

7/4/18: ISRAELITE TOTEM AND TABOO: D'VAR TORAH: PARSHAH V'YIKRA – SHEMINI: LEVITICUS: CHAPTER 11, VERSES 1-12: THE ISRAELITE DIETARY LAWS AND OTHER HEBREW BIBLICAL NORMS

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As you heard in the Hebrew and in the English translation of today's Shabbat *parshah*, meat and fish are regarded as *kasher*, if the meat is from a creature that both chews the cud and has a divided hoof. So, this would include agricultural, domesticated animals, such as cattle, sheep, goats. Birds are in a separate category and later we are told to avoid predatory and scavenging birds which are unclean presumably because they eat freshly killed non-*kasher* or putrefying meat. Implicitly the domesticated fowl is *kasher*. Obviously, we are dealing with a society that is not a hunter-gatherer society, but a settled, farming agricultural society. There is the assumption that hunted game like deer, simply because they are not mentioned, even though they may chew the cud and have divided hooves, are not regarded as *kasher*, if only because they are not sacrificially killed by the method of the *shochet*, which I will describe a little later. Even though they are associated with hunter-gatherer Canaanites, and with other Semites (like Ishmael and Esau the excluded Other brothers), or with earlier Neolithic hunter-gatherers symbolically drowned in Noah's flood (really the "progress" of economies), wild game are not specifically excluded. Actually, because deer chew the cud and have split hooves although not mentioned in this passage, they may be *kasher*. It is hunting them that puts them on the border of *kasher* and *treif* or *tamay* – *unclean*. They are shot or trapped or speared, not sacrificially bled to death after having their throats cut.

As regards other animals which are not *kasher*: what does *not* divide the hoof and does *not* chew the cud is regarded as unclean. This includes the camel which chews the cud but does not have a divided hoof. (Obviously the camel would be excluded from diet because it is a valuable economic resource like other beasts of burden). The rock badger (the cony or hyrax) and the hare are regarded (wrongly) as chewing the cud but have not got divided hooves so are unclean. (Actually, they make chewing movements but do not actually chew the cud.) The pig is unclean because although it has a divided hoof it does not chew the cud.

What the Levitical writer – called P. for the Priestly Code – is actually doing is looking for a transcendent meaning for all kinds of economic and in the case of the pig, perhaps even aware of medical reasons for rejecting the animal as food: the unhygienic conditions of farm-reared pigs encourage parasitical infections dangerous to humans.

As for sea and water-creatures: fish that have fins and scales are regarded as clean and edible, but shell-fish, eels and water-mammals like seals, dolphins and whales which have no fins and scales are regarded as unclean. Again, this reinforces the idea that as regards Judeans and Israelites we are dealing with economic causes rationalised as ritualised sanctified objects; the Jews are not hunter-gatherers who if they live near the sea would naturally seek out proteins for which we have a

possibly instinctual propensity associated with our survival and dominance as *homo sapiens* with a large neo-cortex (brain-matter being “fed” by quickly cooked proteins).

But rather, we stem from settled agriculturalists; this then accounts in part for the *cultural* survival of Israelite and Judean ideas despite great genetic intermixture produced by emigration, conversion, and rape. We exist by contrast with the more vulnerable hunter-gatherer economies which have disappeared as indigenous peoples cut off from globalising, world capitalism succumbed to colonialism and imperialism.

Jews learned in a pre-scientific, pragmatic way that *farming* for animal proteins and cereal crops / carbohydrates, for as yet unknown vitamins found in green vegetables and fruit, promoted longevity. Other skills such as craftsmanship and trading as well as general scholarship and artistic creativity meant that Jews could take their skills with them if persecuted and needing to emigrate because of poverty. So, the dietary laws and the laws of animal sacrifice and washing the hands are observed, if only unconsciously with a view to survival: because if Jews are ritually “clean” they have survived because ritual cleanliness sometimes entails hygienic cleanliness. Shell-fish contaminate quickly whereas sea and river fish can be smoked. The P. writer is in part perhaps “unconsciously” motivated by aesthetic considerations although really the pig *was* the victim of a lack of domestic farming hygiene when cruelly confined in pens even during parturition and subject to parasitical infections communicable to humans. The wild boar is also an omnivore and therefore potentially dangerous to humans.

