**Why are Jews forbidden to eat meat and milk together? The function of eating restrictions in human societies**

I. The Ban on Combining Meat and Milk: Introduction

It is well known that Jews are forbidden to eat foods made from meat and milk together. This ban is accompanied by a number of additional related prohibitions, such as bans on cooking meat and milk together, deriving any benefit from such a mixture, placing meat and dairy foods on the same table, and using the same utensils for both meat and milk, as well as expansions on the definition of meat, such that it includes poultry, though not fish. The ban requires that several further halakhic decisions be made, for example defining the minimum amount of time one must wait between eating meat and milk, and the creation of halakhic categories for foods that are neither milk nor meat, referred to alternately as *parve* or *stam*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The prohibition on eating meat and milk together does not appear explicitly in Scripture and seems to have been unknown in Biblical times. Thus in Genesis 18 Abraham feeds his guests a dish of meat and milk: “He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them” (Gen 18:8). From the context it is clear that the author never considered such an act to be problematic. The consumption of meat and milk is also described in the story of David’s coming to Machanaim, where he was presented with foodstuffs including “honey, curds, a flock, and cheese from the herd for David and the troops with him to eat” (II Sam. 17:29); in this case, again, the narrative implies that the hospitality offered was particularly complimentary, and there is no hint that such a mixture of meat and milk was inappropriate.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Likewise in the final days of the Second Temple we find no evidence that the Jews were aware of any such prohibition. Josephus makes no mention of it and there is no trace of it among the Qumran scrolls.[[3]](#footnote-3) Philo, in his discussion of the verse “You shall not boil a lamb [per the Greek translation] in its mother’s milk,” stresses, “If one should wish to cook meat with milk, he should do so without cruelty and distance himself from a profanation of heaven’s name.” It is clear that he saw no wrongdoing in the actual mixing of meat and milk.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The above discussion notwithstanding, in Mishna Hullin (8:1) the prohibition on mixing meat and milk appears as universally accepted and a foregone conclusion. The core of the rabbinic discussion involves whether or not it is permissible to place poultry and cheese on the same table. This is a tangential question deriving from the fundamental prohibition not to eat meat with milk, and it is clear that for the parties to the debate the cooking of poultry in milk – and all the more so the eating of it – is entirely forbidden.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Inherent in the Jewish faith is the belief that two Torahs were given to Moses at Sinai – one written, comprising the five books of Moses from Genesis to Deuteronomy, the other oral.[[6]](#footnote-6) At the center of the oral Torah stand the Biblical laws and commandments, and it is clear that this legal tradition comes to fill the gaps found in the legal passages of the written Torah and to bridge the gulf between that Torah and the halakhic world of Jewish believers.[[7]](#footnote-7) While the rabbis of the first centuries CE did not present a unified approach to the relationship between the written and oral Torahs, rabbinic literature does reveal a constant desire to present a unified halakhic system based on Torah law and derivations from it, despite the fact that many halakhic regulations have no clear basis in the written Torah. In keeping with this fundamental hermeneutic approach, the prohibition on the mixing of meat and milk is located in an explicit verse of the Torah – “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk,” which appears twice in Exodus (23:19 and 34:26) and a third time at the end of the list of forbidden foods in Deuteronomy (14:21)[[8]](#footnote-8) – and the sages interpret that verse as referring to all meat and all milk and as prohibiting not only cooking but also eating.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It is impossible to recreate the original identification of the prohibition of mixing meat and milk with the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk”; all that can be said is that such an identification took hold in the first centuries CE and is recognizable in Tannaitic sources, such as Mishna Hullin (8:4) and the Aramaic translation of the Torah, where the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” is translated in all three instances as “You shall not eat meat with milk.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Throughout the generations of Jewish interpreters, it has been assumed that there is nothing incidental or extraneous in the Torah. Accordingly, each of the three repetitions of the verse is interpreted as portraying different aspects of the prohibition of meat and milk: the first instance of the verse forbids eating, the second forbids any benefit (such as profiting from such a mixture), and the third forbids cooking. Such an interpretation is best known from the Babylonian Talmud, which is cited, often verbatim, in many places.[[11]](#footnote-11)

A significant amount of research has been dedicated to the meaning of “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” If there is one shared conclusion, it is that this verse is a riddle with no known solution.[[12]](#footnote-12) Scholars also seem to agree that in its original context the verse is not intended to forbid the combination of meat and milk in its later halakhic meaning.[[13]](#footnote-13) Among the suggestions as to what it does mean, one that is particularly widespread is that the verse aims to limit eating practices on humanitarian grounds. From the late Second Temple period until our own time, both traditional and academic interpreters have connected the verse to the explicitly humanitarian command “No animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young” (Lev 22:28) and frequently to the warning “Do not take the mother bird together with her young” (Deut 22:6). According to this interpretation, the Biblical legislator sought to arouse empathy for the maternal concerns of the animals, as evoked by the warning not to take young cattle away from their mothers for the first week of their lives: “When an ox or a sheep is born, it shall stay seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as an offering of fire to the Lord” (Lev 22:27).[[14]](#footnote-14) The implication is that such laws are not limited to the particular types of cattle that are explicitly listed – kid, calf, and ewe – but rather they apply to any kind of animal and its mother. This understanding is evident in Philo’s interpretation of the verse: “Whoever cooks the flesh of an ewe, a kid, or any other young in its mother’s milk reveals his own coarseness, for his heart knows not that emotion most essential to the intelligent soul: compassion.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Alongside the widespread suggestion that the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” was intended to set humanitarian limits, in recent decades interesting alternative theories have been put forward, among them the proposal that the verse reflects an ancient belief in the danger posed to cattle whose milk has been boiled; that it is related to the fear of blood in general or the ban on eating blood specifically, since colostrum resembles blood in appearance; that it is meant to prevent a nomadic practice that developed out of the simultaneous availability of milk and young cattle; that it was inherited from the Canaanites and stems from a fear of harming the numinous power of divinity; that it is meant to separate the source of life from death; that it is part of a male strategy of distancing women from ritual life; that it is a metaphorical expression of the ban on illicit relationships; that it relates to a sophisticated tactic by farmers seeking to use a previous year’s produce to pay taxes; that it originally had nothing to do with milk (*halav*) but rather fat (*helev*); and many more.[[16]](#footnote-16) Most of these studies limit their scope to the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” in its Biblical context and do not address the later halakhic development of a prohibition on any mixing of meat and milk.

The Torah does not include a programmatic statement regarding the aspirations of the Biblical legislator or a clear explanation of the values and norms undergirding its laws.[[17]](#footnote-17) A reading of the Torah’s legal chapters leaves one with the impression that the laws’ authority is derived from the fact that they were given by God, in the spirit of the famous statement by de Montaigne, “Laws are authoritative not because they are right, but because they are laws.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Accordingly, obedience to the law is considered righteousness – “Is there anything more righteous than obedience to laws?!” – regardless of their propriety.[[19]](#footnote-19) God is granted the right, therefore, to legislate laws and to obligate Israel to keep those laws regardless of their content or whether they be good or evil, ethical or unethical, rational or irrational. Nevertheless, throughout history a number of intra- and interreligious debates have turned on detailed matters of law and their interpretations, and the shared faith in their divine origin was not enough to settle the matter. Much attention has been paid to a number of laws that appear to have been entirely inscrutable even to their ancient audience.

We can place the multiple explanations of such laws on a spectrum. At one end, we find complete acceptance of these laws and their inscrutability: they are “decrees of the king,” who is imagined as saying “I the Lord have given them, and you are not permitted to challenge them” and “You are not allowed to transgress My decrees.” At the other end, we find various attempts to explain the logic behind them by offering “many reasons to keep them and fulfill them,” arguing in turn that “the reasons for the commandments are in keeping with the ways of the world” or that “all the reasons for [the laws in] the Torah are as easy to see as a field.” Many have sought a middle ground between these two extremes, for example by making a distinction between a law’s general import, which has “certain benefits and some intelligible reason,” and the details of the law which often remain unclear.[[20]](#footnote-20) Ultimately, however, all of these attempts, however much their contents diverge, share the same basic assumption, which is that there is an explanation for the Biblical laws. It should be stressed that we have yet to distinguish between the approach of those late Second Temple period sages who, under the influence of Hellenism, assumed that divine laws must be compatible with sublime virtues and tended to portray a parallel between Torah law and natural law (“The laws are in the most perfect image of the law of the universe”) and the sages of the Talmud, who on the whole felt no compunction to align Torah law with natural reason.[[21]](#footnote-21) We should likewise distinguish between the approach of the medieval rationalists who also assumed the existence of a recognizable logic underlying the laws (“Every commandment from among these six hundred and thirteen commandments exists either with a view to communicating a correct opinion, putting an end to an unhealthy opinion, communicating a rule of justice, warding off an injustice, endowing men with a noble moral quality, or warning them against an evil moral quality”) and the approach of the Kabbalists, who tended to seek the reasons for the commandments in esoteric lore.[[22]](#footnote-22) In every case, however, it was inconceivable that the law lacked all logic or reason. Even if they could not always discover them, leaving them to wonder aloud “Why were the Torah’s reasons not revealed?” they never doubted that such reasons existed.[[23]](#footnote-23) At most, the suggestion was occasionally made that the divine logic underlying the laws was hidden from the eyes of men, or perhaps hidden for now but meant to be revealed in the world to come: “In the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will sit in the Garden of Eden, explaining it [the Torah], and all the righteous of the world will sit before Him, and all the hosts of heaven […] and the Holy One, blessed be He, will explain to them the reasons for the Torah.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

The ban on meat and milk, derived from the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk,” is a prime example of a law the reasons for which are unclear. Many and varied explanations for this ban have been offered. In the following section I will survey the most important of these explanations and their ramifications.[[25]](#footnote-25) To aid in this survey, I have divided the various explanations into categories. As we will see, many thinkers maintained more than one explanation for the prohibition and variations on previously offered explanations appear over the centuries, up until our own time. In the third section I will offer a new solution from a different angle.

