

***The Chester Principles on Ethical Kashrut* ©**

Congregation Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek, Chester CT

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The practice of ethical kashrut seeks to bring an awareness of Jewish values into our multifaceted relationship with food. The Rabbis consider that the laws of kashrut were designed to sacralize the fundamental activity of eating. The prophet Ezekiel even called the dinner table a *mikdash m'at*, or “miniature altar”, according to rabbi Doug Sagal. As members of a Reform congregation we choose whether or not we keep kosher. The synagogue has established guidelines for permissible and prohibited foods. But we believe that for us to observe the spirit if not the letter of dietary law, we need to return to core principles of Jewish teachings and apply them to our contemporary situation, In particular, we share in the ancient view that holiness (*kedushah*) comes from being spiritually mindful of, joyful about and thankful for what we eat.

The following are *recommended guidelines* for our congregation, intended to enhance our traditional kashrut principles and serve as a source of education and inspiration. They rest on four cornerstones of Judaism that we as a congregation value: first, avoid causing suffering, (*tsa'ar ba'alei hayim*); second, respect for the land (*shomeir adamah*); third, pursuing social justice (*rodfe zedek*); and fourth, protecting the health of families, communities and ourselves (*sh'mirat haguf*).”

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I. Tsa'ar ba'alei hayim/ Avoid causing suffering

The idea of minimizing suffering is presented in a number scriptural and rabbinic teachings. Though it is not said that animals are made in the image of God, they are nonetheless part of God's creation. It follows from this that animals, the good work of God's creation, ought not be regarded as industrialized commodities. This does not mean that we need to be vegetarians; indeed, the Torah endorses eating meat, but this is seen as a concession to our corrupted nature. (We are first granted permission to eat meat after the flood, in the context of the covenant that God makes with man that God will not destroy the earth “for man's heart is corrupted from his youth”).

So if we wish to eat meat, we need to be aware of an obvious truth that the industrialized production of food conspires to obscure: before we can eat animals, we have to kill them. Given this, it is ethically imperative that we observe the first principle: avoidance of *tsa'ar ba'alei hayim*. We agree with Peter Singer's dictum: “If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering

into consideration.” The Torah repeatedly makes us aware of this principle, instructing us to rest our animals on the Sabbath, refrain from yoking different species together, and allow working animals to graze. The traditional laws of kashrut stress slaughtering in a way that minimizes the animal’s suffering.

II. Shomeir adamah/ Respect for the land

The Torah is clear about human responsibility for the earth. According to the creation account, God puts man in the garden to tend and protect it (*l’avdah v l’shamra*). Just as we are enjoined to provide rest for our livestock on Shabbat, so the land is to be given Sabbath rest once every seven years (the *shmita* year). The pressing need for environmental stewardship and a sustainable food system is a vital element of *tikkun olam*, or repairing the earth. We may apply the principle by, for instance, growing or purchasing organic products, patronizing local farms and farmers markets, or supporting organizations that advocate for sustainable food sources.

III. Rodfe zedek/ Pursuing justice

A central tenet of our faith is to seek to repair the world. This obligation extends to food as it does other things. We cannot ignore the social costs of industrialized meat production and agriculture, for instance. Food justice may involve avoiding edibles produced through unfair labor practices, unsafe working conditions, and violations of human rights. Further, there is no way to live in this connected world and entirely untangle ourselves from issues of global hunger. But we can take steps to promote social justice in fields and agricultural plants by selecting foods produced with fair practices, supporting organizations that encourage ethical trading, and aiding programs such as food banks or agencies such as Mazon.

IV. Sh’mirat haguf/Protecting our health

Tradition urges us to treat our bodies with care as we are created in the image of God. Maimonides put it this way: “We must strive to maintain a healthy body so that we can serve God.” Today, respect for our bodies involves recognizing that the food we eat nourishes and sustains our families and our communities, as well as ourselves, allowing us to thrive and to “choose life” as the teachings command. We may apply the principle by eating foods in healthful quantities that, where possible, are fresh, nutritious, and free of harmful ingredients.

Congregation Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek
55 East Kings Highway
Chester CT 06412 USA
+1 860 526 8920, info@cbsrz.org
www.cbsrz.org