Many thinkers such as Philo Judaeus, Josephus Flavius, Maimonides and countless modern bible scholars have suggested other rational arguments for Jewish dietary laws, including *shechita* – ritual slaughtering – which requires that the animal’s throat be cut so that the animal bleeds to death. Obviously, this is not just a *cultural* fear of blood, but may have survival value: salt, an antiseptic agent is used to drain and absorb blood which may contain pathogens.

But there is another rationale: there is a taboo in *halacha* against consuming blood which, one might suppose, is an alien ritual associated with some “blood-thirsty” pagan religions.

So, the blood of sacrificed “clean” animals was splashed on the altar of the ancient Israelite temples, presumably to make the blood of sacrifice sacred rather than profane by this not altogether magical, but a religious and a *hygienic* act: the heat of the sacrifice on the temple altar would sterilise blood and meat and thus promote the health of the *Levi'im* and *Kohan'im* who were entitled to eat of the sacrificed “clean” animal.

The taboo against mixing milk and meat originates from the *halachic* precept found in the Priestly Code (redacted by R. editing the P. J. D. and E authors during the exile in 6th century BCE Babylon) concerning the obvious cruelty involved in killing a new-born kid goat and “seething” (boiling) it in its mother’s milk. Clearly the “inhumanity” of killing a kid goat and “seething” it in its mother’s milk would distress the mother of the kid if she was within range of the smell and sight of these events. It is certainly aesthetically repulsive to a sensitive human being for such cruelty to be allowed. Thus, Judaism establishes its rationale as an *ethical* monotheism involving animals as well as human beings.

This, then, gets generalised to the taboo in Orthodox Judaism on mixing *any* milk and *any* meat and in Orthodox households even crockery, cutlery and cooking utensils are kept separate for meat on the one hand and milk or milk products on the other. However, the negative side of this ritualism is that *mere* ritualism if it becomes a substitute for *ethical behaviour* justifies the complaint re-iterated by the prophets and psalmists that God hates mere ritual.

The taboo on eating the flesh containing the visible blood of animals, probably evokes a horrible association of “blood-thirsty” human murder in the Judean and Israelite biblical “mind” which is why *halacha* insists that the meat of animals should be completely drained of blood after the animal’s death before cooking. Blood even of animals is a potent object of Israelite and Jewish horror. Perhaps this is not just for the sake of hygiene but because of the *ethical* discourse of Levitical law expressed, for example in the myth or legend of Cain’s killing of his brother Abel. The blood of Abel is said in the biblical text in *B’rei’sheet* to “cry out of the earth” to God to remedy or punish this murder. This God does in banishing Cain and cursing him: he will never be able to farm again because the earth will not yield up its fertility to him – soaked as part of Eden is by Abel’s blood. This is the *primal curse* against fratricide.

Whereas there is no *primal curse*, just a *Levitical ban* against father-daughter incest, initiated after God’s physical assault on Sodom and Gomorrah because of God’s (supposed) horror against homosexual relations. Lot’s daughters believe that because of God’s consequent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah which is full of male homosexuals, there are not going to be any people around on the earth so as to perpetuate their family and the human race. Lot’s daughters (Abraham’s nieces) therefore commit incest with Lot their father and produce children.

The laws against intercourse with a menstruating woman and the “unclean” “untouchable” nature of a woman after childbirth for a week or two perhaps also has to do with the conscious or unconscious *fear of blood*, especially blood associated with men’s *jealousy* of women’s ability to conceive and the fact of *monthly non-conception associated with the blood of menstruation*. There may be a male *sexist* motive for stigmatising menstrual blood as well as the fear of blood as symbolic of “bloodshed” in the form of criminal violence.

Can we use a comprehensive scientific theory taken from the field of social anthropology to understand Israelite and Jewish halacha as regards the dietary laws and associated taboos connected with blood, ritual slaughter, farm animals and wild animals, birds; that is, what is allowed and what is not kosher as regards food and sexual behaviour?

What is *totemic* in Judaism is, right at the top of *a hierarchy of totems* is YHVH, God as “I Am That I Am” Yod-Hey- Vav-Hey – the unpronounced *HaShem* - *God as Being itself*. This is God as fully transcendent *and* immanent. *Elohim, El, El Shaddai, and El Elyon* are perhaps originally *local totemic aspects of YHVH immanent in people and places as the spirit of God, later called the Shekhina*. What is *repressed* in the Hebrew bible as a totem *is the female partner of God, the Shekhina who only becomes a theological force in Her own right with the evolution of Kabbalah in the early Middle Ages in Spain, Provence and Germany*.