II. The Ban on Combining Meat and Milk: A History of Justifications and Explanations

1. Cruelty: Various interpreters have suggested that the ban on meat and milk is intended to distance people from cruel behavior. The goal of the ban, then, is moral edification. This explanation relies directly on the association of the ban on meat and milk with the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” As mentioned above, there was a widespread understanding that the verse aims to set humanitarian limits that exceed the particular details of the verse. This understanding reappears in the writings of those authors who did not recognize the total ban on mixing meat and milk, such as Philo in antiquity, Karaite interpreters in the Middle Ages, and text-critical interpreters and scholars in the modern period.[[26]](#footnote-26) This interpretation of the verse itself was later applied, as described above, to the more comprehensive ban on meat and milk that is derived from that verse.

The application of the humanitarian interpretation to the broader prohibition is clearly recognizable in the Short Commentary by Abraham Ibn Ezra (Spain and Latin Europe, 1089-1164/7) on Exod 23:19: “God commanded one not to cook a kid in its mother’s milk […] and the reason for the prohibition is because it is a form of cruelty […] and that which has been written by our ancestors [the sages of the Talmud], that any mixture of meat and milk is forbidden, is true.” In similar fashion (and perhaps under the influence of Ibn Ezra), R. Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam; northern France, late 11th and early 12th centuries) wrote in his interpretation of the verse, “It is a despicable thing and an act of gluttony to eat the mother’s milk with the young […] and Scripture has commanded so to teach you the way of refinement […] and such is the law for all mixtures of meat and milk as our rabbis have explained in [TB Hullin].”[[27]](#footnote-27) From another statement by Rashbam we can see that he used this ethical-educational reason for polemical purposes in his arguments with Christians, in order to counter their claims that, while Christianity was a religion of mercy, Judaism was known for its cruel laws:

“Do not take the mother with the young” – according to accepted custom and in answer to the heretics [the Christians]. I have already explained in my commentary to “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” [Exod 23:19] and “No animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young” [Lev 22:28] that it would be cruel and gluttonous to slaughter and cook and eat a mother and her young together.[[28]](#footnote-28)

It can be assumed that these arguments revolved around the prohibition of meat and milk itself and not the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk,” or at least not only that verse in isolation from the halakhic prohibition.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The explanations by Ibn Ezra and Rashbam to the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” are echoed by later interpreters, from the Middle Ages to contemporary rabbis, who also emphasize the educational goal at the basis of the verse and the broader prohibition alike. To take three important medieval interpreters as our examples, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor (northern France, 12th c.) wrote, “It is forbidden to cook meat and milk together […] and to eat them or derive benefit from them […] and the reason is that it would be cruel to cook meat in the milk on which it grew, perhaps even the milk of the beast’s own mother.”[[30]](#footnote-30) So too Nachmanides (Gerona – Acre, 1194-1270) noted that “a kid in its mother milk […] is not an abominable food” in and of itself; rather, the goal of the law is educational:

that we not be a cruel people showing no mercy [per Jer. 6:23], taking from the mother the very milk we would use to cook her young. And even though every mixture of meat and milk is included in this prohibition, for every suckling beast is called “the mother” and every nursing young is called “the kid,” and it is made forbidden through cooking, they are all forms of cruelty.

Similarly, Abravanel (Lisbon – Padua, 1437-1508) writes, “the essence of this commandment is to remove the vice of cruelty, […] however, the prohibition has been expanded to include every mixture of meat and milk.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

From these and many similar statements from the Middle Ages until the modernity, we learn that the identification of the ban on meat and milk with the verse “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” became so entrenched that scholars and interpreters tended to see the humanitarian message of the verse in the halakhic prohibition itself. In fact, every mixture of meat and milk, regardless of the level of cruelty involved in its combination, was considered symbolic of crossing the bounds of ethical behavior and entering the realm of cruelty. This is evident in the commentary of Samuel David Luzzato (Shadal; Padua, 1800-1865), who wrote with particular vehemence:

Once the kid has been slaughtered, what does it matter to it and its mother the choice of liquid in which it is to be cooked? Nevertheless, such an act instills a vice in the soul of the man who does so as well as the one who watches. Can you imagine a man turning the bones of his father into spoons and his skull into a bowl from which to eat? He would be doing his departed father no harm! Nevertheless, it would be a cruel thing and such an act would drive away all mercy and compassion from his heart and the heart of those who watched him.[[32]](#footnote-32)

2. Idolatry: An additional explanation for the ban on meat and milk, and apparently the most common, ascribes the prohibition to an attempt at ritual separation. Throughout the Bible, God explicitly demands of the Israelites that they separate themselves from the rituals of other nations and all forms of idolatry. Interpreters have suggested, and at times even claimed unequivocally, that the mixture of meat and milk was used in these forbidden rituals and so it is only natural that God demand that Israel avoid them. The words of Maimonides (Cordoba – Cairo, 1138-1204) to this effect are well known and widely cited:

As for the prohibition against eating mean [boiled] in milk, it is in my opinion not improbable that – in addition to this being undoubtedly very gross food and very filling – idolatry had something to do with it. Perhaps such food was eaten at one of the ceremonies of their cult or at one of their festivals. A confirmation of this may, in my opinion, be found in the fact that the prohibition against eating meat [boiled] in milk, when it is mentioned for the first two times, occurs near the commandment concerning pilgrimage: Three times in the year, and so on. It is as if it said: When you go on pilgrimage and enter the house of the Lord your God, do not cook there in the way they used to do. According to me this s the most probable view regarding the reason for this prohibition; but I have not seen this set down in any of the books of the Sabians that I have read.[[33]](#footnote-33)

According to Maimonides, this prohibition, like other prohibitions and commandments, is intended to uproot a custom of the Sabian cult, which Maimonides identifies as idolatrous.[[34]](#footnote-34) In support of this claim, Maimonides points out that the ban on cooking a kid in its mother’s milk is repeated in the section detailing the commandment of pilgrimage to the Temple, a rite that tended to include the roasting of meat. Such an argument, of course, assumes there is an underlying conceptual logic to the order of the commandments.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Maimonides acknowledged that he had found no hint of the practice in the writings of the Sabians. Under his influence, a number of other sages and interpreters were explicit in pointing out that they possessed no proof of any foreign ritual that made use of meat cooked in milk but nevertheless insisted that the theological explanation for the prohibition remained the most reasonable one. Thus Maimonides’ son, R. Avraham ben Moshe (Cairo, 1186-1237), wrote: “It seems likely that this law was directed against idolatry, as my father and teacher, of blessed memory, explained.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Gersonides (R. Levi ben Gershom or Ralbag; Provence, 13th – 14th c.) likewise wrote in his explanation of Exod 23:19,

For it may have been a practice of the ancient peoples to cook meat in milk in their house of idolatry when they came to celebrate their festivals, and so the Torah forbids us from doing the same; and if we have not found any evidence of this in their writings, it is because all trace of the rituals of these peoples was lost because of the passage of time and the Torah’s argument against them.

Other interpreters, however, have taken non-Jews’ use of meat and milk in their rituals as fact. Such is the implication of the comments by R. Ovadia Sforno (Italy, 1475-1550): “‘You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk’ – you shall not perform any practices like those done by idolaters [alt: the Sabians] to increase the harvest”; “‘You shall not cook a kid’ – as the foreigners [alt: Canaanites] did, thinking thereby to secure success in their harvests or their flocks”; “‘You shall not cook a kid’ – as the nations [alt: Canaanites] did, thinking thereby to increase the size of their flocks and their possessions and all their cattle.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

We find similar interpretations even into the modern period, as in the commentary of R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah of Berlin (the Netziv; 1816-1893):

It was a custom in those days to enrich the fields as we do with refuse; so the foreign nations had the practice of cooking the meat of a kid in its mother’s milk and pouring it out bit by bit onto the fields. The verse warns against this practice: since it is forbidden to cook meat in milk, so is kid’s meat in its mother’s milk forbidden, even for use in farming.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Based on these statements and many more like them, we can conclude that, in the opinion of these interpreters, foods made of a combination of meat and milk are not prohibited due to any problem inherent in the food; rather, the prohibition is a consequence of the use of milk and meat in non-Jewish ritual. This understanding of the ban brings into question the relevance of the prohibition at a time when such rituals no longer take place.[[39]](#footnote-39) On the other hand, one may point to the fact that throughout history non-Jews have continued to mix meat and milk, if in a non-ritualistic way. Such a direction is taken in the following remark by Ibn Ezra in his Short Commentary on Exod 23:19: “God forbade the cooking of a kid in its mother’s milk for to this very day it is a custom of the Ishmaelites to cook a kid with the milk, and they say it is a tasty dish.” Ibn Ezra returns to this line of argument in his Long Commentary on the same verse: “Even the Ishmaelites acknowledge that if the kid is cooked in its mother’s milk, which two share the same nature, then it will be tastier.” Joseph Kaspi (Provence, 1279-1340) similarly writes, “It is a custom of that land to eat the meat of kids in milk, as I saw in Egypt and the surrounding lands.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Abravanel, on the other hand, connects the ancient non-Jewish ritual to a widespread habit of herdsmen of every land and age:

It seems more likely that it was a practice of the idolaters […] to cook the kids in milk at harvest time, thinking that in doing so they were pleasing their god and making an offering to him, and that he would bless the work of their hands […] Even today it is the custom in the kingdoms of Spain, that when all the herdsmen gather twice a year to consult with one another and make rules in the matters of herdsmen and flocks [….] their food is meat in milk, and the meat of the kids is considered by them to be the choicest in such a dish; I have already inquired and learned for certain that such has always been the custom of those who come from the end of the earth, from a place called Ingaletirah, where there are far more flocks than in any other land. I truly believe that for this reason God warned them, when they gather for the holiday of Sukkot, not to cook kids and milk together as do the non-Jews, and it was to distance them as far as possible from the ways of idolatry that God forbade the eating of such a mixture or the derivation of any benefit from it, as [our sages] of blessed memory have said. They also forbade any mixture of meat and milk so as not to give sinners license to say “What is the difference between the two?”and for the same reason they forbade even the meat of poultry in milk.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Variations on this ritual in the customs of non-Jews from the time of the Talmudic sages and later interpreters even served as a basis for additional stringencies in the prohibition, as is evident in the following statement addressing the halakhic practices of R. Isaac Luria (the Ari; Safed, 1534-1572):

Regarding meat and milk it is written “You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk.” My teacher, of blessed memory [Isaac Luria], on any day that he had eaten cheese, would not eat meat until the night. And I saw that some kept the stringency not to eat the sugar made from sweet cane with meat, because the non-Jews bleached them with goat milk, as is known, and so they would not eat it with meat. And I saw my teacher, of blessed memory, eat it together with meat.[[42]](#footnote-42)

