

Kashruth – Mixing Meat and Milk Deuteronomy 14:21

A Fundamental pillar of Orthodox Judaism is the “required” separation of the consumption of foods and items contain milk products from foods and items containing meat products. The traditional and Rabbinical source for this practice is the text in Exodus 23:19 and 34:26, repeated in Deuteronomy 14:21, which translates to “You should not boil a kid in its mother's milk.” It is given as the singular source for the prohibition against mixing meat and milk, and it regarded as sacred, not only NOT requiring any empirical justification, but as cultural device enabling “observant” (or “believing”) Jews to differentiate themselves from “non-observant” (or “non-believing”) Jews.

As a practice seemingly NOT based upon rationality, it is also somewhat embarrassing to “non-observant” Jews. As an ex-microbiologist it is embarrassing to me that it has taken so long to develop an empirical understanding of its origin or original utility.

The existence of bacteria was not documented or observed until Leeuwenhoek’s enhancement of the microscope in 1673. Among his discoveries was that raw milk is ripe with bacteria. The bacteria are an essential part of the cows’ digestive process and are an essential process for the production of cheese and other milk by-products. Bacteria thrive in the nutritious warmth of liquid milk. Warming the milk increases their growth rate, but heating the milk to the point where it is boiling is difficult without having the proteins in the milk solidify (curdle) even before the bacteria are killed or produce by-products likely to be toxic. The process of Pasteurization was not discovered until 1862. Adding meat to a liquid containing raw milk only provides an even more nutrients in the form of blood that by further aids in the bacteria grow to the point that their presence and by-products would be guaranteed toxic. That is why consumer product and federal law now require pasteurization and refrigeration of milk and thorough cooking meat prior to eating it.

The original and empirical thrust of Jewish dietary laws is cleanliness and sanitation. The objective of those sanitary injunctions was not to explain how or why you get sick, but to make sure that healthier behavior was followed. Having God as The Authority for what you should, or should NOT, do when there is NO knowledge of bacteria or viruses is effective. Such sanitary empiricism is likely also why Judaism requires its members to wash their hands before eating, likely the ONLY religion to have such a required practice.

The difficulty of unquestioned Authority is the loss of credibility when a person wants to be rational and know “why.” When there seems to be NO rational explanation, Observance seems more like “mindless” blind devotion. It seems irrational when it prohibits having pasteurized cheese on a cooked hamburger. It also seems irrational when you extrapolate it to whether hens give milk, or whether you can cook chicken in milk? (In India “traditional” Jews view hens as Parve, non-milk, in the same category as fish.)

The irony is that in trying to observe the “Words of the Bible” to supersede the “Wisdom of the Bible,” Orthodox (Fundamentalist) Jews have ignored not only the scientific learning of technology (significantly, a result of many fellow Jews), but have violated a basic tenant of Judaism which is a reverence for Real World empiricism rather than the illusions of idolatry.

Such a loss of empiricism is why it is likely that 20% of the justification for Orthodoxy ceased to exist with the discovery that chlorine killed bacteria. The 6th Century BCE prohibition against mixing meat and milk has little relevance in the 21st Century when applied to a cheeseburger at McDonalds. To paraphrase Dennis Miller, “it is not real meat and it is not real cheese.” Before I eat, I DO wash my hands, but I say a prayer of thanks to my microbiology professors.