

The Woes (and Pros) of Keeping Kosher

By: Naomi Weltman

Despite the deep-rooted stereotype of Jewish people and their affinity for all things food, there exists a barrier that keeps us from engorging ourselves whenever. A serious inconvenience, where lenience is left from the lexicon. A personal attack on the pack of self-proclaimed foodies. Keeping Kosher is a commandment that God presented to the Jewish people. It is a key tenet of the contract, the one that declares He is ours and we His so long as we uphold our end of the bargain: adhering to the dos and don'ts of Judaism. A sizeable don't is the prohibition against eating any food that has not been deemed strictly Kosher.

For a food to be rendered acceptably edible, several factors are at play: all ingredients must be Kosher as indicated by a special symbol on the packaging, some animals are forbidden, dairy and meat products are to never be combined, and all food preparation must be done using a strictly Kosher kitchen. This list is not exhaustive, nor does it feature particularly simple instructions. As an Orthodox religious, Torah-observant, Kosher-keeping Jew, this commandment that imposes restrictions on eating, a universal and social activity, is challenging at times.

Growing up, some enticing snacks were always off-limits much to my sweet tooth's chagrin. Kit Kat, that flaky, melt-in-your-mouth wafer enrobed in a thin coating of velvety chocolate, was never Kosher. For some reason, the powers that be had bestowed a Kosher certification to this beloved chocolate bar only in America, noticeably neglecting their northern neighbors. To circumvent this problem, family members of mine that travelled to the U.S. always stocked up before heading home to fill our Canadian Kit-Kat void. We followed the same protocol for Oreos (prior to them receiving certification here – a dashing win, indeed!), Fruity Pebbles, and Chex Mix.

As I grew bigger, so did my problems surrounding Kosher. I would learn approximately a decade later that the struggles reached far beyond a slightly reduced selection of sweets and treats. This knowledge arrived when I pursued my Master's degree along with 49 other students in an intimate class setting. Potlucks popping with homemade delicacies were times that I stood awkwardly on the sidelines. Eventually, I would scrummage through the leftovers, realizing that my efforts were virtually futile as I would emerge with only a tangerine and chocolate chip cookie from the batch that I brought.

Other notable challenges were the boxes of Timbits floating around during class, complimentary of an extra generous professor. While the bite-sized chunks of fried dough served as bribery for most, for me they were a disappointment. Nearby classmates quickly learned to pass over me when the donuts were on their third or fourth rotation. Other peers of mine were not as cognizant of my Kosher keeping habits, which led to me overhearing some comical conversations. I silently chuckled at the girl who was relating her astonishment over the fact that her neighbors at the cottage have – can you believe this?! – two separate sets of dishes, one for dairy foods and one for meat. How ridiculous!

A large component of my schooling involved practicums. For two months, I was placed at a hospital downtown. Hospitals, it seems, are eager to provide free lunches for staff whenever they can. One email notifying me of a small-group lunch and learn ends with the promising sentiment of “*Kindly let us know if you have any dietary restrictions!*” Yes, hi, I keep Kosher, and I was just wondering if this was something you might be able to accommodate. In response to my plea, I receive an enthusiastic ‘yes!’, they will have me covered, no worries. At the meeting, I am spotted and told, *Are you the Kosher one? Here, we got you this vegetarian sandwich from Subway!* Oh no. Subway is not a Kosher establishment. There is a palpable discomfort in rejecting the efforts of well-meaning individuals who just don’t know any better, especially when they present the pseudo-Kosher food item with pride. So I gently and somewhat awkwardly explain that Kosher is not synonymous with vegetarian, and I watch their expressions deflate like a bouncy castle that’s had the plug pulled. This lunchless experience taught me the importance of the adverb ‘strictly’ to precede ‘Kosher’, and how innocent assumptions can lead to hungry repercussions.

But not all situations are sticky. Several times I have been pleasantly surprised by people’s general willingness to accommodate my unusual gastronomic needs. At the end of my placement, my supervisors literally went the extra mile to a non-nearby Kosher bakery to pick up a rather extravagant chocolate cake (shout-out to My Zaidy’s Bakery!). A similar scenario occurred at another hospital I interned at, where we celebrated my completion with a donut cake (a second shout-out to Amazing Donuts!). I was extra impressed by my supervisor’s knowledge to bring a plastic knife since she knew a regular metal knife would be problematic based on its unknown history of contact with non-Kosher foods. One of my professors, famous for showering us with goodies, announced with delight that her box of sandwich cookies featured a Kosher symbol. Being the lone Kosher-keeper of the class, I was touched that she cared. And even though no-name sandwich cookies are not my snack of choice, I took one anyway to show my appreciation.

Keeping Kosher, while sometimes inconvenient, is a meaningful daily reminder that I am part of God’s chosen people, and I am doing my best to follow His commandments. Being mindful of everything I eat is an exercise of self-control and a kind of religious expression that I’m proud of. Moreover, navigating Kosher in a secular world and gratefully receiving accommodations (occasionally) speak to society’s growing tolerance for accepting others’ differences – a concept that is both refreshing and inspiring. And to the less tolerant, to the ones that scoff or slant their eyebrows in bewilderment, I tell them this: If my conscientious customs are considered crazy, then call me a kook, ‘cause I’m completely content with keeping Kosher.