

## Parshat Shemini שְׁמִינִי 2017

Woody Allen story about the yeshiva *bochker* whose question is so lofty that he travels to bigger and bigger cities, with more and more learned Rabbis, in order to ask his question about kashrut.

Half this *parsha* is spent discussing the types of animals, birds or fish that are allowable to eat, and the types that are abominations. The *Sfat Emet*, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, who was the Gerrer Rebbe in Poland until his death in 1905, sees kashrut as a liberation akin to the exodus from Egypt. He stated, "By eating of forbidden foods, freedom is taken away from the soul, and thus one who eats them denies the Exodus from Egypt." This is curious because it would be logical to think that eating *anything* you wanted was liberating, not *denying* yourself foods. But the *Sfat Emet* argued that eating was our most animalistic activity, something we did every day, three times a day, based on what our bodies biologically. He said, "If everything that doesn't actually poison us is edible, then our eating is no expression of freedom or choice. It either lowers us to an animal level, or just takes us away for much of the day from the holiness, from things we do that are elevated." He argued that by dividing food into permitted vs. forbidden, we bring free will into our lives. Thus, knowing that pork might be as tasty or healthy as beef or beans, then choosing only the kosher could be construed as an act of a free person, a sort of freedom of choice.

One hint about this thesis comes from the parsha: when identifying kosher animals as those that, in English, "chew their cud", the Torah uses the language in Hebrew, גָּרָה מֵעֵלָת -- "brings up", which refers to the animals that regurgitate and rechew their food. In a similar fashion, G-d is referred to the same verb: מִצְרַיִם מֵאֶרֶץ אֶתְכֶם הִמְעֵלָה, the one who brought you up from the Land of Egypt. As we eat, we are asked to leave the part of us that represents the wantonness of Egypt, that unstructured part of our soul that was also enslaved. Choosing not to eat something I want is an act of freedom in itself. Therefore, we correlate kashrut with liberation from what Egypt represented, so that we can adopt traditions which now make us unique, make us Jews.