

Shabbat Shmini 5783 - Is Kosher Chicken Parmesan Kosher?
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Shabbat Shalom.

There is a joke about a man, David, who was always very careful about keeping kosher. When he passed away and ascended to heaven, G-d wanted to reward him for keeping the Mitzvah so carefully. G-d said, "David, you have passed up on so many delicious foods in the world in the course of your keeping Kosher. Thank you. As a reward, you may sample in heaven any delicacy that you like. In this world, everything is kosher."

David hesitated. He continued, "G-d, keeping Kosher was important to me and I want to continue that practice. May I ask who the Mashgiach is in Olam HaBa? Who is the kosher supervisor in heaven?"

G-d responded, "None other than Moses himself."

David hesitated. He continued, "I think I'll have the fruit plate."

Warning: The following sermon may make you hungry, as we are talking about food today. This morning's Torah reading, Shmini, outlines the basic rules about how to keep Kosher, by naming the animals Jews are not permitted to eat. Though this practice is literally thousands of years old, new questions arise all the time in the world of Kosher eating.

For example, this one: years ago I was living in New Jersey, and one night I went to a gourmet kosher restaurant in Monsey, NY, which has a very Orthodox community. On the menu at a meat restaurant called Fireside, supervised by a strict Kashrut agency, was chicken Parmesan. Of course the chicken was meat, but the menu made clear that the cheese topping was a vegan cashew Parmesan. Still, I had never seen this before on a Kosher menu, and though I was curious, I hesitated to order it. I stopped and wondered: is Kosher Chicken Parmesan actually Kosher?

Not in the technical sense, as I knew there was no dairy in the dish, and thus no mixing of meat and dairy products. But I wondered if eating this was in the *spirit* of keeping kosher. Was I cheating by eating this, or simply following the Kosher rules the way I was supposed to?

This is a question many of us have asked. While we all live closer to Muncie Indiana than Monsey New York, we can all create the same experience at home. Many of us have done so. If we want a kosher cheeseburger, we actually have choices. We can prepare a delicious Impossible Burger, plant-based and meat-free, and then have a slice of real American cheese on top. And we can even have Graeter's ice cream for dessert! Or we can go the other direction. We can grill up a real meat burger and smother it with a slice of Daiya American "cheese," which is a dairy-free substitute. While we cannot enjoy dairy ice cream after this meal, we can come close with a yummy non-dairy ice cream. Food science has led to these tastes coming closer to the real thing than ever before. And these products are certified Kosher by the authoritative Orthodox Union, no less.

But are these combinations Kosher in spirit, or are we just cheating the system?

Let's consider both possibilities.

First, maybe we shouldn't be doing this. Maybe the issue is the perceived combined taste instead of the separate ingredients that enter our mouth. Additionally, we might be concerned that Jews who eat these combined foods in a permitted way may enjoy them so much they will be tempted to eat non-Kosher combinations. We certainly don't want to feed that temptation. Finally, we should be concerned with *Marit Ayin*, giving a false appearance that something is permitted when it's not. This is a well-established principle in Jewish Law. Someone who is not aware that the burger is an Impossible Burger may see a Jewish family eating it and think Judaism is okay with eating real burgers with real cheese. These imitation products taste and look like the real thing, so we don't want to deceive people.

I considered these ideas and concluded the same way the Orthodox Union does – These foods are Kosher in law and in spirit. Let me now counter each of these above points.

First, let's start with the Talmud, which is the authoritative Orthodox collection of conversations discussing Jewish law from 1500 years ago.

It teaches that the core issue is not *perceived flavor* in the mouth but *actual ingredients* that enter our mouth. It tells of Rabbi Nachman and his wife Yalta having a conversation: "*Yalta said to her husband Rav Nahman: Now, as a rule, for any item that G-d prohibited to us, G-d permitted us a similar item. G-d prohibited us the consumption of blood, yet G-d permitted us consumption of liver, which is filled with blood and retains the taste of blood. Furthermore, the Torah prohibits the consumption of the forbidden fat*

of a domesticated animal, but permits the fat of an undomesticated animal, which has the same flavor. It is prohibited to eat pork, but one may eat the brain of a shibuta fish, which has a similar taste. One may not eat giruta, a non-kosher fish, but one may eat the tongue of a fish, which tastes similar. Yalta concluded: The Torah prohibits the consumption of meat cooked in milk; I wish to eat a dish that tastes like meat cooked in milk. Upon hearing this, Rav Nahman said to his cooks: 'Roast udders on a spit for her.'"

In other words, Rav Nachman said to his wife, "Honey, I'm taking you to dinner at Fireside in Monsey!"

This passage from the Talmud teaches us that substitutions are perfectly fine even if they closely approximate the forbidden food. We also see that Jews have been seeking out the perfect non-traif alternative for 1500 years. If the Talmud is good with rabbis actively seeking out these imitation foods, then the Orthodox Union is too. As am I.

To the second point, I don't really think that a Jew who keeps Kosher and is smitten by a Kosher cheeseburger will abandon the practice and make a dash for McDonald's. These imitation products have been around for a few years now, and I have not heard of this ever occurring. People who care about keeping Kosher aren't suddenly going to abandon it for a bite of something slightly better, if at all.

Third, Marit Ayin. Indeed it's a serious issue, but much depends on how widely known these products are to others. These days, everybody knows about imitation meat and dairy-free cheese, which totally changes the equation. If these products had just been released and were not yet mainstream, then we would have to account for *Marit Ayin*. But now they are ubiquitous. As Rabbi Zvi Nussbaum of OU Kosher writes, "Maarit ayin is a question of perception, causing suspicion that there is a violation of Halacha. The common, everyday use of these products should remove any possible suspicion [of someone not acting in accordance with Halacha.]" Thus in the case of the Fireside Chicken Parmesan, Marit Ayin is not an issue.

There is another reason I think these products are *Mutar Lehathila*, perfectly permissible. And this goes to the heart of keeping Kosher itself.

Keeping Kosher is a daily Jewish activity, which is crucial for us to live active Jewish lives. Shabbat is paramount, but it only comes once a week. Every day we have the opportunity for prayer, but what if we skip Minyan? But we all have to eat. Every day. And keeping Kosher gives us a Jewish way to do a human activity. By being aware of ingredients, of meat, dairy, or parve status, of what foods we can and cannot eat, of whether the food has a heksher symbol, of how many hours it's been since we ate

meat, each meal is a very active Jewish exercise in doing Jewish. Furthermore, keeping Kosher is not an end, but a means. Our eating in a Jewish way actively reminds us at least three times a day that we are Jewish. Not that we would forget, but when we practice this Mitzvah daily, being Jewish becomes top of mind every day. So when we are encountered with a challenge in the world - to cheat on our taxes, to copy someone's homework, to lie and take credit for another person's idea - we respond appropriately in the Jewish way: honestly and ethically every time.

Back to the Chicken Parmesan. I was fully aware with every single bite that I was eating imitation dairy. It never left my mind that it was still a meat meal and that the "cheese" was not real cheese. In other words, I was 100% aware, from start to finish, that though this was a new food for me to try, it was a Kosher meal. My Jewish muscles were as fully activated as they would have been if that night we had just made chicken stir fry at home by itself, without imitation dairy. So enjoying my Kosher chicken Parmesan was in fact a Kosher experience.

Lucky us - we live in a time when recreating every taste under the sun is possible, for we live in the age of Impossible.

Shabbat Shalom.