The theory that a non-Jewish ritual was behind the halakhic prohibition of meat and milk was amplified in the mid-20th century, a shift that is associated primarily with Moshe David Cassuto. Cassuto adopted the following suggested reading of a short and corrupted line of text from the Ugaritic composition “Song of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods”: “*tab*[*ach ge*]*di bechalav*, *ananach bechem’at*.” Following later scholars, he translated this as “cook a kid in milk, a lamb in butter.” In keeping with this understanding, Cassuto argued that the verse “You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” was intended to separate Jewish rituals from those of the idolaters: “You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk following the cruel custom that they [non-Jews] practice during their festival of the first-fruits.” He explains that “the Talmudic tradition expanded the ban to include eating any combination of meat and milk,” emphasizing that “cooking is generally only for the purpose of eating,” and the inclusion of the prohibition in the list of forbidden foods found in Deut 14:3-21 is proof to this effect. Similar to the emphases of other interpreters, Cassuto too connects the cooking of kids in milk to customs practiced in the modern period as well and notes that it remains a widespread custom among the traditional Bedouins to cook a tender animal from the flock in milk.[[43]](#footnote-43) The implication of his remarks is that a forgotten Canaanite ritual was somehow preserved in the collective memory for over a thousand years until a response to it could be formulated explicitly in the first centuries CE in the Mishnah.[[44]](#footnote-44)

We find a different emphasis on the continued relevance of the verse “You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” and the broader halakhic ban in comments by the scholar Shalom Rosenberg on the Italian Kabbalist Aviad Sar-Shalom Basilea (Mantua, 1680-1743). Basilea claims that a mixture of meat and milk, like several other prohibited items, are by their very nature unfit and aid the forces of evil. According to Basilea, this was in fact the reason for their adoption by the non-Jews in their rituals, which were drawn to those forces of evil:

The real reason is […] that those things give birth to spiritual impurity within the soul of man, and render him impure above and below, and so the Torah forbade them. Idolaters would do such things specifically in order to bring the spirit of impurity upon them, for they served the Side of Impurity.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Rosenberg restated Basilea’s claim in a psycho-symbolic interpretation: the idolatrous rituals symbolize a fundamental evil that dwells in the heart of every man, including the human attraction to impurity and sadism. This being so, the verse “You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” and the halakhic prohibition on meat and milk continue to be relevant since, even if the idolatrous rituals are no longer practiced, their dangerous roots exist in the human soul and we must be wary of them along with their cultural and ritual symbols:

Many of the practices of idolatry, rather than being the product of social convention, in fact stem from deep levels of the soul. These levels are not always pure. They can express corruption, violence, and especially sadism. This sadism is contrary to many commandments of the Torah that are not directly connected to idolatry, such as “No animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young” (Lev 22:28). This prohibition serves as a kind of prologue to “You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk,” an act in which sadism reaches its apex. Mother’s milk, the divine blessing giving life to the young, is transformed into a means of its death, turning mercy to cruelty, as if behind this idolatrous act stood a hidden god that sometimes dwells in the depths of the human soul, a god whose values are contrary to the good and the upright, compassion and mercy.[[46]](#footnote-46)

3. The Ban on the Consumption of Blood: Some verses in the Torah explicitly forbid the eating of blood, among them Deut 12:23-25:

But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh. You must not partake of it; you must pour it out on the ground like water: you must not partake of it, in order that it may go well with you and with your descendants to come, for you will be doing what is right in the sight of the Lord.[[47]](#footnote-47)

In this case, a clear reason is provided for the prohibition on eating blood: the blood is “the life” and so it is forbidden to eat it. It may be that these verses assume, as some scholars have suggested, some magical belief or practice associated with blood. In any case, a certain recoil from this bodily fluid, the sight of which is accompanied by pain and sometimes death, is only natural and needs no further explanation.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Some interpreters have drawn a connection between milk and blood, explaining the ban on eating meat and milk as dependent on the explicit and natural ban on eating blood. Underlying this explanation is the conception that milk is derived from blood, specifically that menstrual blood makes its way to the breasts and emerges as breast milk.[[49]](#footnote-49) It seems that a similar explanation is reflected in Tannaitic sources: “‘You must not partake of it’ [the blood; Deut 12:25] includes meat in milk”; similarly, “Issi says, ‘you must not consume the life with the flesh’ [Deut 12:23] includes milk in meat, which is forbidden for consumption.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Rabbi Issi’s statement serves as the foundation of an interpretation by R. Tuviyah ben R. Eliezer (Byzantium, 11th–12th c.), the author of *Midrash Lekah Tov*: “[Scripture] says, ‘you must not consume the life with the flesh’ to include meat in milk, which is forbidden for consumption, for the blood thickens and becomes milk.”[[51]](#footnote-51) If the blood is the life as well as the basis of the milk,[[52]](#footnote-52) then the prohibition of eating “the life with the flesh” is connected to the prohibition of eating meat with milk.

The identification of the ban on meat and milk with the verse “the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh” is not so straightforward as *Midrash Lekah Tov* would have it. The consumption of blood is forbidden whether eaten alone or mixed with meat while meat and milk are not forbidden by themselves but only when combined. A solution was proposed by R. Bachaye ben Asher ibn Halawa (Spain, 1255-1340). In the course of listing a number of reasons for the prohibition of meat and milk, R. Bachaye addresses the connection between it and the prohibition of eating blood, explaining the dangers to physical and mental health that these are intended to prevent:

According to the plain meaning of the verse, the reason for this commandment is that it stupefies the heart, for milk is made from blood, and the temperament of the blood is wicked and it leads to cruelty, and one of the reasons for its prohibition is that it does not undergo change through digestion in the body as other things do when eaten, and so its evil nature remains within it unchanged. And even though it has now been changed from blood to milk and developed into something else, nevertheless when it returns to the meat and mixes with it, it returns to its original state as blood, and the mixture of them together stupefies the heart and generates coarseness and vice in the soul of the one who consumes it.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The mixture of milk with meat instills in it the undesirable characteristics of blood. If meat and milk together were not forbidden, then the Jews would be unknowingly transgressing the prohibition of consumption of blood and exposing themselves to the damaging effects of blood.

4. Bodily Health: Several interpreters have noted that the mixture of meat and milk is hard on the body and can even be damaging to it. Such explanations do not stand alone but are rather brought in support of others. Thus Maimonides, who, as mentioned, understood the ban as preventing idolatry, points out that meat and milk together is “undoubtedly very gross food and very filling.”[[54]](#footnote-54) We have seen how Bachaye ben Asher claims that milk turns back into blood upon touching meat, thus “stupefying the heart”; he also adds, “So too, according to doctors, a mixture of fish and cheese cooked together leads to vice and disease and leprosy.” Though he mentions leprosy here, it seems that in Bachaye ben Asher’s opinion the worst damage is mental: “One should not stupefy the heart with forbidden foods, but instead have foods that are pure and clean and conducive to the contemplation of the ways of the Torah and prepare one’s heart for the apprehension of God’s knowledge.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

Ibn Ezra also testifies to the possible deleterious health effects of eating meat and milk together in his Long Commentary on Exod 23:19. Similarly to his comments in the Short Commentary mentioned above and a number of other remarks, here he connects the ban on meat and milk to cruelty: “For it is cruelty to cook a kid with the milk of its mother.” We can sense a certain skepticism in his words, however, as he argues that “we have no need of a reason for this prohibition, for it is hidden from the wise.”[[56]](#footnote-56) The core of Ibn Ezra’s comments revolve around the technical difficulties of cooking meat in milk and the question of whether such a dish is tasty or not: “So no one eats meat in milk, for it is not tasty; the meat must be cooked at length, but not the milk.” Among other points, Ibn Ezra notes the distinction between the cooking of a lamb in milk, which damages the body, and the cooking of a kid in milk, which is advisable from a health standpoint:

For there is no such custom today in the land of the Ishmaelites to eat a lamb cooked with milk, for the meat of a lamb is very moist, and so combined with the liquid milk it is unhealthy; so it is not to be eaten. Since the meat of a kid has no moisture, and when it is small it is hot, they cook the kid in milk. And do not be surprised that the men of these lands do not do so, for all doctors acknowledge that there is no other meat like it, and they even allow the sick to eat it. So too do they eat it in Spain, Africa, Egypt, the Land of Israel, Persia and Babylonia.

Although Ibn Ezra does not say so explicitly, we can conclude from his words that the ban on the tasty kid meat cooked in milk is intended only to protect one from eating the unhealthy lamb in milk.

Another explanation, likewise for reasons of bodily health, is connected to the separate periods required for the digestion of meat foods and milk foods. Combining them together into a single dish leads to a situation in which the digestion of one interferes with the digestion of the other or, in the words of Gersonides, “These foods are digested at different speeds, and so their mixture renders digestion ineffective, for what is gained in the digestion of one is lost by the digestion of another.”[[57]](#footnote-57) It is possible, however, that this remark is intended only to direct the reader on how to derive the most energy from his diet.

