I have thousands of reasons to feel guilty about food, but until recently, the laws of kashruth were not among them. I grew up on Long Island in a liberal, Reform Jewish home. In our family being Jewish did not mean keeping kosher. We were as likely to eat ham steaks with pineapple rings as roast chicken and challah. That was until my father became a born-again Jew, converting from the most liberal branch of Judaism to the most observant. He went from loose biblical interpretations to following the literal laws of the Old Testament. And what was most drastic for me, he went from eating pork without compunction to following the ancient Jewish dietary laws. Suddenly, my father and I were divided at the dinner table.

When we were growing up, my father encouraged my two brothers and me to try every food we encountered. No food was too bizarre or too exotic. When we drove through Pennsylvania Dutch Country, his relentless pursuit of scrapple, a sausage-like food comprised mostly of pig parts that would not otherwise be edible, taught me that a place could be identified with a food. When we ate in New York’s Chinatown, he always ordered what the Chinese were eating, dismissing the waiter’s warnings. He taught me to be someone who was curious about other cultures, other people, and other foods. So naturally, when we went to Maryland last year to observe Rosh Hashanah, I wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity to visit a crab house, even if it was one of the holiest days on the Jewish calendar.

My family gathered in Annapolis, Maryland, where my brother and his family live. Making this trip was a considerable sacrifice for my father, who would have preferred to stay in New York to pray at his local synagogue. We attended the evening services that welcome in the holiday and spent the next morning at the Rosh Hashanah service. That was enough for the rest of us but not for my father. For him the observance began in earnest the following day, when he attended the Orthodox shul.

While my father was there, we did what anybody would do with a free afternoon in Maryland. We went to Jimmy Cantler’s Riverside Inn, one of Maryland’s most popular crab houses.

As the youngest sibling, and the only unmarried adult, it’s my job to worry about my parents. But I wasn’t worrying about my father on the way to the crab house. It was a warm, bright, Indian summer late afternoon, and I was praying that we’d be able to get a seat outside with a view of the water. I envied the Maryland natives who had the option to sail over and leave their boats at the dock, rather than wait an hour just to get into the parking lot. My overriding concern was whether the two dozen “large” crabs we’d reserved by cell phone en route were going to be enough for six adults and three niblings (a gender-neutral term for nieces and nephews). Apparently, we could reserve crabs but not a table.

As we waited for our table, I began to feel uneasy and jittery. Our family group was incomplete without my father.

“Eric, did you leave a note for Daddy, telling him to eat the leftover brisket?” I asked.

“I already told you I did,” my brother answered, irritated.

“What are you worrying about?” she asked. “Call his cell phone. Leave him a message. If he was so concerned about being with his family, he could have come home earlier.”

It was my love of Maryland crabs—and my yearning to immerse myself in the local culture, as my father had taught me—that had gotten me into this predicament. But I was now uncomfortably aware that I had taken advantage of his absence to do behind his back something I was no longer comfortable doing in front of him.

In the early years of his conversion, I had scanned menus at restaurants for foods my father would eat and selected items we could all share. As time passed, however, he grew uncomfortable if any family member ate what for him had become forbidden foods—Chinese favorites such as roasted pork or salt-and-pepper shrimp—and his discomfort made me uncomfortable, too. He couldn’t prevent me from ordering pork in a restaurant, but how could I enjoy our family’s long-time favorite spareribs in black bean sauce if eating them made my father miserable?

At Cantler’s we sat at a table spread with the requisite Maryland crab house brown paper that would absorb the mess we were about to make, each of us with a wooden mallet and sharp knife at our place. While we waited for our crabs, we snacked on grilled shrimp doused in barbecue
sauce. I was still blathering on about my newfound guilty feelings about eating treyf on a Jewish holiday, when I noticed a small pile of gristly fat on my sister-in-law's plate. “Wait a minute,” I said, finishing my second jumbo shrimp. “Are these wrapped in bacon?”

There was no reason for me to be shocked: although nonkosher Jews often joke about food combinations that are exceedingly treyf, a bacon cheeseburger is equally off-limits to a Jew who follows the laws of kashruth as any meal that combines milk and meat or contains pork or shellfish. And unfortunately, unlike a double negative, two nonkosher foods served together do not a kosher meal make.

As I sat gnawing on a crab leg, I thought of all the crab dishes I had enjoyed throughout the years, dishes I would never have tasted if I had been kosher. But in spite of my frequent visits to Maryland crab houses, I had never really learned the proper way to eat a crab. My method had been to bang at the shell indiscriminately with my mallet and pick at whatever meat I could salvage. It was labor-intensive and messy and often resulted in bits of shell and too much Old Bay mixed in with the meat. Alternatively, I would let someone more expert dissect the crabs for me as if I were a child. So even though I always wanted crab dishes I put in. But this year, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, I finally admitted that regardless of my father's preferences, I am a crab eater. I decided that day at Cantler's to learn to do it myself. I would take responsibility for my choice to eat crabs and for the sometimes difficult challenge of eating them.

When I returned from the crab house and saw my father sitting in the den, still in his tie and jacket, I felt the need to confess. After all, Yom Kippur was just a week away.

“Guess where we went for dinner?” I asked my father, challenging him instead of confessing. My craving to share my triumph over the crabs was so powerful that it surpassed my fear that he would feel betrayed.

“You should have been in synagogue,” he said, his tone rueful. “I thought you liked to go by yourself,” I said.

“I don’t mind. But you’re missing out.”

“We went to Cantler’s Crab House,” I persisted, even though he had changed the subject. I was aware that I was acting like a petulant child, but it was so frustrating to have this wall between us like a mechitzah—the curtain that separates men and women in an Orthodox synagogue. I wanted to tear it down and sit unobstructed next to my father at the dinner table again. “I know that you don’t want to eat crab, but why shouldn’t I?”

“Because it’s against the rules,” he said. “And I believe in the rules. Being kosher ennobles your spirituality. You take care of your soul by eating the right foods.” I didn’t tell him how much I hate rules.

“But assuming that I’m not going to stop, would you rather I not tell you?”

“Yes, I’d rather not know.”

“So we’re going to agree to a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy?”

“If that’s what it takes. Peace in the family supercedes the rules of kashruth.”

A few months after the Jewish New Year, I made a dinner to celebrate my mother’s seventieth birthday. I had planned to make braised beef short ribs. But I also wanted to make a salad dressed with heavy cream, hard-boiled egg, mustard, and blue cheese. In the past I would have made my father’s salad separately with a dressing that contained no milk products. But this year, as I stood in the Chelsea Market about to enter Frank’s butcher shop, something happened. I turned away and headed down the hallway to Ronnybrook Farms, where I bought three pints of cream. I would make a dairy meal instead.

Though my brother Eric kept asking during the meal where the short ribs were and winking at me, in the end the meal was magnificent: firm leaves of romaine sprinkled with fresh blue cheese, pasta with salmon roe in a lemony cream sauce, grilled steelhead trout, asparagus sautéed in lemon oil, and vanilla custard with fresh raspberry coulis for dessert. As I glanced around the table, I was elated that all the chairs were filled with all the right people. It was a blessing to enjoy the meal together. No one was the poorer for not mixing milk and meat. Peace in the family is a higher calling.