The word “kosher” is universally used to denote that which is proper and meets accepted rules and standards. In Judaism, the term kosher applies specifically to food, Torah scrolls, tefillin, and mezuzot, and can even be applied to the acceptability of witnesses. Its most common use today, of course, is in regard to food, which is the subject of this shiur.

This class will address the following questions:
~ Why is it important to keep kosher?
~ What are the reasons for keeping kosher?
~ How does someone observe the laws of kashrut?
~ What are some of the Kabbalistic explanations for the laws of kashrut?

Class Outline

Section I. Principles of Keeping Kosher
Part A. Kosher Mammals
Part B. Birds
Part C. Kosher Animals and Birds Require Shechitah
Part D. Gid HaNasheh
Part E. Fats and Blood
Part F. Not Mixing Meat and Dairy Products
Part G. Fish
Part H. Insects
Part I. Selected Rabbinic Prohibitions

Section II. Philosophy of Keeping Kosher
Part A. Kashrut Connects a Jew to God
Part B. Spiritual Health
Part C. Damage Caused by Non-kosher Food
Part D. Kashrut Can Improve One’s Character

Section III. Kabbalistic Explanations of Kashrut
SECTION I. PRINCIPLES OF KEEPING KOSHER

Fundamental principles of the kashrut laws governing permissible and prohibited foods are summarized below.

PART A. KOSHER MAMMALS

The Torah states that kosher mammals are those which chew their cud (ruminants) and are cloven-hoofed. The following animal species are among those considered to be kosher: addax, antelope, bison, cow, deer, gazelle, goat, ibex, and sheep. Mammals and fowl require special preparation as discussed in Part E below.

1. Vayikra (Leviticus) 11:2-3 – The Divine definition of the kosher mammal: it must have split hooves and chew the cud.

2. Sifra Shmini, Parshat Yayin ve-Shechar, Parshah 2 – To teach the Jewish people which animals are kosher, Moshe (Moses) held up each animal and declared its status.

PART B. BIRDS

The Torah does not list specific characteristics to distinguish between permitted and forbidden birds. Instead, it enumerates twenty-four forbidden species of fowl, while all other birds are considered to be kosher. Nonetheless, in practice we eat only those birds which have an established tradition that the species is kosher, such as chicken, turkey, duck, and goose.


PART C. KOSHER ANIMALS AND BIRDS REQUIRE SHECHITAH

Animals and birds require (shechitah) ritual slaughter to render them kosher. An animal that dies in any other way is not kosher.

1. Devarim (Deuteronomy)12:21 – The source for the requirement of a kosher slaughter.
2. 

**Vayikra 22:8 – Prohibition of eating from a dead animal or one which has not been shechted (kosher slaughter).**

Do not eat from a carcass or from a torn animal, to be contaminated through it; I am God.

**PART D. GID HANASHEH (SCIATIC NERVE)**

The sciatic nerve (gid hanasheh) in each leg and the fat surrounding the nerve must be removed.

1. **Bereishit (Genesis) 32:33 – The sciatic nerve must be removed from the hind legs.**

Therefore the Children of Israel do not eat the gid hanasheh on the hip-socket to this day, because [the angel of Esau] struck Yaakov's (Jacob) hip-socket on the gid hanasheh.

**PART E. FATS AND BLOOD**

Certain fats, known as chelev, may not be eaten. As much blood as possible must be removed from the meat, either by soaking, salting, and rinsing or by broiling over a fire.

1. **Vayikra 3:17 – Blood and forbidden fats must be removed from the meat before eating.**

It is an eternal statute for all your generations in all your dwelling places – all fats and all blood you shall not eat.

**PART F. NOT MIXING MEAT AND DAIRY PRODUCTS**

Milk from kosher animals is kosher. However, dairy and meat products cannot be mixed. The seriousness of the prohibition of mixing meat and dairy products is underscored by its appearance three times in the Torah.

1. **Shemot (Exodus) 23:19, 34:26, Devarim 14:21 – The three sources of the Torah prohibition.**

Do not cook a goat in its mother's milk.