There are likewise some in the modern period who claim categorically that a mixture of meat and milk is unhealthy, despite the fact that there is to date no evidence to this effect: “A mixture of meat and milk may damage one’s health. Even if there is no scientific evidence of such, God knows what may harm the body and soul of man and He desires to prevent us from inflicting self-harm, and so He forbade the eating of a mixture of meat and milk.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

5. Symbolic and Kabbalistic Explanations: One line of explanation for the separation of meat and milk draws on symbolic and Kabbalistic thought. Here the primary emphasis is on the very combination of these two incompatible elements: “the reason for the prohibition is because of the mixing”[[59]](#footnote-59) or, in the words of Abravanel,

It is forbidden to eat meat and milk together since things of such nature should not be combined. For one is of the mother [the nourishing milk] and the other is of the son [the meat that was nourished], and it is not fitting that they should be combined in one dish. For this reason [Scripture] said that eating the kid and milk is an abomination.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Similarly, but from a physiological angle, Shlomo Ephraim of Luntschitz (1540-1619), the author of *Kli Yakar*, wrote:

“You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” – most interpreters have weighed in on the reason for this commandment and they did not provide a sufficient answer, leading some to say that this commandment is one of the *hukot,* whichhave no known reason. [In fact] this commandment is similar to the prohibition of *kilayim* [combining different forms of plants or animals] and the mixing of powers [cf. Pesachim 44b], for it is known that the flesh of the fetus is born from the blood of the red female, which gives birth to all red parts of the body, for that is its source, and so too the beast’s milk, which is derived from the blood when it thickens and becomes milk; accordingly, the flesh of the fetus and the milk both came forth from the blood and then separated, and it is not right to recombine them by cooking or eating.[[61]](#footnote-61)

The essential incompatibility between meat and milk stems from their function as symbols of something else. Meat is frequently presented as a symbol of the earthly and human world of impurity and evil, while milk represents the pure divine world; in a similar vein, red meat symbolizes the divine aspect of judgment, while white milk symbolizes that of mercy. Just as one must distinguish between and separate the lower from the higher, the impure from the pure, evil from good, judgment from mercy, so too one must separate between meat and milk. This approach is clearly at work in the Zohar:

“You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” – What does this mean? Only that one should not mix the low with the high, that the outer side not nurse from the inner side. What is the difference? What is outside comes from the side of impurity, and what is inside comes from the side of holiness.[[62]](#footnote-62)

It stands to reason that being punctilious in maintaining the prohibition of meat and milk also has a functional side, contributing meaningfully to human life: “When the mother,” that is, the *sefirah* of Malkhut, “nurses from the other side,” that is, from the side of impurity and evil, “the Temple is rendered impure, and the snake begins to reveal itself.” Then, “the kid nurses on the milk of its mother, and the judgments are aroused.” The separation of meat and milk in the lower world influences the upper world and arouses the forces of good: “For this reason no one of holy seed should eat meat with milk […] for the matter depends on one’s actions, for the act below arouses above.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

Such symbolism reappears in the writings of Menachem Recanati (Italy, second half of the 13th c.), now repeated in the name of anonymous “interpreters”:

Other interpreters say that the meat and the milk hint at the arms of the cosmos, and you already know the explanation of the word *basar* [meat, flesh] from the verse “the end of all flesh” [Gen 6:13], and it is “the ‘pit empty of water’ but full of serpents and scorpions” [per Shabbat 22a], and you know that the anger of the Lord flared against the people while the meat was still between their teeth [per Num. 11:33]; so it is unfit to mix it with the well of living waters where the Lord dwells and from which milk and honey flow, for one must not bring the power of impurity into the holy place.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Recanati cites three sources on corrupt human behavior, in two of which appears the word *basar*, “meat” or “flesh.” The sins of man, which are that meat,[[65]](#footnote-65) caused God to send the flood as punishment: “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.” Joseph was cast into the pit empty of water, that is, empty of Torah, and full of scorpions and serpents, symbolizing evil.[[66]](#footnote-66) The meat lodged between the teeth of the complaining Jews symbolizes their greedy behavior that so incensed God: “The meat was still between their teeth, nor yet chewed, when the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague” (Num. 11:33). These three episodes stand in stark contrast to the “well of living waters,” God’s heavenly sanctuary, symbolized by milk. The prohibition of mixing meat and milk is intended, therefore, to represent the profound and critical demarcation between corrupt human behavior and holiness, between the lower earthly world and the upper heavenly one.

In some cases, the symbolism of the meat and milk depends on their red and white colors and their connotations, derived from well-known verses. So R. Avraham Sabba (exiled from Spain, 1440-1508) wrote in his comments on Exod 23:19:

The reason for this [prohibition of meat and milk] is because it is not fitting to mix the powers of the two, the power of judgment with the power of mercy, and the power of mercy with the power of judgment. For meat is the aspect of divine judgment, in the mystery [according to the esoteric interpretation] of “an end to all flesh” [Gen 6:13], “For sorrow is contained in the flesh…” And milk is the aspect of absolute mercy, which turns the sins of Israel to white, as it is said, “[Be your sins like crimson,] They can turn snow-white” [Isa. 1:18]. And sin is red, in the mystery [according to the esoteric interpretation] of “[And Esau said to Jacob,] Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished—which is why he was named Edom” [Gen 25:30]. And so the two must be kept apart, each according to its nature and its kind.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Bachaye ben Asher makes a slightly different distinction, this one between the commandments and the *hukim* that are in heaven and those that are on earth, seeing in the separation of meat and milk a symbol of this essential demarcation:

According to the Kabbalah: You already know that all the commandments are entirely divine in nature and every one of them is drawn in the form of supernal matters, and so too are the *hukim* an evocation of what is above – thus are they called *hukim*, because they are *hakukim* [engraved] above. Meat and milk allude to unique matters above; as each one is permitted alone, so too each of these supernal matters is unique unto itself, and there is no essential prohibition of them but only their combination, and the Torah distanced them from each other and decreed a separation between them. So we too must understand that they are separate and we must not compare holiness above to holiness below, even though all is joined together as one.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Here the separation of meat and milk represents an essential, even Platonic, separation between the law that is engraved in heaven and the law that is on earth.

The symbolism of the prohibition of meat and milk is evident in the modern period as well. To provide one example, the Hasidic writer Elimelekh Weissblum of Lizhensk (1717-1787) explains:

“You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” – this verse alludes to the reason why we are forbidden to mix meat and milk, even while Abraham our Father served the visiting angels just such a combination […] for meat alludes to corporeality, and since the righteous one eats the corporeality with spiritual unifications, he draws down the efflux from the supernal worlds […] and the righteous one in eating becomes milk, that is, the efflux referred to as milk. And since we do not possess the power to perform such a unification below, God commanded us not to eat meat and milk, so as not to mix what belongs above with what belongs below. But the angels are otherwise, for they possess the power to perform the true and complete unification below as above.[[69]](#footnote-69)

According to Weisbloom, then, so long as man does not possess an angel’s nature he cannot unite the lower world with the upper: “So long as a man is not perfect in his righteousness and he is still soft as a kid, sometimes strong and sometimes weak in his fear of heaven, it is not fitting for him to tread in the ways of the holy and make unifications.”[[70]](#footnote-70) The implication of his words is that in the World to Come or with the coming of the messiah, when men’s faith is strengthened and they become like angels, the prohibition of meat and milk will be annulled, a position that is found in the writings of other thinkers early and late.[[71]](#footnote-71)

The scholar David Kraemer also presented the prohibition as stemming from the inherent symbolism of meat and milk. His arguments rely on the studies of Louis Evan Grivetti and Kaj Århem: Grivetti showed that various tribes (especially in Africa) are known for maintaining certain separations between meat and milk and Århem provided the conceptual bases for such distinctions in the Maasai tribe.[[72]](#footnote-72) Their explanations are grounded in conceptions of meat and milk in the local society. Meat is considered a delicacy generally consumed within public or ritual contexts, which are associated with male activities such as hunting; meat is made available by the death of a living creature, and its roasting is considered a sort of resurrection. Milk, on the other hand, is considered a most basic foodstuff and is associated with female activities; it is provided by an animal that still lives and breathes. This system of contrasts is what stands at the basis of the separation of meat and milk. Kraemer assumes that a similar symbolic system of contrasts stands at the basis of the Jewish prohibition on meat and milk, and he adds a uniquely Jewish contrast to that system: meat symbolizes the offerings of the Temple that was destroyed, while milk symbolizes a foodstuff that does not belong to the ritualism of the Temple.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Underlying all of the approaches brought above, along with many others of a similar nature, is the conception of meat and milk as separate elements the mixture of which is counter to the divine, natural, and cosmic orders. We might connect this line of thinking with the human inclination for binary opposition and categorization. The intuitive human tendency to organize the chaotic world into comprehensible categories, which are themselves divided into opposites, has been widely treated by modern scholars of various fields in their attempts to explain Biblical dietary restrictions.[[74]](#footnote-74) These scholars have presented the Bible, explicitly or implicitly, as a “tremendous project of separation” between fundamental opposites and the laws dealing with food as one salient expression.[[75]](#footnote-75) The symbolism rabbinic interpreters have seen in the prohibition of meat and milk therefore expresses a common paradigm in modern scholarship.

6. Moderation: Several explanations for the prohibition of mixing meat and milk assume that separating the two can aid in refining one’s urges, preventing being drawn after coarse food, and channeling one’s God-given capabilities for the good. A salient example are the explanations by Rashbam mentioned above, which associate a tendency for cruelty with a lack of moderation: “It is a despicable thing and an act of gluttony to eat the mother’s milk with the children […] and Scripture has commanded so to teach you the way of refinement,” and, likewise, “It is tantamount to cruelty and gluttony to slaughter and cook and eat the mother and the young together.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

Gersonides, in his comments on Exod 23:19 (*Biur haParashah*), also presents the prohibition of meat and milk as a means of educating a person towards moderation: “It is forbidden to cook a kid in its mother’s milk so that we learn not to waste the abundance that God has given us and from which we grow and sustain ourselves.”

The most complex development of this line of thinking, as well as the best known and most often cited, was offered in the modern period by R. Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook (1865-1935):

With the proper conception of the world, one which recognizes the fullness of God’s compassion and goodness, a man will recognize that the milk in the udders of the mother beast is there not so that he in his strength can exploit it for his own uses but so that she can suckle her tender young, offering the milk of her udders to her beloved kid. This kid also deserves to enjoy the love of his mother’s udders, according to his own nature. Yet man’s virtue, due to its material and ethical weakness, has corrupted his conception of the world […] O man! Your ears hear something from behind you, the voice of God in strength calling to you: “You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk.” No! The purpose of the kid is not only to be food for your sharp and polished teeth or for your own scandalous and humiliating act of eating flesh, and the milk was not intended as a seasoning for you, to fulfill your base cravings. In knowing that the meat and the milk, if they are to refine our eating, are to remain far from one another or else become abominable, in knowing that all benefit, cooking, and eating are forbidden, you will recognize in good time that the life of living things was not created for your gluttonous appetite, and the milk was intended by nature to be sustenance for [the kid] just as the milk of your mother’s breasts were sustenance for you when you were a nursling.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Kook seems to be alluding to the conception, not particularly widespread but nonetheless known, that after the Redemption humans will cease to eat meat, and so the human race will return to its Edenic existence, following a vegetarian diet.[[78]](#footnote-78) His words also seem to reflect the idea that divine creation is identifiable by its harmony; immoderate behavior, including gluttony, damages this divine harmony and represents ethical corruption. The prohibition of meat and milk prevents this.

