

Partly Pregnant? What does it mean to be a “good” Jew?

Among the ironies of the recent election was the fact that increased turnout in certain states, out of support for a progressive candidate, nevertheless allowed the passage of certain conservative ballot initiatives, such as Proposition 8 in California (overturning the state Supreme Court ruling sanctioning same sex marriage). I have a lot I would like to say about Proposition 8, and the whole very serious subject of civil rights and the concept of family... but at the moment I am distracted by a recent discovery on You Tube. It is at a website called www.funnyordie.com . It is called “Proposition 8: The Musical.”

The clip features a group of fun-loving, tree-hugging civil rights activists confronted by dark-clad, sinister looking Proposition 8 advocates, who invoke the Bible in support of their position until – poof! – out of nowhere walks (you sort of have to see this) Jesus, played by Jack Black. When the conservative critics seek support for their position in Scripture, Jesus asserts that the Bible says a lot of things... at which point a shrimp cocktail magically appears in his hands.

Now, the whole historical question here is kind of complicated. I don’t actually believe that a historical Jesus would have eaten shrimp with anywhere near the delight displayed by Jack Black’s character. Why Christians do *not* keep kosher is an interesting and important topic for another time. This scene reminded me, however, of a question I was once asked in all seriousness by a more traditional Jew: “Don’t you have to keep kosher to be a good Jew?” At about the same time, in response to one of the weekly columns I once wrote for America Online in which I had made the historical assertion that “Jews don’t eat shrimp,” I received a heated note asserting that many “good” Jews are indeed connoisseurs of all kinds of crustaceans.

Personally, I keep kosher, “to some extent.” To me, and to the way I understand Judaism, that is not a contradiction in terms. And to the all-or-nothing fundamentalists who assert that keeping “kind-of” kosher is like being “partly pregnant” I respond that they would squeeze creativity and experimentation and individual involvement out of Judaism in the name of a conformity on which they can not agree in any event. And I do believe that what comes out of our mouths is more important than what goes into them. But, denominational defensive polemics aside, I find great joy and meaning in the idea that every time I sit down at a meal, I become conscious of limitations and options, of my people and my heritage. Keeping kosher to the extent that I do is a powerful part of my Jewish spiritual identity.

But. That is a response about *kashrut*. It does not answer the question that was asked. And the far more interesting aspect of that question was this concept about being a “good” Jew.

Do you have to keep kosher to be a good Jew? The answer is... "maybe."

What kind of an answer is that?, you ask. Well, it is an answer based on the *modern* Reform movement's "**pro-choice**" approach to Jewish ritual.

When the Reform movement was founded over a century ago, it was officially **anti-ritual**. The Pittsburgh Platform of the late nineteenth century, the first official

statement of (North American) Reform movement ideology, wrote that "today we accept as binding only the moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization." Specifically, they continued, "we hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a sense of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation."

The authors of those words could not have been clearer. With disdain dripping from their pens, they wrote that you **could not** keep kosher and still call yourself a Reform Jew.

A lot has changed since then. Already by the 1930's, the Reform movement began to realize that many customs, symbols and ceremonies "possess inspirational value." And by the 1970's, with the San Francisco Centenary Perspective, the movement had changed a great deal, from anti ritual to pro-choice. The words that remain the "official" position of the Reform movement in regard to ritual are: "Within each area of Jewish observance, Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of **commitment** and **knowledge**."

These words leave a great deal in the hands of the individual. But. They also mean far more than the derisive taunt that Reform is "do what you want" Judaism.

Commitment to a living Judaism requires that we take the claims of our tradition seriously. And so, to be a good Jew, one must interact with traditions such as keeping kosher. One must learn about it. Since learning is more than merely cognitive and intellectual, learning involves experience. It involves experimentation. It involves trying things on.

In my opinion, to be a "good" Jew today, one has the responsibility, indeed, the obligation to take our tradition seriously -- including the rituals part of our tradition, such as keeping kosher. But. As a modern Jew, I also believe that we have the right to bring that tradition into our lives -- in the ways we determine. And we are to make the choices we are allowed to make... on the basis of knowing the tradition, caring about it, and wanting Judaism to live on into the future. As the platform says, we are to make our choices on the basis of commitment and knowledge.

And so, if someone asked me if they "should" keep kosher, I would say the following: here, take these articles. Some describe keeping kosher. Others prescribe it as a wonderful way of life, a spiritual path, a road to holiness. Others deride it as a nutritionally based system no longer needed. Try it for a month. Or try giving up pork, but eating everything else. Then eat bacon cheeseburgers for a month. (Although... maybe not during Pesach.) At the end of exploration and experimentation, maybe you will have some sense, a tiny taste of what is involved, of what it means, of what it feels like, and of what it might mean in your life. Then, do whatever you want... but *keep thinking about it*. And that will probably mean: keep tinkering with it. Keep experimenting. Keep on eating *as a Jew*... however you decide to eat.

A good Jew is one who cares about Judaism, who knows the Jewish tradition, who lets questions of "whether this is good for the Jewish community" affect his or her actions, and who knows what Judaism means to him or herself personally. One can eat shrimp, and be a good Jew. One can never touch pork, and still not be.

It depends on commitment.

It depends on knowledge.

It depends... on you.

And as for Proposition 8... Well, if the You Tube clip is any indication... maybe there is a way, into the hardened hearts.