



## Do *Ma'achalos Asuros* Cause Diseases?

*To distinguish between the contaminated and the pure, and between the creature that may be eaten and the creature that may not be eaten. (Vayikra 11:47)*

Following the spread of the novel coronavirus in recent months, several of the eating habits in various provinces of China have come to light. These include the consumption of animals that the Western world find repulsive, and, according to some reports, *Eiver Min haChai*. It appears that these practices and the poor hygiene in these regions may have been the cause of this zoonotic disease spreading to humans.

A significant portion of *Parshas Shemini* discusses *Ma'achalos Asuros* – forbidden foods. The Torah restricts the types of foods that we may consume and demands that we carefully prepare those foods that are permitted. It also stresses that *Ma'achalos Asuros* contaminate the soul, but fascinatingly, several of the *Rishonim* offer medical reasons to avoid consuming *Ma'achalos Asuros*, arguing that doing so guards one's health and prevents disease!

This is famously the position of the *Ramban* who discusses this matter at length. These are his comments on the signs that distinguish Kosher fish:

*The rationale for the requirement of fins and scales is because those fish that have them always reside in the upper and clearer parts of the water and receive nourishment from the air that penetrates the water there. For this reason, they have a slight amount of heat that wards off diseases that stem from their excessive moisture, just as wool or hair or nails found in humans or animals. But those that do not have fins and scales always reside in the deep and murky waters and due to the increased moisture and lack of heat they do not ward off anything. Therefore, their bodies contain cold and sticky fluid that are likely to cause death [to those who eat them] (11:9).*

According to the *Ramban*, the condition that Kosher fish must bear fins and scales is designed to protect the Jewish people from consuming species that typically carry diseases! He makes a similar point regarding the Kashrus of birds for which the



Torah does not provide a *Siman* to determine which are Kosher (it merely lists those that are non-Kosher):

*And the biggest sign for (non-Kosher) birds is that they prey [on other species]. For any bird of prey is non-Kosher. The Torah forbade it for its blood is heated up due to its cruelty and increases the blackish, burnt humor [of the body] and instills the heart [of one who eats it] with cruelty. (11:13)*

The *Ramban* goes on to say that this is also the basis for the *Simanim* of Kosher animals, for all the animals that have split hooves and chew their cud are herbivores – in other words, they do not prey on other animals. Moreover, *Chaza"l* say (*Avoda Zara* 35b) that milk of Kosher animals congeals and becomes cheese unlike milk of non-Kosher animals, proving that they are of a different nature. The *Ramban* suggests that consuming non-Kosher animals damages the reproductive organs and leads to defective sperm that will be incapable of impregnation or will not produce good, healthy offspring. Furthermore, consumption of permitted animals also has known medical benefits. The *Ramban* notes that he saw in records of medical experiments that a child who suckles from a pig will become a leper which indicates the harmful natural properties of non-Kosher animals.

The *Ramban* summarizes his position in *Igeres haKodesh* (4):

*Blood is the sustenance of the body and becomes part of the body, and the nature of the blood is like the nature of the food from which it is sourced. Therefore, if one's food is coarse and dirty, the blood that is derived from it will be coarse and dirty. And if the food is clean, clear, and pure, the blood will be likewise. For this reason, Hashem bid us in His Torah to distance ourselves from many foods that he forbade, some of which stop up the heart like forbidden fats and blood, some of which cause us to become brazen like wild animals or birds and carnivorous animals, some of which close the doors of the knowledge and wisdom like the rabbit, hair or pig and their like, and some of them instill us with many harmful and terrible diseases like the insects and bugs of the land or water. Regarding all of them, the Torah states: "Do not make your souls abhorrent" (Vayikra 11:43) which teaches us that all of these things are repulsive and disgusting and produce inferior blood that is the source of much suffering.*

The *Ramban* is not alone in his approach to *Ma'achalos Asuros*. The *Rashbam* writes similarly, adding that *Ma'achalos Asuros* "destroy and overheat the body". He notes that the Gemara states, "Gentiles who consume *Shekatzim u'Remasim* (creeping



and crawling creatures) – their bodies are ruined,” referring to the Gemara in *Shabbos* (86b) which considers the possibility that the body “heat” of gentiles and Jews differ. On the one hand, Jews are constantly occupied in Mitzvos that “heat up” their bodies, but on the other, gentiles consume *Shekatzim u’Remasim* and this leads to increased body “heat”! According to the *Rashbam*, this means that their bodies are *damaged* as a result.<sup>1</sup>

Another example of the deleterious nature of *Ma’achalos Asuros* is a *Treif* – an animal that is mortally ill or injured and will die within twelve months. The Torah (*Shemos* 22:30) commands that the flesh of a *Treif* should be cast to the dogs and according to the *Ibn Ezra* this is not only due to its damaging *spiritual* properties. A *Treif*, he says, contains a “harmful substance” (in other words, it could cause disease) and therefore is only fit for a dog, not for other human beings (unlike a *Neveila* that is permitted to a *Ger Toshav* or non-Jew).

