

Of cheeseburgers and Torah
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The scene: Mt. Sinai. God is dictating the Torah to Moses; not only the 10 famous Commandments, but the 603 others which are followed in one form or another by traditional-minded Jews.

"Okay, here's another," says God. "Don't boil a kid in its mother's milk."

"So we shouldn't mix meat and dairy foods," says Moses.

"No," says God, "don't boil a kid in its mother's milk."

"Oh!" says Moses. "So we should have different dishes for meat and dairy foods."

"No," says God patiently. "Don't boil a kid in its mother's milk."

"I see," says Moses. "So if we do eat meat and dairy, we should wait three to six hours between courses."

God looks at Moses, and sighs, "Moses, do whatever the hell you want."

--- Old joke

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Have you ever noticed that religious observance makes some people uncomfortable?

I have a couple of theories about that. One is that people consider religious practice as somewhat akin to sex; something that we should all just sort of know how to do instinctively, and can't criticize when it doesn't feel right.

The other theory is based on the concept that ritual is somehow supposed to bring us closer to God. People who incorporate more religious ritual into their lives tend to be seen as either "holier-than-me" or "holier-than-thou," depending on who's doing the seeing.

Having been on both sides of the problem, let me tell you what it looks like from within.

Over the past two years or so, my wife and I have been increasing our level of Jewish observance -- not because "God said so," but simply because we both want to live more fully as Jews.

Thus, although we don't keep separate dishes for meat and dairy, we also don't eat cheeseburgers, beef Stroganoff, pork or shellfish.

Among other things, we also keep Shabbat. From sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, our TV and computer are off; work and shopping ceases; and we attend services, study Torah and visit with friends. To paraphrase a famous rabbi, our attention turns from the world of creating to the world of creation.

I don't know if these or any other Jewish practices bring us closer to God. But I think they do bring us closer to Judaism, and that's important to me -- for reasons I'm unable to explain meaningfully.

However, there are some problems. For one thing, people like to talk shop with me, which I don't do on Shabbat. For another, as a Jewish but shrimp-eating friend pointed out, how can somebody pick and choose ritual obligations without feeling like a hypocrite?

According to Torah, when Moses told the Israelites that God was going to lay down the law, they replied, "Na'aseh v'nishmah: We will do and we will hear/understand."

Making love. Riding a bicycle. Tasting anything. These also can't be explained meaningfully, only experienced. In other words, if you want to hear, you have to do. And if you do, but don't hear, maybe you're better off doing more deeply -- or not doing at all.

I think this applies to anyone engaged in or contemplating any ritual practice, especially from a modern perspective. The important thing isn't to "do" it all -- but that what you do, you do fully and completely.

Or, as salesman and poet J. R. "Bob" Dobbs once said, "Don't just eat a hamburger. Eat the hell out of it."

As for me, though, I'll skip the bacon and cheese.