat any that hath both true cloven hooves and that brings up its cud" (Lev. 11:3); "Among the mammals that you may eat are the ox, the goat, the gazelle, the deer, the antelope, the ibex, the chamois, the bison, and the giraffe" (Deut. 14:4); "You may eat any creature that lives in salt water or fresh water, as long as it has fins and scales" (Lev. 11:9); "Of all the pure birds you may eat"; twenty-four forbidden species of fowl are then listed (Deut. 14:11).

• *A prohibition against eating certain animals:* "All creatures in seas and rivers that have no fins and scales, whether invertebrates or mammals or other creatures, are an abomination to you" (Lev. 11:10); "These are the smaller animals that breed on land which are unclean to you" (a list of rodents, reptiles, and mollusks follows; Lev. 1:29); "All the winged swarming things are unclean to you;

they shall not be eaten" (Deut. 14:19). Again, no reasons are given in the Bible as to why some fish and animals are proper to eat and others are forbidden. However, the identifying characteristics that make a creature fit for consumption are provided: mammals must both chew their cud and have a split or cloven hoof; fish must have both fins and scales that are removable without damaging or tearing the skin. The characteristics of permitted birds are not listed; later traditions, however, allowed that domestic fowl and birds that have a projecting claw, a crop, and a gizzard or stomach whose inner lining can readily be peeled were kosher.

- *The ritual slaughtering of animals for food:* "Then shall you slaughter of your herd and of your flock" (Deut. 12:21). Although not described in the Bible, ritual slaughter is one of the central elements of kashrut. Ethical considerations stressing the importance of compassion and respect for all living things led to creating humane methods of animal slaughter, methods that were designed for the quickest and most painless death for the animal. Exactly what is involved in ritual slaughter and what else is done to meat to make it kosher will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

Kosher and Nonkosher Animals

Permitted mammals: Animals that both chew their cud (ruminants) and have a split or cloven hoof, including antelope, bison, buffalo, cattle, deer, eland, gazelle, goat, hart, moose, ox, sheep, and yak

Forbidden mammals: Camel, dog, dolphin, donkey, horse, pig, porpoise, rabbit, rodents, whale

Permitted fowl: Birds that have a projecting claw, a crop, and a gizzard or stomach whose inner lining can readily be peeled; most domestic fowl, including capon, chicken, Cornish hen, duck, dove, goose, pigeon, songbirds, squab, and turkey

Forbidden fowl: Wild birds or birds of prey, including eagle, heron, ostrich, owl, pelican, stork, swan, falcon, raven, hawk, and vulture

Permitted fish: Must have both fins and scales that are removable without damaging or tearing the fish's skin; seventy-five species including anchovy, bass, blackfish, bluefish, butterfish, carp, chub, cod, flounder, fluke, haddock, halibut, herring, mackerel, mahimahi, mullet, perch, pickerel, pike, pompano, porgy, red snapper, sablefish, salmon, sardine, shad, smelt, snapper, sole, tilefish, trout, tuna, weakfish, whitefish, and whiting. The eggs (caviar) of permitted fish are kosher.

Forbidden fish and seafood (partial list): Catfish, eel, lamprey, marlin, rays, puffer, sailfish, shark, sturgeon, swordfish, and turbot. The eggs (caviar) of nonkosher fish are not kosher. No shellfish or mollusks are kosher; this includes clam, lobster, octopus, oyster, scallop, shrimp, snail, and squid.

Also forbidden: Reptiles, invertebrates, and amphibians, including crocodile, frog, lizard, snake, toad, turtle, and worms; all insects are also forbidden.

Did You Know?

There is no such fish as the gefilte fish. *Gefilte* (Yiddish for "stuffed") is an eastern European Jewish dish, a dumpling made of chopped whitefish, pike, and carp that is poached in a vegetable broth. It is most often eaten cold, as an appetizer, especially at Sabbath or Passover meals. The copyeditor of this book told me the following story, a gefilte fish tale that makes the origin of both the dish's name and its traditional shape much clearer. In Europe, he was served gefilte fish prepared with the chopped fish mixture stuffed into the cavity of a whole carp before the entire fish was poached. After the fish was cooked, the hostess removed the stuffing in a single lump that looked very much like the tubular-shaped "loaves" of gefilte fish we are familiar with in this country.

The dietary laws of kashrut divide all foods into two categories: kosher (Hebrew, *kasher*), or permitted, foods and *trayf* (sometimes spelled *trayfe* or *treif*), food that is unfit or improper to eat. (Derived from the Hebrew word for "torn" or "damaged," *trayf* originally meant "torn from a wild beast" and therefore unfit to be eaten.)

Kosher or permitted foods are then divided into three categories:

1. *Dairy (milchig):* Milk and all its derivatives, excluding milk from nonkosher animals. (Labels on dairy products are marked "D" after the symbol of kosher certification.)