*Basar v’Chalav* is also said to be harmful to a person’s body. *Rabbenu Bachya* (*Shemos* 23:19) explains that milk is produced from blood and blood is a substance that is “bad and imparts cruelty (to those who drink it)”. Unlike other parts of the animal which undergo a change and become permitted and no longer damaging to health, milk retains its essential ruinous qualities though it has now been transformed from its original form. When it is mixed with meat, its underlying qualities that stem from its original state (of blood) come to the fore and it “stops up the heart and produces coarseness and bad nature in the soul of the person who consumes it”.

We see that there are many *Rishonim* who offer medical reasons for the prohibition of *Ma’achalos Asuros*. (See also the *Rikanti* and *Seforno* in our Parsha, and the *Sefer haChinuch* 154). Obviously, these are not the sole reasons for these prohibitions and even if scientific research would definitively confirm that these foods are not damaging to one’s health, they will certainly not become permitted fare. Like all Mitzvos in the Torah, this Mitzva contains many hidden and deeper reasons that apply regardless of their possible scientific or medical basis.

This discussion may shed some light on a wide-ranging debate regarding the signs of a Kosher animal. The *Acharonim* discuss whether the absence of the signs is

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<sup>1</sup>As an aside, the Chasam Sofer in several of his Teshuvos (Y.D. 2:175 and 2:101, among others), cites this Gemara as proof that the bodies of gentiles are different to those of Jews and therefore one cannot rely on medical or scientific studies that have been performed on gentiles as the results may not apply to Jews!



the very cause (“*Sibah*”) of the animal’s forbidden status, or merely an indication (“*Siman*”) that it is a forbidden species<sup>2</sup>. According to the *Rishonim* who hold that *Ma’achalos Asuros* pose a risk of physical harm, it would seem that the prohibition falls on the species itself and the signs are merely an indication of which species are forbidden.

An oft-quoted source on this topic is the *Chidushei Agados* of the *Maharal* (*Chulin* 42a), who is cited as a dissenting opinion:

*Though there are signs as to which species is Kosher and which is not, these are not the main reason [for the animal’s permitted or forbidden status]. An animal is not Kosher because it has a split hoof, for why should that be a reason for it to be Kosher? Rather, this is a mere indication...as an animal’s Kosher status is due to it being a species that is not detached from Hashem... A non-Kosher status is because this species is detached from Hashem. This is the actual source of Kosher or non-Kosher status, not the signs which are mere indications... This is also implied by the Pasuk which states: “To distinguish between the impure and the pure” – [implying that the difference between the Kosher and non-Kosher animals] is recognizable, [in the sense] that the two are inherently distinct from one another [and are not merely dissimilar due to external signs of Kashrus].*

According to the *Maharal*, there is no specific reason or characteristic that causes a species to be Kosher or not. Rather, if the Torah forbids a certain species, that prohibition renders the animal impure and vice versa. In his *Sefer Tiferes Yisrael*, the *Maharal* directly disputes the contention of the *Ramban*, arguing that the Torah is absolutely not a Sefer of medical advice and it did not command *Mitzvos* due to the physical harm or benefits they may bring.

In our Parsha, the Torah commands, “Do not make yourselves abhorrent”. This Mitzva obligates a person to observe laws of hygiene, particularly regarding the preparation of food, as stated by the *Rambam* at the conclusion of *Hilchos Ma’achalos Asuros* (17:29-32):

*The Chachamim forbade food and drink that would disgust most people, such as food and drink that have been mixed with vomit or excrement, disgusting bile, or*

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<sup>2</sup> A similar discussion is had regarding the signs of “*Bagrus*” (a stage of maturity in the growth of a girl). The question is whether the various signs that are mentioned regarding a *Bogeret* are merely a *Siman* that she has reached at a certain stage of growth and maturity or whether they are an actual *Sibah* of *Bagrus*, in other words, the signs are the *Bagrus* itself.



*the like. The Chachamim similarly forbade eating or drinking from vessels that contain excrement – which people find abhorrent – such as vessels of the bathroom or glass vessels of barbers into which they scrape blood, and the like. They also forbade eating with soiled or dirty hands, or from dirty vessels. For all these matters are included in the prohibition of “Do not make yourselves abhorrent.” Somebody who eats these foods – we strike him with lashes. It is similarly forbidden for a person to delay relieving himself, whether to urinate or defecate. Anybody who delays relieving himself is considered a person who “makes his soul abhorrent”, aside from the illnesses that he will bring upon himself [by this conduct] and making himself culpable for causing harm to his body. Rather he should regulate his schedule [to relieve himself] at regular intervals so that he shouldn’t need to distance himself from others [in order to relieve himself while seated with them] and he will not cause his soul to become abhorrent. Anybody who is careful in these matters brings a great amount of holiness and purity to his soul, and cleanses his soul in the name of Hashem, as it states, “And you shall make yourselves holy and you will be holy for I am holy”.*