

This is the gift that Roth gave in the above passage from *Portnoy's Complaint*. We are able to see the tensions and fault lines of depuration, disgust, desire, femininity, food, and fear that all join together in this workaday observance. These blood taboos serve to compromise between the two negative possible extremes: giving in to the chaos that desire contains *in potentia*, on the one hand; and the repressive stifling of the drives that make life vital on the other. The desires for meat and sex are dangerous; either desire can spill over into violence and rip a community apart. Yet, without some indulgence life is meagre and grey. Throughout the novel, Portnoy finds himself trapped in exactly this conflict between chaos and suppression, the Torah's solution of moderating life with blood and water denied to him (and even unconsidered) because of the modern casting off of religious ritual life.

In our distance from this blood-purging food ritual's commonplace recurrence, now that it is hidden from our eyes and made strange to us, we are doubly blessed. On the one hand, this act of purity and decontamination still resides in living memory. We can see it just barely out of grasp, perhaps ready for us to reclaim it. On the other hand, it has all but disappeared from the observed life of the contemporary Jew. And through its strangeness we see its roots in an older, broader domain—Scripture's apprehension of blood rooted in its association with unrestrained desire. Today we can witness it oozing life as it disappears from the hearths of the Jewish people in favor of the system of commercial and industrial kashrut. Let us pray that we are observant enough to mark its passing and decide how we should respond.

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ראה תשע"ט



Blood, Water, and Desire

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Only be sure that you do not eat the blood; for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the meat. (Deut. 12:23)

"And once I saw her menstrual blood . . . saw it shining darkly up at me from the worn linoleum in front of the kitchen sink . . . Also in this icon is an endless dripping of blood down through a drainboard into a dishpan. It is the blood she is draining from the meat so as to make it kosher and fit for consumption. Probably I am confusing things . . . but I see her standing at the sink salting the meat so as to rid it of its blood, when the attack of woman's troubles sends her, with a most alarming moan, rushing off to her bedroom. I was no more than four or five, and yet those two drops of blood that I beheld on the floor of her kitchen are visible to me still." (Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 42–43)

These days most observant Jewish women in North America do not soak and salt their own meat. What was once a common and familiar marker of Jewish kitchens, and a deeply gendered rite of passage for young Jewish women, has been professionalized and sequestered away from the eyes of most of those who cook and eat kosher meat. In the United States, the act itself is often performed by mostly non-Jewish workers under the supervision of Orthodox rabbis—a largely male caste. The sounds, sights, and smells of this "kashering" process as performed today would seem strange, unfamiliar, and perhaps even repulsive to most Jewish North American women. The remaining women whose mothers taught them this little ritual of water, blood, and salt, with its ramped wooden drainboard, are now mostly in their late sixties and early seventies. Within the next twenty or thirty years, for all practical purposes, its

existence as a rite commonly performed by women in Jewish kitchens may pass from living memory.

This shift in location from home to commercial setting has happened in my own lifetime. As recently as the 1970s, Rabbi Isaac Klein, the Conservative Movement's widely-accepted *posek* (adjudicator of Jewish law), wrote this piece of practical advice:

We would suggest that housewives who put meat into a deep freeze should, as a rule, kasher them first and then freeze them. In cases of emergency, however, and where the meat was accidentally not kashered, we permit the kashering of the meat after it was taken out of the deep freeze. (*A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, 353)

What is relevant for us is that the tradition of kashering meat at home was still robust enough at the time he was writing that a sufficiently abundant number of Jewish women would have been interested in whether they should kasher their meat before or after freezing. I think it unlikely that a contemporary rabbi would write such a passage for a popular Jewish audience. The question is simply not relevant to the lived day-to-day practice of observant Jews in the English-speaking world.

One of my earliest memories is of my mother beside the kitchen sink with raw meat laying before her on a slanted board, a small blue box of kosher salt on the counter. The memory is vague and foggy and yet strikingly immediate, tinged with the metallic scent of blood. There was a time when these miniature scenes of decontamination were common to the point that Jewish men and boys' imaginations of their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters were suffused with a ferrous crimson. Philip Roth was only able to use the iconography of salt, blood, kitchen, and mother so powerfully because of its familiarity to him and other Jewish men of his generation. In times and places other than our own, Jewish women wielded a curious power in the control they held over blood. Blood was threatening and dangerous, possessing a hazard. Women held the antidote in the form of two water-based rituals—kashering and *mikveh*. This decontamination had to occur before Jews could eat meat or make love.

JTS professor emerita Rabbi Judith Hauptman has argued compellingly that already in the time of the Mishnah women took power over the ritual

complex of *niddah* (menstrual impurity) by invoking stringencies or leniencies in matters of seeing menstrual blood. As she writes, "The rabbis seem to have sensed that in the area of *niddah* women had taken matters into their own hands" (*Rereading the Rabbis*, Ch. 7). These ancient rabbinic women controlled the reactivity of desire, either drowning it in blood, or rousing it with water.

Meat was also long linked with desire in rabbinic representation. Deuteronomy 12:20 reads:

When the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as He has promised you, and you say, "I am going to eat some meat," because you wish to eat meat, you may eat meat whenever you have the desire.

Sifrei Deuteronomy, an early work of Midrash, already contextualizes the dispensation for the eating of non-sacral meat in the quenching of desire.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says: Scripture comes only to teach you proper behavior. For a person should not eat meat unless they desire it. (*pis.* 75)

Most notably, Roth's association of kashering with the blood of menstruation is not coincidental. For a non-trivial amount of time, soaking and salting was an oral tradition among women, as with *niddah*, passed from mother to daughter. It also arose from a culture of blood taboo and purity—it was a practice that seemed normal, mundane, and unremarkable. It is only now when kashering has become a strange, alien, and unfamiliar thing that we have the possibility of seeing its full range of associations with clarity.

The term "*ostranenie*" (often translated as "defamiliarization" or "estrangement") was first coined in 1925 by the Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky in his essay "Art as Device." Shklovsky claimed that presenting audiences with common things in an unfamiliar or strange way (as art does) allows recovery and restoration—a fresh and renewed experience of quotidian events, circumstances, and entities. When a thing is common and familiar we tend to take it as a given and it escapes our attentiveness. Even matters possessing storied pasts and profound symbolic potency become hum-drum and disregarded. Framing them in new perceptual contexts grants us a new clarity of vision and rejuvenates our capacity to attend to them.