2. *Meat, including poultry (fleishig):* From permitted animals (ones that chew their cud, generally cows and sheep, and have split hooves), that have been ritually slaughtered, and have undergone the koshering process of soaking and salting to remove any residual blood (see Chapter Five). This procedure, which is also referred to as kashering, must be done under the supervision of a *mashgiah,* or rabbinic supervisor. (Labels on meat and poultry products are marked "M" after the symbol of kosher certification. An "M" may also mean that the product was processed on equipment that was used to process meat products.)

3. *Neutral (pareve):* Foods that are neither dairy nor meat. Based on the verses in Genesis (1:29–30) in which God gives Adam and Eve permission to eat "every seed-bearing grass" and "every fruit-bearing tree," everything that grows in the ground is considered both intrinsically kosher and pareve. This includes, in their natural state, all plants, herbs, grains, fungi, fresh fruits and vegetables, flowers, roots, seeds, and nuts, as well as food products made from them, such as sugar, tea, flour, coffee, spices, pasta, salt, oils, and most condiments.

However, once a fruit or vegetable has undergone any form of processing, it may no longer be either pareve or kosher, since a nonkosher ingredient or a meat or dairy ingredient may have been added or it may have been processed by machines that are also used to process nonkosher foods. For example, coffee beans and ground coffee are pareve, but flavored coffees may not be, since they may include nonkosher or dairy ingredients. Similarly, canned tuna fish[1]

processed in water or oil would be pareve, but some tuna fish is processed with milk byproducts and therefore would be considered dairy. Also pareve are eggs (from kosher birds), as long as there is no blood in the yolk, and fish with fins and scales. Unlike kosher meat and poultry, kosher fish need not be killed by a ritual slaughterer, nor is it soaked and salted. (Labels on pareve foods have neither "D" nor "M" after the symbol of their kosher certification.)

For observant Jews, pareve foods may be eaten with both meat and dairy foods. Because of the biblical injunction against "seething [cooking] a kid in its mother's milk," observant Jews do not cook or eat meat and milk together at the same time. Depending on local traditions, they wait between three and six hours (about the time it takes to digest meat) after a meat meal before eating any milk or milk products. (If the dairy is eaten first, there is no need for this waiting period.)

Because they may be made of porous materials that allow particles of meat or dairy to be absorbed, cooking utensils and dishes have also come under this dietary law. Observant Jews have at least two sets of pots, pans, plates, bowls, knives, forks, and so on—one for milk dishes and one for meat. For the same reason, they have two sets of dish towels and two separate bars of soap for washing dishes. In this way, they can be sure that there is no inadvertent mixing, however small, of meat and milk. Pareve foods can be cooked and eaten on either meat or dairy plates and utensils.

Although observant Jews consider fish to be pareve, it is not mixed with meat or poultry. This is another example of how sometimes enigmatic biblical injunctions were elaborated by later rabbis. The admonition to "verily guard your souls" was interpreted by Talmudic scholars to mean that you should closely guard your health, and therefore fish and meat should not be consumed together because you might not be scrupulous in looking for fish bones when eating the latter and therefore might choke on one.

Foods that are prohibited by the laws of kashrut are called *trayf* and will never be found in food products that have been certified as kosher. *Trayf* foods include the following:

- Meat from pigs, dogs, rabbits, horses, camels (four-footed animals that do not chew their cud)
- All insects[2]
- Rodents, reptiles, and creeping animals such as worms, snakes, and lizards
- Invertebrates and amphibians, such as frogs and toads
- Shellfish and mollusks
- Animal blood
- Certain sinews and fat, even if from kosher animals (probably because the fat from oxen, sheep, and goats were used as part of pagan sacrificial rites; rabbis later extended this prohibition to the fat of cows as well)
- Products such as gelatin and bone meal that are derived from prohibited animals
- Any limb that has been cut or torn from a living animal (a graphic example of the biblical admonition against "causing pain to any living creature")
- Meat from any animal that has been killed by another animal or that died a natural death (one more extension of the prohibition against eating the flesh of an injured animal; also, such animals could not have been ritually slaughtered)
- Any food or food product that mixes milk, or milk products or derivatives, with meat or products derived from meat (of special importance for lactose-intolerant individuals and vegetarians)

What Makes a Product Kosher?

1. Even though kosher foods already meet safety standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), they must also meet certain additional requirements of Jewish law pertaining to raw materials and processing. Although there are several branches of Judaism—including Orthodox, Conservative,

Reform, and Reconstructionist—it is Orthodox rulings that usually determine what is kosher. The major certifying agencies follow Orthodox rulings.

2. Rabbinic inspectors and other members of kosher certifying agencies are trained specialists; they include food and flavoring chemists and processing experts, as well as authorities on kosher law.

3. All the ingredients in a processed food or product must be certified as kosher. This includes all of the raw materials as well as flavorings, colorings, stabilizers, and other ingredients that are added to processed foods. Certain additives, such as those derived from civet cats (civet), beavers (castoreum), and whales (ambergris), are intrinsically nonkosher. Others, such as glycerin, gelatin, enzymes, emulsifiers, and fatty acids, may be derived from kosher or nonkosher sources.