David Kraemer, as a supplement to other explanations, raises the possibility that Jews from the end of the Hellenistic period were aware of the characterization of barbarians as eaters of meat and milk. The contexts in which this notion appears, from Homer to Aristotle, reveals that it was intended to signal culturally inferior behavior. The eating of meat and milk is an essential feature of nomadic culture, which is to say unrefined and low in comparison to the ideal Hellenistic culture, characterized by self-discipline. According to Kraemer, Jews, who were deeply influenced by the Greco-Roman diet, were also influenced by this association and naturally sought to distance themselves from the symbol of barbarism and to adopt the desired cultural behavior.[[79]](#footnote-79)

7. Practical Considerations: An alternative explanation for the prohibition of meat and milk is connected to the features of milk in the hot Israeli climate. Herbert Chanan Brichto emphasizes the role of the table in the life of Jews as a symbolic and actual replacement for the altar in the destroyed Temple.[[80]](#footnote-80) In keeping with this correlation, the ban on offering spoiled food – “No meal offering that you offer to the Lord shall have fermented” (Lev 2:12) – was assiduously applied to the food the Jews placed on their tables. Milk spoiled easily, especially in the Mediterranean climate, and the addition of meat was likely to accelerate that process and increase the likelihood of the offering becoming unfit.[[81]](#footnote-81)

A similar line of thought is found in a study by archaeologist Gloria London, according to which an assessment of animal bone fragments from the geographical area of Israel reveals that the ancient inhabitants customarily boiled their meat rather than roasting it. The boiling was performed in vessels that were also used to store beverages, including milk and milk products. The remains of these products that were absorbed by the walls of the vessels spoiled, a process accelerated by contact with meat. The separation of meat and milk was intended to prevent this undesirable situation and so was entirely functional.[[82]](#footnote-82)

8. Prevention of Assimilation: Ben Zion Luria has suggested an additional explanation for the prohibition – “the prevention of assimilation.” According to Luria, with the failure of the first Bar Kochba rebellion and the coming spread of Christianity, the separation of meat and milk was proposed as a fundamental divider between Jews and gentiles:

One of the Torah sages of that generation (his name is unknown) found a way to prevent assimilation. He proposed a new law that would limit contact with gentiles as much as possible: Jews would have unique dietary laws, separating between dairy foods and meat foods, and could not eat with gentiles […] In consideration of the expected danger, the matter was ratified by the sages of the generation, who began to spread the interpretation that it was forbidden to eat meat with milk.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Luria defined the transition from the verse “You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” to the prohibition on any kind of combination of meat and milk as a minor change, yet he seems to see in it a halakhic development of striking internal logic.[[84]](#footnote-84)

The function of the prohibition of meat and milk in the creation of rabbinic identity within a climate ripe with sectarian sensitivities at the end of the Second Temple era is also stressed by David Kraemer, according to whom this ban served as an effective method of distinguishing between Jews and Jews and later between Jews and non-Jews as well. The aspiration towards separation was integrated with and strengthened by the symbolic aspects of meat and milk.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Luria’s position, though revealing a certain naiveté, and even more so Kraemer’s, signals a direction to be developed presently, in the section to follow.

The explanations listed above were put forward over the course of more than 1,500 years. Most of them were proposed by Jewish sages and interpreters who saw themselves bound to the commandments and prohibitions of the Jewish religion, including the prohibition of meat and milk. They saw the divine origin of the law and its absolute authority as being above all dispute. Yet a number of the suggested explanations find echoes in the writings of scholars who do not see the prohibition as divine in origin or themselves as bound to the commandments. The common denominator to all parties is their assumption that the prohibition is based on some recognizable logic, whether educational, religious, hygienic, symbolic, or what have you. This assumption is what drives the traditional interpreters and even modern academics to seek out the solution in concrete features of meat and milk or the combination of the two, in the role of these ingredients in human life, or in the connection between the ban and the verse “You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk.” Many of the interpreters gave more than one reason for the prohibition; many, while offering possible reasons of their own, pointed out the cryptic nature of the ban and the possibility that its purpose will only be revealed in the future, in the world to come or with the coming of the redemption.[[86]](#footnote-86) This would seem to reflect a certain lack of confidence in the explanations and a felt need for additional, supporting theories, as well as even acknowledgment of the possibility that none of the explanations offered are correct and the true reason remains hidden. At the same time, so far as we know, no one suggested the possibility that the prohibition of meat and milk lacks reason entirely.

We should not be surprised that those who assume that the origin of the prohibition of meat and milk is divine would never consider the possibility that there is no logic behind it, even if this logic remains hidden from mortal eyes. They understand the divine Torah as perfect and God as perfect, whereas arbitrariness and disharmony are considered undesirable and to a certain extent contrary to divine nature.[[87]](#footnote-87) The possibility that God’s laws, including the prohibition of meat and milk, do not express an appropriate logic is therefore inconceivable. We should not even be surprised that no modern scholars have suggested the possibility that there is no logical answer, for while a definitive explanation can be considered, supported, or challenged, it is exceedingly difficult to either support or challenge arbitrariness and lack of explanation. Even if we are entirely aware of the presence of irrational decisions in our own lives, we strive to limit their power as much as possible and even refuse to acknowledge them.

It seems, then, that the claim that a group of people numbering in the millions would accept upon themselves severe restrictions such as a ban on meat and milk, and with no logical explanation, is not reasonable. However, it may be that irrationality is actually the key to understanding this prohibition if understood in tandem with some of the explanations offered over the years. Moreover, it is likely that irrationality and even arbitrariness characterize additional dietary restrictions known to us from the Jewish religion as well as other religions and societies. To this end, it would be correct to look beyond the particular details of each one of these dietary restrictions and instead consider what is common to them all.

III. The Purpose of the Ban on Meat and Milk and the Purposes of Other Dietary Restrictions

For our current purposes, it will be worthwhile to distinguish between nutrition and food. The term “nutrition” signifies the total of proteins, lipids, carbohydrates, minerals, and vitamins that a person needs for proper physiological functioning. “Food” is nutrition that has undergone a cultural transformation.

The transformation that accompanies the change of nutrition to food can be reduced to those activities performed in order to acquire material goods, such as hunting and gathering and agriculture, and those activities performed with those goods, such as soaking, grinding, crushing, cutting, fermenting, cooking, roasting, mixing, etc. Some of these are necessary for human digestion; various manipulations are needed to render kernels of grain (wheat, barley, rice, etc.) into an available and effective source of carbohydrates for the human digestive system, as opposed for example to many kinds of fruits, which are edible straight from the tree. However, beyond these basic and universal preparatory activities, the cooking of food products is always culturally dependent and located in a specific time and place. So, for example, wheat kernels can be ground into flour, from which can be made a French baguette, Iraqi pita, Italian pasta, Chinese dumplings, and an enormous variety of other foods, all depending on the culture of the person preparing the food.

Furthermore, food is a unique artifact (a cultural product) in that it is the only one that crosses the boundaries of the body. Unlike other cultural products, which always remain outside the person who needs them, food enters his body and is changed through the digestion process into a physical and symbolic part of that body. Clothing can be removed, a tent or a house can be exited, and a painting on a wall or in a museum, like music, a literary text, or any other artistic creation, remains in its place. As such, food preparation is accompanied by unusual attention to the precise details, the clarification of its source, and the complicated path by which it was prepared, including the question of which people came into contact with it.

In the transition from nutrition to food, therefore, there is both a physiological element grounded in survival and a cultural element grounded in society, and the fact that it enters the body grants it special importance. It is no wonder, then, that the need for food carries tremendous significance both cultural and symbolic or that humans tend to develop complex rituals and traditions around both the preparation and consumption of food. Of these, one particularly germane to this discussion is the phenomenon that characterizes various religions and cultures – dietary restrictions. Many such restrictions are well known and millions of people throughout history have seen themselves bound to them, as in the bans on eating cows in Hinduism or on eating pigs in Judaism and Islam. Other examples are less known for reason of simple numbers, such as the Inuits’ practice of not mixing game meat with seafood.[[88]](#footnote-88)

Regarding the dietary restrictions known to us, including the prohibition of combining meat and milk, we find three important commonalities:

1. A heavy influence on personal and social behavior: Dietary restrictions have a particularly significant influence in the difficulties they impose, which can be divided into two categories: those restrictions forbidding a food that is particularly available, appetizing, and nutritious and those requiring a complicated process of preparation. The first category undoubtedly includes the ban on eating cows in Hinduism and the ban on eating pigs in Judaism and Islam. The second includes the requirements to separate between common types of food, such as meat and milk products or game and seafood. The requirement of a vegetarian diet in Hinduism and Buddhism and the requirement to abstain from eating entirely under certain circumstances combines these two categories of difficulties. The list of forbidden foods in Judaism, divided into categories and identifying characteristics, also combines the two categories of difficulties. Some of the items on the list are particularly available and nutritious and to remove them from the diet carries a heavy price. At the same time, other items don’t have much of an impact on the eaters. However, the forbidden foods never appear individually, but as a running list that demands complicated management of meals. The pig is but one item in a long list of forbidden foods (Lev 11:7, Deut 14:8), and if over time the pig came to be the symbol of all these foods, standing at the center of interreligious debates – “For why should one detest the good meat of this animal that Creation has in its goodness provided?” – this is only because, unlike the ban on eating camels, for example, pigs are available, tasty, and nutritious, they have no use to the household other than to provide meat, and the ban on eating them evokes surprise.[[89]](#footnote-89)

We are hard pressed to find examples of dietary restrictions with only marginal impacts on the effected population.[[90]](#footnote-90)

2. Irrational Restrictions: Dietary restrictions do not necessarily reflect any discernible rationale. Notwithstanding the explanations that have been offered over the generations for the ban on eating cows or pigs or the prohibition of mixing meat and milk, we cannot ignore the fact that the rationales behind these restrictions are not self-evident. Indeed, it is no wonder that not one of the explanations offered for these restrictions has been universally accepted.

3. The restrictions are not interdependent: The dietary restrictions, in their generalities and their particulars, are different from one another and we do not find any developmental connection between them. For example, a ban on eating cows does not necessarily imply a ban on eating pigs, nor does a ban on eating pigs lead logically to the separation of meat and milk products. It seems, then, that every restriction stands alone and apart from the others. Likewise, the fact that one restriction is particularly widespread does not stem from any details of that restriction but rather from factors in the spread of the various religions and societies that adopted it.