2. **Rashi, Shemot 23:19 – What additional laws is the Torah teaching by this repetition?**

The three places where the Torah writes the prohibition of mixing milk and meat teach that it is 1. forbidden to eat the mixture, 2. forbidden to
3. **Rabbi Yaakov Luban, OU Kosher Laboratories** – The separation of meat and milk includes:

- not eating them at the same meal,
- not preparing them on the same utensils, and
- waiting between eating meat and milk.

The Rabbis extended the prohibition to disallow the eating of meat and dairy products at the same meal or preparing them on the same utensils. Furthermore, milk products cannot be consumed after eating meat, for a period of time. There are different traditions for how long to wait between meat and dairy, but the most prevalent custom is to wait six hours.

Meat may be eaten following dairy products with the one exception of hard cheese that is aged six months or more, which requires the same waiting time as that of dairy after meat.

**PART G. FISH**

Fish must have fins and scales to be kosher. Unlike meat and poultry, fish requires no special preparation.

1. **Vayikra 11:9** – Any fish which has fins and scales is kosher.

   This is what you may eat of all that is in the water: You may eat any creature that lives in the water, whether in seas or rivers, as long as it has fins and scales.

**PART H. INSECTS**

There are five Torah prohibitions regarding the eating of insects. The Torah states that only certain *chagavim* (grasshoppers) are kosher. But just like birds, there is a need for a tradition regarding the identity of the kosher species.

1. **Vayikra 11:20-1** – Insects may not be eaten.

   Every flying insect that uses four legs for walking—it is an abomination to you. The only flying insects with four walking legs that you may eat are those which have knees extending above their feet, [using these longer legs] to hop on the ground.

**PART I. SELECTED RABBINIC PROHIBITIONS**

1. **Is it Kosher? Rabbi E. Eidlitz, p. 66** – Food and wine prepared exclusively by a non-Jew is prohibited.

   Foods cooked by an *akun* [a non-Jew] are forbidden, since it is possible that he would serve non-kosher food, and this is also a precaution against assimilation.
SECTION II. PHILOSOPHY OF KEEPING KOSHER

PART A. KASHRUT CONNECTS A JEW TO GOD

1. Shemot (Exodus) 22; 30 – A holy people needs holy food.
   You shall be a holy people to Me, and you shall not eat the flesh of an animal that has been torn in the field, but you should throw it to the dog.

2. Rashi, ibid. – Our holiness and closeness to God depends on what we eat and how we eat.
   “You shall be holy people to Me.” If you are holy and separate yourselves from the disgusting carcasses and torn animals then you are Mine. If not, you are not Mine.

3. Harekanti, Vayikra, Tazria p. 60 – Kashrut helps to reach one’s potential and come close to God.
   According to the simple meaning the reason that it is forbidden to eat impure animals is that they cause decay and illness to the soul. They prevent a person from reaching his perfection and coming close to God.

4. Seftorno, Devarim 14:4 – Our elevated national status after the giving of the Torah requires that we eat “elevated” food.
   Before the Torah was given the difference between impure and pure animals was known as is clear from Noach (who differentiated between them in the Ark). Nevertheless it was not prohibited for non-Jews to eat non-kosher animals. But you [the Jewish people], since you are holy, it is not fitting for you to be sustained by these forbidden things.
PART B. SPIRITUAL HEALTH

1. **Kli Yakar – Kashrut ensures the well-being of the soul.**
   
   The reason for the laws of kashrut is not for physical health benefits, as the Ramban (Nachmanides) explains. We see that non-Jews eat non-kosher foods and are healthy. Rather their purpose is for the well-being of the soul. Non-kosher foods remove the spirit of purity and holiness, and create a blockage in the intelligence, and cause cruelty. This only helps “them,” Israel, for they will live in the world to come. But for non-Jews there is no purpose in this mitzvah.

2. **Midrash Tanchuma, Shmini 7 – Kashrut leads to the perfection of a person.**
   
   God said to the Jews, “Be careful that you do not make yourselves disgusting with non-kosher animals or creatures.” King David said, “God’s ways are perfect. The word of God has been perfected” (Tehillim/Psalms 18:31) – in order to perfect His creations.