The totemically *kasher* edible animals, the “clean” domesticated farm animals, and fish with fins and scales are seen as the norm are totems, *kasher* and clean, because unlike shell-fish and warm-blooded sea mammals like seals, dolphins and whales, they are not in an ambiguous category.

“Normal” fish, are therefore *kasher*. Further, as Mary Douglas observed the *kasher* animals can be sacrificed on the holy temple altars corroborating the idea that what is *kasher* is *kasher* for humans and sacred to and for God and exemplifies renunciation of personal wealth so as to placate both God, the priests and society for whose sake the supplicant shows himself to be generous. Thus Israelite religion is a form of ideological cohesion.

But in the Israelite Bronze Age patriarchal society of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the female totemic Goddess was perhaps the *psychologically* repressed Canaanite fertility Goddess Astarte, known in Bronze Age Greece as Aphrodite and in ancient Egypt as Isis. We know from the legend of Rachel, Laban, Jacob and their quarrel over the priority of husband over and above wife's father that the ancient Israelites in the period of the patriarchs kept fertility gods, *teraphim*. Rachel sits on the household gods' statuettes when Laban her father is quarrelling with her and her husband Jacob over Jacob's salary, and Laban cheating Jacob of Rachel as his first wife by substituting Leah. So important were the *teraphim* as title deeds to property that the legend associates them with blood: Rachel says she cannot get up to reveal the stolen household gods (the title deeds now in her possession as heir to her father Laban's possessions.) because she is menstruating.

There is ample evidence for the Real presence of a female Goddess in Israelite and Judean society from the vehement denunciations of the prophets who actually attribute military defeat of the Jewish Commonwealths by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Macedonian Greeks and the Romans to idolatry which includes the repressed female Astarte who later is totally transformed into the invisible *Shekinah*, the female partner of God: or so anthropologists might hypothesise.

Possibly because women are associated with blood and the “non-blood” (no menstruation) of fertility they are “lower” in the totemic human hierarchy: the main heroes of the Hebrew bible are not women but men, despite the notable tragic or moral characteristics of Rachel, Ruth, and Judith. Modern feminist theology has tried to correct this bias by elevating the neshama or the nefesh – the psyche – of women who are repressed in male biblical narratives. Thus a modern re-telling of what are after all legends or myths, we might suggest the modern psychoanalytic idea of Julia Kristeva that the chora the psychological womb continues to operate in men if they free themselves from male sexist narratives. Abraham then contains and is contained by Sarah, and the same is true of Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Zipporah the daughter of a Midianite priest Jethro. Bathsheba eventually, much later, gives birth to none other than Solomon, mythically or actually wise and powerful, putting David's virtual murder of Uriah Bathsheba's husband into another, by no means justifying perspective. These are not intended to be exemplary tales. As myth or legend they help to create Israelite and Judean identity analogous to the Iliad, the Odyssey, Sophocles' Theban Trilogy with God playing a frequently moral role, certainly by comparison with the Greek-Olympian pantheon.

Should we worship the *Shekhina*, the Holy Spirit of God? We should at least acknowledge through Kabbalah that God is at least 10-fold in His/Her totemic aspects. If not part of a religious prayer in Jewish monotheism this characterisation of godly virtue is ethically and psychologically important.

This is not to dispute ethical monotheism. Perhaps “God” is a sign or symbol Who becomes Real when his female counterpart the repressed, absent *Shekhina* is also allowed to emerge from the unconscious and conscious mind. With Kierkegaard we may “leap” across the abyss of unbelief into a faith which is intuitively Real Who enters our lives as more than a symbol or wrought of the

imaginary and its desires: something to Whom we can pray. For Being-as-Being, I Am That I Am, may be a wondrous event if only because of the fact of a created universe in which we, created by and in that universe, find a place as it expands and perhaps eventually collapses into a singularity again. It is my supposition that this I Am That I Am is really a projection of human hopes for redemption, forgiveness of sin, and a love transcending human war, hate, division and chaos, a love which we show each other if and when the world recovers from its current “age of anger”.

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