



Edah Staff:

Rabbi Saul Berman, Director

Rabbi Bob Carroll, Program Director

Rachel Craig, Administrator

Marisa Yammer, Asst. Program Director

Esther Berman, Administrative Assistant

Upcoming Events:

April 30th Darfur Rally in DC

May 23-June 13 Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Elman at the JCC in NYC on "Modern Orthodoxy- the Fourth Century Version" 7:00-8:15 pm

May 30-June 13 Dr. Lawrence Schiffman at the JCC in NYC on "A Brief History of Heresy" 8:30-9:45 pm

June 18 Edah mini-conference at the JCC in NYC

Kashrut : Liberation And Holiness

By Rabbi Saul J. Berman

The closing chapters of this week's *parasha* focus on the dietary laws. As the Torah arrives at the conclusion of the detailed presentation of what one may and may not eat, God offers a rationale. In Chapter 11, verse 45, God says, we should keep kosher first, "because I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God." And then, "You be holy, because I am holy."

What's the nature of this dual rationale for the laws of *kashrut*? What does the Exodus have to do with *kashrut*? And then, why the particular connection between the Exodus and the fact that God wants us to be holy because He is holy?

What is the connection between the Exodus and the laws of *kashrut*? The essence of slavery is the loss of individual choice. Even in the carefully limited institution of Jewish slavery, there remained one fundamental element -- the slave could not walk out. By denying him the power to quit, the Torah insists he's still a slave. But in ancient slavery, non-biblically transformed slavery, *e.g.*, in Egyptian slavery, the constraints on choice went beyond the right of the individual to quit. They touched every aspect of life. The Jewish slave in Egypt could not quit, he could not choose when or how to work, where to live, what to wear, what foods to eat.

Why is what a slave eats so important? Because eating is more than simply satisfying bodily need; it is an expression of the uniqueness of the individual in his or her choice of how to gratify his personal desires. Food provided by a master can satisfy bodily need. But there is no room for the slave to exercise discretion in choosing his own food.

Says God to the Jewish people, "I freed you from the land of Egypt." I freed you from the state in which food was consumed only to satisfy bodily needs. Freeing us from Egyptian slavery freed us to make the act of eating a manifestation of values beyond the satisfaction of physical needs. Henceforth, eating would be a manifestation of the choice of values, and of moral qualities. Eating will manifest the freedom to choose between right and wrong. How so? Says God, "because in each element of the selection between kosher and non-

kosher foods, you will behaviorally and symbolically affirm the values that are important." Thus, says God, "I am the God who freed you from the land of Egypt."

Towards what? Towards *kedusha* - holiness. And how will you be holy? Says God, when you sit down to eat, you will have before you only those animals which are herbivorous, only animals which chew their cud and have split hooves. You will not eat the lion and the tiger. By not eating animals which kill, you will be reminded through eating of the need to choose peace over war. You will not eat birds of prey. The fowl you eat will be fowl which do not prey on others, and will thereby remind you that the oppression of others is not warranted.

Most interestingly are the criteria for *kashrut* of fish. In order for fish to be kosher, they must have fins and scales. What are scales but a middle point between the dermal armor of the lobster and the turtle, and the bare skin of the catfish. In between are the scaled fish.

The implications are profound. On one hand, not dermal armor. You can't lock yourself away in a shell and think that being Jewish within that shell is sufficient. On the other extreme, you can't have bare skin. You can't simply absorb anything that the realities of the world present you with as valuable. Scales offer the ability to evaluate that which exists in the outside world and make the value judgment to enter or not enter. That value needs to be affirmed symbolically through the fish that we eat.

Kashrut is the vehicle for affirmation of your most fundamental values. By freeing you from bondage, I freed you from eating as a purely physical act, God is telling us. That's why the *parasha* concludes two verses later (Lev. 11:14) with the word "*Lehavdil*" - "to distinguish." The observance of *kashrut* gives us the capacity to distinguish between that which ought to be absorbed and elevated and that which cannot be absorbed because its values are wrongful.

To our great misfortune, many of us eat kosher without thinking about what that choice implies. The challenge that this *parasha* lays before us is to understand the power of *kashrut* to transform and free our choice-making in the direction of *kedusha*, in the direction of holiness.