   Rebbi (Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi) said, “What difference does it make to God if the Jews eat without proper slaughtering, or if they tear open the neck and eat, or slaughter from the back of the neck? Know that the only purpose of the commandment of slaughtering was to perfect the Jewish people…”

3. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Yoma 39a – Eating non-kosher food desensitizes a person …**
   
   It was taught by the school of Rabbi Yishmael: Sin blocks up a person’s heart, as it states, “Do not contaminate yourselves through [eating] them (sharatzim), lest you become contaminated through them” (Vayikra 11:43). Do not read it as “contaminated” (nitmeitem), but rather “blocked up” (nitamtem).

4. **Rashi, ibid. – … and diminishes one’s wisdom.**
   
   “Blocks up” – seals and closes it from any wisdom.

5. **Ramban (Nachmanides), Devarim 14:3 – Strong language to emphasize protecting the soul.**
   
   “Do not eat anything disgusting.” The Torah wanted to add an explanation for the forbidden...
PART C. DAMAGE CAUSED BY NON-KOSHER FOOD

All Torah authorities agree that kosher food has a beneficial effect on the soul and non-kosher food the opposite effect. However, they disagree as to whether non-kosher food can physically damage the body. The sources listed below maintain that non-kosher food physically damages the body. The Kli Yakar cited in B:1 above disagrees.

1. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Mesillat Yesharim (The Path of the Just), Ch. 11 – Food penetrates the body and soul.**

   The prohibitions concerning forbidden foods also involve many details, as is reflected in all of the commonly known laws that are treated in the Halachic writings. One who is lenient in relation to these laws when he has been instructed to be stringent is destroying his soul … For sin dulls a man's heart in the respect that it causes true knowledge and the spirit of wisdom that the Holy One, Blessed be He, gives to the righteous (as it is said [Mishlet/Proverbs 2:6], “For God gives wisdom”) to depart from him, and he remains beastly and earthy, immersed in the gross materialism of this world. Forbidden foods are worse than all other prohibitions in this respect, for they enter into a person's body and become flesh of his flesh …

   Any intelligent person will regard forbidden food as poison, or as food with which some poison has become mixed. Would anyone allow himself to partake of such food? If there were any room for suspicion or even the slightest doubt, he would certainly not permit himself to eat of it; and if he did, he would be regarded as an absolute fool. Forbidden food, as we have explained, is poison to the heart and soul. Which intelligent person would allow himself to eat food which has any question whatsoever about its permissibility?

2. **Ramban, Torat Hashem Temimah (p. 166 in Vol. I of Chavel edition Kisvei Ramban) – Non-kosher food is damaging to the body and the soul.**

   The Torah further enlightens us with the secret of cause and effect. It prohibited us from eating certain animals, birds and fish. This is in keeping with the other laws of the Torah. The Torah further enlightens us with the secret of cause...
WHY KEEP KOSHER?

and effect. It prohibited us from eating certain animals, birds and fish. This is in keeping with the other laws of the Torah, which are beneficial both for the body and the soul. For all these forbidden foods are known to be foods which are not good for one's health. However, besides this they cause damage to the soul. This is why the Torah writes, “They will make you blocked up (nitmetem)” without the letter aleph (which would spell nitmeitem – you will become impure) to teach that they block up the heart.

An illustration of this point can be found in the list of non-kosher birds. These are all birds of prey, except for two, and include all the birds of prey in the world. These birds are all cruel. Through consuming their flesh and blood, the soul absorbs the attribute of cruelty. Therefore it is appropriate that the Jewish people, who are commanded to be merciful and to love one another, be forbidden from these things.

3. **Sefer HaChinuch Mitzvah 73 – Non-kosher food can harm the body, which is the platform for the soul.**

The reasons for this mitzvah [of kashrut]: The body is a tool for the soul, through which the soul accomplishes its tasks. The soul cannot function without the body. Any deficiency of the body will thus limit the soul’s ability to function. Therefore, the Torah instructed us to refrain from eating anything that could cause us damage. This is the simple explanation for the forbidden foods in the Torah.