I would like to suggest that these three commonalities, taken together, hold the key to understanding the fundamental goal of all the dietary restrictions in Judaism and other exclusionist religions, including the prohibition of mixing meat and milk that is at the center of our discussion. This fundamental goal is **the separation of a certain human group from any who do not belong to it. The restrictions create ostensibly pure social categories and they are an effective tool for controlling contact between groups and the limiting possibility of crossing the bounds between them**.

This fundamental goal is the reason why the restrictions are placed precisely on food, which, as noted above, unlike other necessities and cultural artifacts, enters the human body and becomes part of it. This goal is also the reason why the restrictions concern ingredients of critical importance to the human diet and social conduct. A restriction that cannot be ignored or avoided transforms the fundamental aspects of a person’s identity and defines his membership in the group of people who share in his obligation to that restriction.[[91]](#footnote-91) In contrast, a restriction on a marginal nutritional ingredient would have only a minor impact on the lives of the people and would not become an integral part of their identity or a fundamental piece of their self-definition as a group. For this very reason it comes as no surprise that there is no practical, material, or functional rationale to the restrictions and no developmental links between them. In fact, there is no reason to seek out such a rationale. If the ban on eating cows or pigs or the mixing of meat and milk was based on reason, these bans would likely have developed among neighboring groups. That is to say, in order to prevent a person with no connection to the group from unilaterally joining it, it is necessary that the restriction not only be burdensome and complicated but also incidental and arbitrary, rather than a logical response to the objective situation.

The fact that the same dietary restrictions may be found in more than one society or religion does not challenges this latest point. What is critical is that the restrictions effectively distinguish between one human group and all others with which it is likely to come in contact. That being the case, if we find similarities between the ban on meat and milk in Judaism and the separation of meat and milk in the Maasai tribe, this only testifies to the fact that these restrictions developed independently and there is no reason to suspect that members of one group joined the other. We might say the same regarding the adoption of the ban on eating pigs in Islam. The rise of Islam occurred in a period in which Jews were distinguished from the non-Jews around them through a complex system of distinctions, including the highly-developed and dismaying array of dietary laws. The adoption of the ban on eating pigs did nothing to blur the distinctions between Jews and Muslims but was a quite effective tool for distinguishing Muslims from Christians and other non-Muslims.

The suggestion that dietary restrictions do not reflect practical, material, or functional reasoning does not contradict the very likely possibility that all the dietary restrictions stem from a discernible reason, and perhaps even a reason that was understandable and logical in its time. However, this reason, whatever it may be, was exceedingly local and inherently bound up with the particular and limited human group that began to adopt it. According to such a theory, a distinction can be made between a hypothetical original rationale, which cannot be reconstructed, and the acceptance of the restriction and its transformation into an effective tool for controlling contact between one group and others. This stage, in which the dietary restriction was already well established and accepted, is separate from the reason for its first formation, a fact that is frequently forgotten.

 If this theory is correct, then the ban on meat and milk and the laws of *kashrut* as a whole were intended to distinguish between Jews and non-Jews.[[92]](#footnote-92) The recognizable burden involved in separating meat from milk obligates daily activities that sharpen the clear boundaries between the Jewish community and others. The obviously arbitrary basis of this restriction guarantees that no one who is not organically connected to the Jewish community would be obligated to it. If indeed at some point – perhaps in the first or second century in an influential cultural center – there was a concrete reason that inspired the Jews to refrain from eating meat with milk, it has been forgotten. Ultimately it was the effectiveness of the prohibition in separating Jews from non-Jews that brought about its acceptance, with no necessary connection to the original reason for its formation. We might even say that it was necessary that this original reason be forgotten and lost in order to enable the complete acceptance of such a dramatic dietary restriction.

The distinction I have suggested here between a possible concrete reason, which was the starting point of the dietary restriction, and its establishment as an effective tool in maintaining communal boundaries does not contradict many of the explanations offered over the generations for the prohibition of meat and milk and listed in the previous section. So if at some point we discover supporting evidence for the widespread explanation that behind this ban stands some concrete idolatrous ritual, we may suggest with all necessary caution that the desire to separate from this ritual is perhaps its starting point. However, it may be correct to present the explanations emphasizing the symbolic aspects of the ban as facilitating its acceptance. We may also say that the binary opposition between meat (or blood) and milk is intuitive and suits the human attraction to binary distinctions of the surrounding reality. This binary categorization made it easy for the Jews to accept upon themselves the prohibition of meat and milk and to a certain extent eased the sense of irrationality characterizing this dietary restriction. At the same time, this same irrationality, like the one characterizing other dietary restrictions, is fundamental and intrinsic and in fact necessary, and it is what allowed these restrictions to become such effective tools of separation between human groups.

It is interesting to note that the high effectiveness of dietary restrictions in establishing ostensibly pure social groups is, paradoxically, likely to become a factor precisely in arousing debate among those who see themselves as belonging to a pure social category. The prohibition on meat and milk in the modern era provides an example of this fascinating phenomenon: a religious Jew would find it difficult to eat with nonobservant Jews, despite the fact that both of them see themselves as legitimate and suitable members of the same group. Furthermore, different institutional aspects make it such that even religious Jews who are bound to the prohibition of meat and milk are likely to find it difficult to eat together, due to varying levels of stringency or oversight over the processes of *kashrut* in kitchens and factories. These developments undermine the basic functionality of the dietary restriction and further highlight its irrationality.

1. For a summary of the central aspects of the laws of meat and milk, see R. Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashba), *Sefer Torat haBayit haArokh vehaKatzar*, *Bayit* 3, *Shaar* 4 (Jerusalem, 1972), 168-176; Menachem M. Kasher, *Humash Torah Shleimah vehu haTorah Shebiktav im Biur ‘Torah Shebaal Peh*,’ 19 (New York, 1960), 217-227; “*Basar beHalav*,” *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, vol. 4, col. 690-727. Regarding the inclusion of poultry in the prohibition of meat and milk, see Jordan D. Rosenblum, “Thou Shalt Not Cook a Bird in Its Mother’s Milk?: Theorizing the Evolution of a Rabbinic Regulation,” Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, and Beth A. Berkowitz (eds.), *Religious Studies and Rabbinics: A Conversation* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 175–187; on the historical development of the question of the length of time required to wait between eating meat and milk, see Steven H. Adams, “The Development of a Waiting Period between Meat and Dairy: 9th–14th Centuries,” *Oqimta* 4 (2016): 1–87. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The word translated by JPS as “cheese” is *hem’ah*, which is synonymous with milk in a number of places in Scripture; compare for example Judges 5:25 and Isa 7:22. Ignorance of any prohibition on eating meat and milk together is also evident in the mythical description of eating in Moses’ hymn recorded in Deuteronomy 32: “He set him atop the highlands, To feast on the yield of the earth; He fed him honey from the crag, And oil from the flinty rock,

