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Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages
David Kraemer
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No shrimp, oysters, or other pleasures of the sea. Staying clear of bacon. One set of dishes for serving milk-derived products and another for those that come from animals. What manner of thing is this? Though it may sound like a diabolical plot to silence the gastronomic senses or drive one to drink, each of these practices is actually part of a millennial constellation of culinary do’s and don’ts known as kashruth, the Jewish dietary laws. First set forth in the Hebrew Bible and further elaborated on over the centuries in the Mishnah, the Talmud, and in rabbic responsa, kashruth remains one of the few readily identifiable conventions that distinguish the modern Jew from her Gentile counterpart—and in its breathtaking longevity there lies a tale. As David Kraemer, the distinguished Librarian of the Jewish Theological Seminary and a celebrated professor of Talmud, makes vividly clear in Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages, an incisive and provocative account of the relationship between Jewish identity and the “eating practices” of the Jews, this divinely ordained system has a history of its very own.

It is to selected chapters in that history that this book attends. Through a close reading of both primary and secondary sources, brightened by an occasional nod to archaeology and material culture, Kraemer focuses on those moments during which a “particular eating practice (or cluster of practices) constitute a major new development in the history of Jewish eating” (p.4). Castigating a sharp and discerning eye on, say, the prohibition against the combining...
of meat and milk, which he takes to be a rabbinic gloss of a Biblical proscription, or on cultural anxiety about bugs in the broccoli, a late twentieth-century phenomenon, he relates them both to extra-gastronomic trepidations about identity, some generated from within and others from without. Heightened concern about combining meat products with dairy ones, Kraemer argues, came into being in response to conditions on the ground in ancient Palestine, then a fiercely heterogeneous assemblage of cultures. “Mixing was perhaps the single most important Jewish identity question from the late Second Temple period through at least the first several centuries of the Common Era. With whom may a Jew mix? To what extent may he or she mix with non-Jews?” And “what mix of the elements of ambient identities—traditional Jewish and new Jewish, Jewish and civilized Roman—should the ‘good Jew’ seek to achieve?” he asks (p.54). One way to find out was to peek into the kitchen.

Anything but static, the strictures of kashruth continue to unfold well into our own day. Take, for instance, mounting contemporary apprehension in traditional Jewish circles about the possible infestation of broccoli, Brussel sprouts, spinach, asparagus, and romaine lettuce with invisible insects, rendering them unkosher. Before putting nature’s bounty on the table, kosher-keeping Jews these days are exhorted to soak their vegetables in salt water for a half hour and then to examine them under a bright light. Whatever for? Surely the Bible or, for that matter, the Talmud did not discourse at any length on bugs or, for that matter, on microscopic copepods. Given that their fidelity to ancient practices runs deep, how, then, to account for why contemporary observant Jews are holding themselves to a higher standard? To Kraemer’s inventive way of thinking, the answer resides in the instability of modern times and with it, the instability of Jewish identity. Fishing for bugs, he suggests, is a form of boundary-making, a way to distinguish between those modern-day Jews whose Judaism is deemed authentic and those whose Judaism is suspect. “Once upon a time, a Jew was a Jew. You could, more or less, take his or her word for it….there was no need to check” (p.170). But today, what with intermarriage at an all-time high and Reform and Conservative Judaisms more than holding their own, that’s no longer the case. “Jewishness has become much more complicated….You probably have to check” (p.170). Under these confusing circumstances, the business about bugs is perhaps best understood as a symbol of fraught times and as a cautionary tale about the limits of internal religious pluralism.

All too often, though, the imaginative sweep of the book doesn’t quite make itself felt. For one thing, those not well versed in the ways of the Talmud may lose themselves in the maze of Kraemer’s exceptionally close readings, detailed analyses, and theoretical formulations of the densely layered text; they are not for the faint of heart or the untutored. A needlessly fussy prose style given more to recapitulation than to clarity also gets in the way. What’s more, at times the text reads less like a book with a narrative arc and a forward sense of motion than a series of individual lectures or classroom exchanges designed to keep the listener on her toes. It stops, starts, meanders, falters, and then races to a stunning finish.

Still, this account of the ways in which food is not just fuel but the stuff of identity—and a continuously fluid identity, at that—powerfully reminds us that institutions and practices that are divinely inspired are just as likely to be shaped here on earth by all-too-human hands.

—Jenna Weissman Joselit, Princeton University

A Short History of the American Stomach
Frederick Kaufman
224 pp. $23.00 (cloth)

In New York City in 1821 a businessman named Gibbons decided to put on a show. He bought twenty cows, had