Rabbi Saul J. Berman is Director of Edah.

A Plea for Jewish Action Against the Crimes Being Committed in Darfur

By Dr. Efraim Zuroff

It is fair to assume that it is not by accident that the "Save Darfur" rally planned for this coming week in Washington was scheduled in close proximity (5 days apart) to Yom Hashoa. We can also expect the Holocaust to be invoked forcefully by those presenting the case for urgent action to end the mass murders being carried out in Sudan. Such a link is only natural given the fact that ever since the end of World War II, when its true scope was revealed, the Holocaust has become the unofficial yardstick for large-scale man-made tragedies. From 1945 on, practically every case of mass murder, ethnic cleansing, and genocide—from Biafra to Cambodia to Bosnia to Rwanda—has invariably been compared to the systematic, industrialized annihilation of European Jewry. In fact, in recent years, this tendency has become even stronger as worldwide awareness of the Holocaust has grown enormously and the Shoa has become the paradigm of man's inhumanity to his fellow man. Thus during the past two decades, the attitude toward various issues which directly relate to the Holocaust such as racism, anti-Semitism, and discrimination on ethnic, religious, or nationalistic grounds have become litmus tests for countries, organizations, and individuals to measure their internalization of Western democratic values and their suitability to join multinational forums such as NATO and the European Union.

While these developments can undoubtedly be considered an important victory for the Jewish people, having ostensibly turned our greatest tragedy into a worldwide vaccination of sorts against racism and anti-Semitism, they have also aroused several serious concerns. Foremost among them is the fear that the worldwide adoption of the Holocaust as the most authentic yardstick of man-made tragedy will ultimately lead to a dilution or diminution of its Jewish component. The Jewish identity of its victims will become irrelevant, the Shoa will be relativized in relation to other tragedies, and we will have betrayed the memory of our martyrs in return for universal recognition and values.

This tension between the particularistic and universal aspects of Holocaust commemoration, education, and most important, the implications we learn from the events of the Shoa will undoubtedly continue to pose a serious problem in the coming decades for Jewish leaders and educators, who will have to find innovative solutions to enable these two components to coexist in peace without destroying one another. Under these circumstances, it is particularly important that this tension and the danger of over-universalization of the Holocaust not inhibit or hinder the Jewish

response to other cases of mass murder and genocide. We cannot allow the misuse or misappropriation of the Shoa its history, imagery and symbols, and/or its moral lessons to dissuade us from speaking out against genocide and ethnic cleansing whenever and wherever they occur, and even more important to do whatever we can to stop these crimes and alleviate the plight of their victims.

In this respect, the fact that most of the world stood idly by while six million Jews were being murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators has always been an important dimension of the tragedy and one of the most critical lessons of the Holocaust which we have tried to impart to the world. But to have real meaning, that lesson has to be taken seriously not only by the nations of the world who failed to save European Jewry, but also by the Jewish people who today are in a position to render meaningful assistance against these crimes. Basic Jewish morality demands this of us, whether we had suffered a tragedy of the dimensions of the Shoa or not, but the fact that we were the Nazis' primary victim doubly reinforces our obligation.

We who have preached to the world for decades about its failure to save the Jews who faced Nazi genocide, cannot ignore the plight of other victims of heinous crimes. Our response, moreover, will in no way diminish or impugn the memory of the Holocaust. If anything, the success of a Jewish effort against the perpetrators of contemporary mass murder, ethnic cleansing, and genocide will only reinforce the power of the memory of the Holocaust and its unique importance not only for us but for the entire world.

So as we face the terrible crimes being committed in Darfur and its vicinity by Arab militias supported by the Sudanese government, we have a Jewish obligation to speak out against the murders and try our utmost to facilitate prompt action to save those targeted by the killers. For years we have been preaching "Never Again," and we have time and again proven our dedication to saving Jews in distress but the time has come to demonstrate clearly that our sacred pledge made in the wake of the Holocaust also applies just as well to the rest of the world. Standing up for Darfur will not betray the memory of Europe's murdered Jews, it will honor that memory. In the words of Hillel (Pirkei Avot Ethics of our Fathers), "If I am not for myself, who will be for me, and when I am only for myself what am I, and if not now, then when?"

Dr. Efraim Zuroff is the Director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Israel.