Do not be surprised that some of these dangerous foods are known to us, but not to doctors, because the Faithful Doctor, Who instructed us about them, is far wiser than you or any human doctor. How foolish is someone who thinks that these foods are not dangerous because he does not know that. You should know that it is for our benefit that the Torah does not explain why they are forbidden or the damage they cause: because some people who claim to be very wise may come and tell us that the dangers that the Torah refers to in a certain food is non-existent, or that it applies only in a certain place, or only to certain people. Lest you be swayed by their words to follow these fools, the Torah did not reveal to us the reasons [as to why certain foods are forbidden], to spare us from this stumbling block.
**PART D. KASHRUT CAN IMPROVE ONE'S CHARACTER**

1. **Ramban, Devarim 14:21 – Kashrut prevents the trait of cruelty.**

   The reason it states, “For you are a holy nation to the Lord, your God” in connection to “Do not eat a kid in its mother’s milk” is not because this is a disgusting food. Rather, it is forbidden in order that we should be holy regarding our food and not act as a cruel and merciless nation – milking the mother in order to cook her kid in her milk.

   All meat and milk is included in this prohibition [even when someone does not cook meat in its mother’s milk, which one might think is not considered cruel] nonetheless, since any nursing mother is called a “mother,” and any nursling is called a “kid,” cooking them together is always considered cruel.

**SECTION III. KABBALISTIC EXPLANATIONS OF KASHRUT**

1. **Rabbeinu Bachya, Vayikra 11:43 – Connection to God is impacted.**

   “You will become blocked up with them” – from the word *timtum* (blocked up). The heart becomes blocked when eating non-kosher foods and a person cannot receive Divine Inspiration. It is possible that the reason the letter *aleph* is missing [from the Hebrew word *timtum*] is because it alludes to the Prime Unity, and [if a person eats non-kosher food] God departs from this person. Similarly the word *chet* (sin) is sometimes written without an *aleph* to show that God also departs from a person because of his sins.

2. **Shelah, Shaar ha-Osios, Os Kuf; Kedushat haOchlin – Non-kosher food blocks our ability for spiritual connection and causes impurity of the body and soul.**

   The Torah warned us about forbidden and permitted foods. “You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, and not make your souls disgusting.” The Zohar explains that the impure foods that the Torah warns us against have an external impure spirit. Someone who eats them makes his soul impure and demonstrates that he has no share in purity or in the God of Israel. The impure thing becomes part of his physical body, which the soul is clothed within. In this way he profanes his soul and makes it impure, and an impure spirit rests on him.
Rav Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin writes that the primal desire of man is to eat of the forbidden. Adam and Chava (Eve) succumbed to that desire, and as a result it has remained pre-dominant in the human psyche since that eventful day (Bereishit 2:15-3:24). In the next source, Rav Tzadok describes how following Adam’s error, food contains an element of the forbidden taste of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. By eating kosher food in a proper manner, one can correct that mistake so that food will again taste like the Tree of Life, which represents Torah.

3. Rav Tzadok HaKohen, Pri Tzadik, Tazriah 3 – Care in kosher food is considered as if one has fulfilled all the mitzvot of the Torah.

The observance of the laws of kashrut encompasses all the other laws of the Torah. In the Garden of Eden the snake was only able to entice them [Adam and Chava] to sin by creating a desire for the forbidden food [the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil]. Someone who is careful about only eating kosher foods and imbuing them with holiness thereby keeps all the mitzvot of the Torah, because the only way that the Evil Inclination can rule over a person is through eating and drinking, as the verse states, “You shall eat and drink … Be careful lest your heart lead you astray” (Devarim 11: 15-16).

In the Zohar it states, “The tree that Adam HaRishon ate from was wheat, others say it was grapes, and others say it was a fig. These opinions do not disagree with one another, but are all true.” How can they all be true when they disagree about the facts of what happened?

The truth is that when the Torah states, “The Tree of Life, was in the middle of the garden…” This means that the inner spirituality of each tree in the garden was the same as that of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. If Adam had eaten first from the Tree of Life in every other food that he ate he would have tasted the taste of Torah, which is life. But when he ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil he made every other food contain within it the taste of that tree, and this is the source of all sin. When a person corrects this sin through eating in holiness, he thereby keeps all the mitzvot and is saved from the challenges of the Evil Inclination.