Curd of kine and milk of flocks; With the best of lambs, And rams of Bashan, and he-goats” (Deut 32:13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cana Werman and Aharon Shemesh, *Revealing the Hidden: Exegesis and Halakha in the Qumran Scrolls* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2011), 47–48. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Philo, *On the Virtues,* ?? [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, David C. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E.g., Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978), 254–278. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On the contents and extent of the oral Torah, see Abraham Rosenthal, “Oral Torah and Torah from Sinai: *Halacha le-Ma’ase*” [Hebrew], *Talmudic Studies* 2 (1993): 448–487. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. However, there is no agreement on the source of the various details regarding the prohibition of mixing meat and milk and whether they derive from explicit Pentateuchal sources or not; so the question of the source of the prohibition on eating poultry and milk together remains unresolved (see M Hullin 8:4 and TB Hullin 116a). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The prohibition may have (also) been connected at an early stage to the verse “But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh” (Deut 12:23); in keeping with the widespread belief that milk was a derivation of blood, the verse could be read as prohibiting the eating of milk with meat: “the blood [including milk] is the life, and you must not consume the life [blood or milk] with the flesh.” Indeed, a similar understanding may be implied in Midrash Sifrei Devarim and Midrash Mechilta (cited in more detail in the following section). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is (characteristically) more detailed (“We are not permitted to cook or eat meat with milk mixed together”) and in every instance of the verse the translator describes the punishment awaiting those who transgress the prohibition (Ernest G. Clarke, ed. [Hoboken: Ktav, 1984], 95, 110, 227), an addition also found in Targum Neofiti (see  D. Andrew Teeter, “‘You Shall Not Seethe A Kid in Its Mother’s Milk’: The Text and the Law in Light of Early Witnesses”, *Textus* 24 [2009]: 57–60). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. TB Hullin 115b: “‘You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk’ [occurs] three times – once to prohibit eating, once to prohibit deriving benefit, and once to prohibit cooking.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For example, “The conundrum of the kid law is probably insoluble” (Alan M. Cooper, “Once Again Seething A Kid in It’s Mother’s Milk,” *Jewish Studies an Internet Journal* 10 [2012]: 142); “the original intent and background of the prohibition of ‘seething a kid in its mother’s milk’ remain remarkably obscure” (Teeter, “You Shall Not,” 41); “The command itself is cryptic. What does it mean?” (Rosenblum, “Thou Shalt Not,” 175). Similar statements are found in nearly every study treating the meaning of the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. One scholar, however, did present it as a natural development from the verse forbidding only the cooking of a kid in its mother’s milk to the separation of meat and milk as later understood within Judaism; see Louis Finkelstein, *The Pharisees: The Sociological Background of Their Faith* I (Philadelphia: JPS, 1966), 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A similar command appears in Exod 22:29: “You shall do the same with your cattle and your flocks: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me”; see Stefan Schorch, “‘A Young Goat in Its Mother’s Milk’? Understanding an Ancient Prohibition,” *Vetus Testamentum* 60 (2010): 116–130. For alternative suggestions, see Casper J. Labuschagne, “’You Shall Not Boil a Kid in Its Mother’s Milk’: A New Proposal for the Origin of the Prohibition,” *The Scriptures and the Scrolls: Studies in Honour of A.S. van der Woude on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, idem et al (eds.) (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 8–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Philo, *On the Virtues*, ??; in the continuation of the text, Philo connects the verse to Lev 22:28 and Deut 22:6-7 (“No animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young” and “Do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life”). However, it seems that Philo also connected the verse to the necessity of behaving in harmony with the nature of the world and of discerning between “causes of life,” that is, mother’s milk and the meat consumed (Ibid.). On the ethical distinction Philo makes between natural harmony and disharmony see, among others, Francesca Calabi, *The Language and the Law of God: Interpretation and Politics in Philo of Alexandria* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 31–78. On the binary distinction between mother’s milk derived from the consumed meat and the blood symbolizing the departure of the soul in death, see the following section. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The theories in this list can be found in the following studies, in order of their appearance above:  James G. Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion Legend and Law*, III (London, 1918), 118; Labuschagne, “You Shall Not,” 13–17; Cooper, “Once Again”; David Daube, “A Note on a Jewish Dietary Law,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1936): 289–291; Othmar Keel, *Das Böcklein in der Milch seiner Mutter und Verwandtes im Lichte eines altorientalischen Bildmotivs* (Freiburg: Universitaetsverlag, 1980), esp. 40–45; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 737–742; Nicole J. Ruane, *Sacrifice and Gender in Biblical Law* (New York: Cambridge University, 2013), esp. 77–87; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (trans.: L. S. Roudiez; New York: Columbia University, 1982), 105–106 (following Jean Soler, “The Semiotics of Food in the Bible,” Robert Forster and Orest Ranum [eds.], *Food and Drink in History: Selections from the Annales, Economies, Societies, Civilisations*,Vol. 5 [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979], 126–138 ???); J. Webb Mealy, “You Shall Not Boil a Kid in Its Mother’s Milk (Exod. 23:19b; Exod. 34:26b; Deut 14:21b): A Figure of Speech?” *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012): 50–72; Jack M. Sasson, “Ritual Wisdom? On ‘Seething a Kid in its Mother’s Milk,’” Ulrich Hübner and Ernst Axel Knauf (eds.), *Kein Land für sich allein: Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palästina und Ebirnâri für Manfred Weippert zum 65. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 294–308. A number of these studies contain their own surveys including additional theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In this respect, the Torah is markedly different from the legal systems known to us from antiquity to today that offer justifications for their statutes and detailed explications of their underlying values; see, for example, the Prologue to Hammurabi’s Code or the divine sanction Lycurgus of Sparta claims to have received and, in the modern period, the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. De Montaigne cites Quintilian: “Whatever princes do, they seem to command” (??). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Josephus, *Against Apion* (??). For similar statements and their cultural context, see the editor’s notes (??). For an attempt at establishing the basic norms of the Pentateuchal commandments in each of its sources and documents, see  Baruch J. Schwartz, “The Origin of the Law’s Authority: ‘Grundnorm’ and Its Meaning in the Pentateuchal Tradition,” [Hebrew] *Shnaton Ha-Mishpat Ha-‘ivri* 21 (2000): 241–265. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The citations come from the following sources: Rashi on Lev 19:19; TB Yoma 67b; Pesikta deRav Kahana, Parah 7 (Dov Mandelbaum, ed. [New York, 1987], 74); Philo, *Special Laws,* ??; Rashbam on Lev 11:34; TB Sanhedrin 102a; Saadia Gaon, *Beliefs and Opinions*, ??; if not otherwise noted, all citations taken from medieval interpreters were based on the Keter electronic edition of Mikraot Gedolot (chief editor Menahem Cohen). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The quote is from Philo, *On Moses*, ??. For a detailed discussion, see Christine Elizabeth Hayes, *What’s Divine about Divine Law?: Early Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The quote is from Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* III:31, Shlomo Pines, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 524. For key examples employed by those who held that the reasons for the commandments could only be revealed through the Kabbalah, see Isaac ben Samuel of Acco, *Sefer Meirat Einaim*, I:1 (Ferrara 1695), 7a. For examples of such explanations, see the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. TB Sanhedrin 21b. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Otiyot deRabbi Akiva 7. Several rationalist theologians from the modern era have taken a different approach, minimizing the importance of searching out reasons for the laws and, under certain conditions, even tending to see such a search as irreconcilable with religious faith – inscrutable laws have their own divine logic and reason, and what is required is the faithful recognition and acceptance of that fact. This approach is particularly associated with Yeshayahu Leibowitz; see, among other works, idem, *Judaism, Jewish People, and the State of Israel* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1975), 57–63.   [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For prior surveys, see especially Kasher, *Torah Shlemah*, 19:302–305; Cooper, “Once Again.” Some of the sources listed below are new to such surveys, as is their categorization. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On Philo and text-critical interpreters and academics, see the previous section; among the Karaites we know of who proposed such an interpretation to the verse are Yehudah Hadassi (Constantinople, 12th c.) and Aharon ben Eliyahu (Nicodemea, 1328-1369). See Yoram Erder, *Methods in Early Karaite Halakha* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’uchad, 2012), 62–63. See also the statements by Eldad Hadani, *Halakhah* 3 (Avraham Epstein, ed., Pressburg, 1891), 121 and their analysis on p. 129-130, no. 51 (though Eldad Hadani’s ties to Karaism have yet to be proven). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Rashbam’s reference to TB Hullin (“and such is the law for all mixtures of meat and milk as our rabbis have explained”) should be understood in a limited sense: he does not intend to include the entire category of meat and milk but rather to expand the verse “You shall not boil a kid” to include all young cattle; see a detailed analysis by Meir Isaac (Martin) Lockshin, *Peirush ha-Torah le-Rabbeinu Shmuel ben Meir* (Jerusalem: Horeb, 2009), 277. For a more general treatment of the relationship of Rashbam’s Commentary on the Torah to Ibn Ezra’s Short Commentary on the Torah, see Itamar Kislev, “‘Exegesis in Perpetual Motion’: The Short Commentary of Ibn Ezra as a Source for Rashbam in His Commentary on the Pentateuch,” [Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 79 (2011): 413–438; “Does Rashbam’s Commentary on the Torah Acknowledge the Commentaries of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra?” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 61 (2010): 291–304. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Rashbam’s Commentary on the Torah, on Deut 22:6. See Elazar Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion: Studies in the Pentateuchal Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan, 2003), 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. It is worth noting that alongside cruelty, Rashbam emphasizes gluttony; see my treatment of this below. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. R. Yosef Bekhor Shor on Deut 14:21; see also his comment on Lev 22:28: “this is the virtue of compassion.” He adds that the goal of such humanitarian commandments is the education of the Jewish people, not the protection of animals: “It is not because the Holy One, blessed be He, extends compassion to the nest and the beast, but rather it is for Israel, that they not behave cruelly”; compare Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Berachot 5:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Nachmanides on Deut 14:21; Abravanel on Exod 13:19 (Bnei Arbael edition [Jerusalem, 1979], 217); see also, under the direct influence of Rashbam and Yosef Bekhor Shor, R. Yitzhak ben R. Yehudah Halevi, *Pa’aneach Raza*, on Deut 14:21 (p. 516); R. Akiva of Vienna, *Peshatim uBiurim*, on Deut 14:21 (p. 207); *Sefer haGan* on Exod 23:19 (p. 248) = R. Haim Paltiel to Exod 23:19 (p. 300). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Shmuel David Luzzato on Exod 23:19 (Tel Aviv, 1966), 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:48, Pines, 599. For an index of references in Maimonides’ writings to the prohibition of meat and milk, see *Moreh Nevukhim*, trans. Michael Schwartz, 634, no. 20 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See *Guide of the Perplexed* III:29, Pines, 514-522; for detailed studies, see *Moreh Nevukhim*, trans. Michael Schwartz, 521, note under the asterisk (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This connection between the verse and the pilgrimage to the Temple is known from other sources; compare especially Rashbam’s comment on Exod 23:19: “Since in the pilgrimage they would eat much cattle, the section describing the pilgrimages contains a warning not to cook and not to eat a kid in its mother’s milk” (see also  Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides’ Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu*, Leiden 2011, pp. 154, 165–166); as well as Ibn Ezra’s Long Commentary on the same verse: “The Torah mentions [the ban on meat and milk] with the bringing of the first fruits because at that time the kids would multiply and grow” (see also the Short Commentary on Exod 21:1); and also Nachmanides on Exod 34:26: “At the time of bringing the first fruits of the earth they would bring every firstborn of the cattle, the kids and the lambs; and at that time the kids would grow and the mothers’ milk would come in, and often they would bring up the mother with the firstborn, which was still nursing, so that it would not die.” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Avraham ben Moshe (Abraham Maimonides) on Exod 34:26 (Jerusalem, 1984), 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ovadia Sforno on Exod 23:19 and 34:26 and Deut 14:21 (Zeev Gottleib ed., Jerusalem, 1980), 183, 209, 333. See also, among others, Yitzhak Karo (1458-1535, exiled from Spain), *Sefer Toldot Yitzhak* (Warsaw, 1877), 85 (his notes to Exod 23:19). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Ha’amek Davar* on Exod 23:19 (Jerusalem, 2005), vo. 2, 450. This comment also appears in his explanation of Exod 34:26 and Deut 14:21 (vo. 2, 690 and vo. 5, 252); see also, among others, the comments of the Malbim to Exod 23:19 (392): “It was a custom of the idolaters to cook and eat meat and milk at harvest time, and the verse warns against this.” This tradition connecting the cooking of the kid in milk to the harvest also appears in the writings of an anonymous Karaite; see a summary of his comments in Menahem Haran, *The Bible and Its World: Selected Literary and Historical Studies* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2009), 434 n. 2, 447 n. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook addresses this very question; see *Ta’amei Mitzvot* (*Talelei Orot*), ???. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Joseph Kaspi on Exod 23:19, *Mishneh Kesef* (Isaac Last, ed.; Cracow, 1906), vo. 2, 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Abravanel on Exod 23:19; the author repeats the claim in his comments on Exod 34:26: “Because those nations, at the time of their harvests, would eat kids cooked in milk, as all herdsmen do unto this day when they gather in council […] so Scripture warned them” (Bnei Arbael edition [Jerusalem, 1979], 217-218, 348). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Haim Vital (Safed, 1542-1620) in the name of Isaac Luria, *Shaar haMitzvot* (Jerusalem, 2005), 16a. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Moshe David Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1958), 40; idem, *A Commentary of the Book of Exodus* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987), 212–213. This theory was first posed by Harold L. Ginsberg, “Notes on ‘The Birth of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods,’” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1935), 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Additional academic treatments of the Ugaritic composition “Song of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods” show that the reconstructions of the text by Ginsberg and Casutto are incorrect; for example, the line cited here does not include any reference to a kid and the narrative context will not even allow for their reading. See a conclusion and relevant bibliography in Haran, *The Bible*, 435–437; Labuschagne, “You Shall Not,” 12–13; and see most recently, Jonathan Yogev, “Epigraphic Means of Poetry Writing in the Ugaritic Tablets,” PhD. Dissertation, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2016, pp. 34–39. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Aviad Sar-Shalom Basilea, *Sefer Emunat Hakhamim*, chapter 10 (Johannesburg, 1859) 16b. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Shalom Rosenberg, “*Historiah Kan veAkhshav*,” *Makor Rishon, Mussaf Shabbat*, 30 March, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. On the ban on the consumption of blood, see among others Lev 7:26-27: “And you must not consume any blood, either of bird or of animal, in any of your settlements. Anyone who eats blood shall be cut off from his kin,” and Lev 17:12-14: “Therefore I say to the Israelite people: No person among you shall partake of blood, nor shall the stranger who resides among you partake of blood. And if any Israelite or any stranger who resides among them hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of all flesh—its blood is its life. Therefore I say to the Israelite people: You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off”; see also Gen 9:4; Lev 3:17, 19:26; I Sam 14:32-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. For a summary, see Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, “dām,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* III (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 234–250; Baruch J. Schwartz, *The Holiness Legislation: Studies in the Priestly Code* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes), 122–125; William K. Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2004), 1–12 ???. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Aristotle, *History of Animals* 7.3, 583a31 (Jonathan Barnes [ed.], *The Complete Works of Aristotle* [Princeton: Princeton University, 1984], vol. 1, pp. 913–914). See also Cooper, “Once Again,” 137–138. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Sifrei Devarim 76 (Eliezer Finkelstein, ed.), 142; Mekhilta, Masekhet deKaspa, Mishpatim 20 (Chaim Shaul Horowitz and Israel Avraham Rabin, eds.), 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Midrash Lekah Tov* on Exod 23:19 (Shlomo Buber, ed., Vilna, 1880), 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. R. Tuviyah’s claim that “the blood thickens and becomes milk” is known from various sources, including Rashi on TB Niddah 9a: “The blood thickens and becomes milk and when [the baby of the nursing mother] dies the blood returns to its previous place”; compare Tosefta Niddah 2:2 (Moshe Shmuel Zuckermandel, ed.) 642; TB Bekhorot 6b. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. R. Bachaye ben Asher on Exod 23:19 (Chaim Dov Chavel, ed. [Jerusalem, 1967], 242). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* III:48, Pines, 599. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Chaim Dov Chavel, ed. (Jerusalem, 1967), 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. SeeUriel Simon, and Josef Cohen, *R. Abraham Ibn Ezra:* *The Foundation of Reverence and the Secret of the Torah* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University, 2007), 9:a (163–164 n.). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Gersonides on Exod 23:19 (*Biur haParashah*). Several explanations in the same vein have appeared in the modern period; compare Daniel Balas, “*Mi amar shetzarikh lehamtin 6 shaot bein basar lehalav*?”, Hidabroot: Atar haYahadut haGadol baOlam, 2.03.2017 (hidabroot.org/article/2213) and the first response to that article on the same website (which compares the combination of meat and milk to that of vitamin B and iron): “The Creator, who knew His creation, was concerned to preserve the health of the body, that we not eat only to fill the belly but first of all to fill the chambers of the body with all the nourishment that the food contains.” [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Shalom Blau, “*Lamah asur le’ekhol basar vehalav? – yesh devarim she’asur le’arbev*,” https://he.chabad.org/library/article\_cdo/aid/4152867. The author refers (incorrectly) in a note to *Sefer haHinukh*, §62, 92; see the next note. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Sefer haHinukh* (Spain, 12th c.), §92, which contains a reference to §62 (discussing magic), where the author explains in detail the essential reason for forbidding the mixing of these fundamentally different elements: “one who combines two different categories of substance creates a third category, annulling whatever would have been gained from either” (Chaim Dov Chavel, ed. [Jerusalem, 1960], 113-115, 147-148). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Abravanel on Deut 14:21 (Bnei Arba’el edition [Jerusalem, 1979], 134). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Shlomo Ephraim of Luntschitz on Exod 23:19, *Kli Yakar* (Lublin, 1602) 69b; see in further detail Cooper, “Once Again,” 134-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Zohar, Mishpatim, 124b. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Zohar, Mishpatim, 125a. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Menachem Recanati on Exod 23:19 (Vilna 1545), 105a. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. On *basar* as including humans (and at times humans and beasts), compare Gen 6:12; 9:15; Joel 3:1, and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. “When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it” (Gen 37:23-24). TB Shabbat 22a interprets, “‘The pit was empty; there was no water in it’ – since it has already been said that ‘The pit was empty,’ do we not know that ‘there was no water in it’? Rather, Scripture means that ‘there was no water in it’ but there were serpents and scorpions in it.” [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. R. Abraham Saba, *Sefer Tzror haMor* (Warsaw, 1879), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Bachaye ben Asher on Exod 23:19, Chaim Dov Chavelle, ed. (Jerusalem, 1967), 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Elimelekh Weissbloom, *Sefer Noam Elimelekh* (Lvov, 1788), 46b. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Compare, especially, “In the time to come, when the evil inclination has been destroyed and the dead are resurrected […] the prohibition on meat and milk will be nullified” (Bachaye ben Asher on Exod 23:19, Chaim Dov Chavelle, ed. [Jerusalem, 1967], 243). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Louis Evan Grivetti, “Dietary Separation of Meat and Milk: A Cultural-Geographical Inquiry”, *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 9 (1980): 203–217; Kaj Århem, “Maasai Food Symbolism: The Cultural Connotations of Milk, Meat, and Blood in the Pastoral Maasai Diet”, *Anthropos* 84 (1989): 1–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating*, 46–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. See especially, Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1984), 42–58; Soler, *The Semiotics*; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 90–112. For a detailed survey of studies on food in the Bible and a discussion of the Neo-Structuralist approach, see Seth D. Kunin, *We Think What We Eat: Neo-Structuralist Analysis of Israelite Food Rules and Other Cultural and Textual Practices*, London 2004, esp. 29–103. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Rashbam on Exod 23:19; Deut 22:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. R. Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook, *Hazon haTzimhonut vehaShalom*, 11 ???. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. See the summary in Yael Shemesh, “Vegetarian Ideology in Talmudic Literature and Traditional Biblical Exegesis”, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 9 (2006): 141–166; also relevant is her study Idem, “Compassion for Animals in Midrashic Literature and Traditional Biblical Exegesis” [Hebrew], *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* 8 (2008): 677–699; on the fact that Kook did not abstain from eating meat in this world, see R. Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook, *Igrot haRa’ayah* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1965), 3, letter 802, p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating*, 52-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. “When the Temple stood, the altar atoned for man; now, a man’s table atones for him” (TB Hagigah 27a). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Herbert Chanan Brichto, “On Slaughter and Sacrifice, Blood and Atonement”, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 47 (1976): 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Gloria Anne London, “Why Milk and Meat Don’t Mix: A New Explanation for a Puzzling Kosher Law,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 34 (2008): 66–69. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Ben Zion Luria, “Do Not Boil a Kid in Its Mother’s Milk,” [Hebrew] *Beit Miqra* 38 (1992–1993): 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid., 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating*, 50–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. This includes R. Bachaye ben Asher, who lists a number of reasons for the prohibition but also acknowledges that “these reasons do not seem to suffice and they are not the essence of the reason for the commandments but are rather meant to turn away the questioner,” adding, “[our sages,] of blessed memory, said that in the future the Holy One, blessed be He, will reveal to Israel the reason why meat and milk are forbidden together” (Chaim Dov Chavel, ed. [Jerusalem, 1967], 243). [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. This conception is exceedingly widespread in the writings of the rationalists beginning with the ancient period; for example, “The world is the kin of order, and void and nothingness – of disorder,” and, while “there is no beauty in disorder,” order is like “the artist’s plan,” which is “precise, without deviation and without confusion,” and orderliness and beauty are evidence of the divine creation: “Such great beauty and order did not give birth to themselves, but rather were borne by some Maker who fashioned the world, and so there must be providence!” (Philo, *On the Creation of the World* ??; Idem, *On Reward and Punishment*, ??). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. David Damas, “The Copper Eskimo,” M. G. Bichieri (ed.), *Hunters and Gatherers Today: A Socioeconomic Study of Eleven Such Cultures in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Holt, 1972), 3–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. The citation is from 4 Macc, 5:8 (Abraham Kahana, ed., *Sefarim Hitzonim*, 267; David de Silva, 4 Macc, p. 16-17). It is notable that, as early as the Second Temple period, the pig had already come to symbolize profanation of the Torah (1 Macc 1:47; 2 Macc 6:18-7:42; cf. TB Sotah 49b); see, among others, Jordan D. Rosenblum, “‘Why Do You Refuse to Eat Pork?’: Jews, Food, and Identity in Roman Palestine,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010): 95–110. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. One possible example of a dietary restriction with marginal impact is the lettuce that, as found in some sources, is forbidden in the Yazidi religion, though it may only be forbidden among a certain segment of Yazidis (compare Ed Stourton, “Richness of Iraq’s Minority Religions Revealed,” BBC, 3.04.2010

[news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from\_our\_own\_correspondent/8598970.stm]); if this is true, then this restriction belongs to a separate category and should be compared to similar restrictions known from other religions that forbid distinct subgroups from eating foods (or specifically allow those foods), and therefore operates on a religious and social plane; this category includes the Biblical laws detailing the foods sanctified for eating only by the priests, though this discussion exceeds the current study. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. On the profound connection between food and identity and the role of dietary laws and customs in the formation of the rabbinic Jewish identity in contradistinction to its surroundings, see especially Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. As mentioned, Kraemer (*Jewish Eating*, 50-51) has already addressed the effectiveness of the prohibition of meat and milk in separating Jews from non-Jews and, prior to that, in separating between Jewish factions, and I see my claims as a further development of his discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)