4. Before a kosher endorsement is given to a product, the plant in which it is manufactured—the equipment it is processed on, as well as the container or packaging it comes in—must be inspected by a representative of the endorsing agency. Traces of nonkosher substances can remain on machinery and processing equipment and can be absorbed into the food, affecting its aroma and taste. If the equipment was previously used for nonkosher items, it must be washed with caustic soap and sterilized with boiling water before kosher products can be processed on it.

5. Even after a product is deemed kosher and receives certification, regular unannounced on-site inspections are made. Kosher inspectors have access to a company's records and storerooms, as well as plant machinery. In some instances, such as in meat and poultry slaughterhouses and processing plants, there may be one or more kosher supervisors on duty at all times, around the clock.

6. Kosher meat and poultry must be ritually slaughtered and butchered and prepared for the consumer by the prescribed method of salting and soaking.

Why Be Kosher?

There are a number of reasons to follow the rules of kashrut. For observant Jews, the dietary laws are God's commandments, to be obeyed without question. Keeping kosher can be a means of connecting with coreligionists, a way of exhibiting Jewish identity. There are also other spiritual, ethical, and moral considerations and dimensions involved in keeping kosher that can appeal to and be appreciated by Jews and Gentiles alike.

Kashrut elevates a simple and necessary act, that of eating, into a sanctified ritual, an observance that is good for your spiritual health. Perhaps it is a good thing to not eat wild animals or birds and beasts of prey—an ongoing reminder of the qualities of character we should avoid. Keeping kosher forces you to think about where the food you consume ultimately came from and to be very careful about the foods we allow into our bodies. The dietary laws also impose a self-discipline that can be transferred to all aspects of life. As the noted Jewish philosopher and physician Maimonides (1135–1204 C.E.) wrote, the dietary laws "train us in our mastery of the appetites. They accustom us to restrain both the growth of desire and the disposition to consider the pleasure of eating as the event of man's existence." Or as Benjamin Franklin succinctly put it some six hundred years later, "One should eat to live, not live to eat." By eliminating certain foods from your diet, you can gain self-control over your passions. By following the dietary laws, what we consume does not consume us and become the end-all of our existence. We learn to say no.

There is also a moral and ethical component to keeping kosher. It promotes a respect and reverence for all life, including compassion toward the animals with which we share the earth. In Jewish tradition, animals are not to be abused and

should be treated with respect. If you must eat meat, you must slaughter that animal in the most humane way possible—by a single stroke that brings almost instant unconsciousness—and you cannot eat meat that has been hunted for food, for to kill by hunting is not humane.

In the 1970s, Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi coined the term *eco-kosher* to describe a growing response to global ecological crises. Individuals who wish to keep eco-kosher—many of whom are vegetarians—consider the impact of what they eat and how it is raised on both the environment and society. Was the food raised organically, without use of pesticides and chemicals? Were the workers who produced the food treated fairly and paid a living wage? Were natural resources wasted or destroyed in the production of the food? Were the animals that were ultimately consumed for food treated well before their slaughter? These are just a few of the questions that the eco-kosher ask.

Finally, there is the idea of eating kosher for physical health. It is impossible to be sure if the Jews of biblical times knew that certain animals—such as pigs or shellfish—or blood could carry disease and therefore were forbidden to be consumed, but today, a cogent argument can be made that in some ways, kosher beef and poultry is a healthier choice (see Chapters Five and Seven) because of the way animals for kosher slaughter are raised and processed. As Rabbi Wayne Dosick says in *Living Judaism*, "Today there is medical evidence of the effects that eating, or avoiding, certain foods have on health. A kosher diet—with its unlimited portions of fruit and vegetables, its limits on certain cuts of red meat, its requirement to eliminate as much fat as possible, and its focus on chicken and fish—may very well contribute to good health."

And as the sages say, "It couldn't hurt."

Kosher Voices

"I started keeping kosher as a young adult to create a sense of Jewishness and tradition I did not have in my parent's home. Keeping kosher connects me with other Jews and gives me a sense of identity. I'm surprised at the number of non-Jews here who keep kosher or buy kosher food. When I've asked some of my Gentile friends for an explanation, I've gotten responses that range from their belief that kosher food (especially beef) is healthier or tastes better to the ongoing debate among Bible-oriented Christians about whether the dietary laws as set down in the Torah are laws for Jews only or are also for Christians. This connects with the idea [held by a number of] Christians [here] that they too are part of the household of Israel."

—Peter, a rabbi and the director of a Hillel program at a major Texas university in an area often referred to as part of the Bible Belt

It should be noted that two of the dietary laws cited in the first books of the Bible were indeed given to all humanity, not just the Jews. These are the prohibitions against consuming blood and eating the limb of a living animal. One could also include the vegetarian ideal set down for Adam and Eve, the ancestors of all people (see Chapter Eight).