

What Diet Does God Prefer for People?

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The most basic line of demarcation in the realm of Halacha is the one between the permitted and the forbidden. Yet, in the realm of the permitted, we also find a further line between the accepted and the ideal. At this point, we do not simply ask what does God allow but what does God prefer.

Within this context, it is essential that we not only ask which foods God permits but that we also consider the diet that God prefers for us. The following arguments are submitted in furtherance of my view that God's preference for people is vegetarianism. My hope is that this presentation will start a respectful dialogue on this important issue.

Argument #1: People were originally vegetarian.

God's first dietary law was strictly vegetarian: "And God said: 'Behold I have given you every herb yielding seed which is upon the face of the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed - to you it shall be for food'" (Genesis 1:29). That God's first intention was that people should be vegetarians was stated by Jewish classical Biblical commentators, such as Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Nachmanides, and later scholars, such as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Moses Cassuto, and Nehama Leibowitz. It is significant that after giving these dietary laws, God saw everything that He had made and "behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31).

Argument #2: God's allowance to eat meat was only a concession.

What about God's permission, given to Noah and his descendants, to eat meat? According to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, first Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel and one of the outstanding Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, this permission was only a temporary concession to human weakness. He felt that God

who is merciful to all of His creatures would not institute an everlasting law which permits the killing of animals for food.

The Torah connects further the consumption of meat with uncontrolled lust (Deuteronomy 12:20), while vegetarian foods are looked on with favor:

For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks, of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness; thou shalt not lack anything in it... And thou shalt eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord thy God for the good land which He hath given thee. (Deuteronomy 8:7-10)

Rabbi Kook furthermore believed that the many laws and restrictions related to the preparation and consumption of meat (the laws of kashrut) supported this outlook. To Rabbi Kook, these regulations implied a reprimand and served as an elaborate apparatus designed to keep alive a sense of reverence for life, with the aim of eventually leading people away from their meat-eating habit. This idea is echoed by Torah commentator Solomon Refrain Lunchitz, author of K'lee Yakar:

What was the necessity for the entire procedure of ritual slaughter? For the sake of self discipline. It is far more appropriate for man not to eat meat; only if he has a strong desire for meat does the Torah permit it, and even this only after the trouble and inconvenience necessary to satisfy his desire. Perhaps because of the bother and annoyance of the whole procedure, he will be restrained from such a strong and uncontrollable desire for meat.

This argument is further supported by the belief of Rav Kook and Rabbi Joseph Albo that in the days of the Messiah, people will again be vegetarians. They base this on the prophecy of Isaiah:

And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,..

And the lion shall eat straw like the ox,..

And none shall hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain.

(Isaiah 11:6-9)

Argument #3: Manna was the preferred food in the desert.

According to Isaac Arama, author of "Akedat Yitzchak", God established another non-meat diet, manna, when the Israelites left Egypt. This would seem to further indicate God's preference for this diet. Manna is clearly described in the Torah as a vegetarian food, "like coriander seed" (Numbers 11:7). This diet furthermore kept the Israelites in good health for 40 years in the desert.

We should also note that when the Jewish people cried for flesh, God only reluctantly provided it (in the form of quails). A great plague subsequently broke out and many people died. The place where this occurred was named, "The Graves of Lust", perhaps an early warning of the negative health effects related to the consumption of meat.

These three primary arguments while presenting vegetarianism as an ideal still accept the fact that Jews do have the choice to eat meat. The following secondary arguments, outlining the effects of meat consumption on other mitzvah concerns, limit, I believe, this choice in our age.

Argument #4: Vegetarianism provides a healthier diet.

Judaism regards the preservation of health as a religious command of the highest importance. The Talmud teaches that Jews should be more particular about matters of health and life than ritual matters. If it could help save a life, one generally must (not may) violate the Sabbath, eat non-kosher foods, and even eat on Yom Kippur. The only laws that cannot be violated to preserve a life are those prohibiting murder, idolatry, and sexual immorality.

In view of these teachings, could God possibly want people to eat meat, when such diets have been strongly linked to heart attacks, strokes, various types of cancer, and other diseases? In this regard, it is interesting to note that Chapter 5 of Genesis tells of the very long lives of people in the generations of the vegetarian period from Adam to Noah.

Argument #5: Modern livestock agriculture is cruel to animals.

Judaism has many beautiful teachings concerning proper treatment of animals. Moses and King David were chosen for leadership, and Rebecca was deemed suitable to be a wife for Isaac, because they were kind to animals. Proverbs 12:10 teaches that "The righteous person considers the life of his beast." The psalmist states that, "The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His creatures" (Psalms 145:9). Concern for animals is even expressed in the Ten Commandments. Many Biblical laws command proper treatment of animals. Shechitah, Jewish ritual slaughter, insures that when animals are slaughtered for food, it is done in the swiftest and most painless way possible. Obviously, the argument that we must be concerned for animals can be used to argue directly against the killing of animals for meat. Yet, the very allowance of meat challenges such an extension. The modern treatment of livestock in preparation for slaughter, though, may be a further consideration. Animals are raised to ensure the highest return on investment, without sufficient consideration for their personal benefit. In view of the above stated arguments, would God favor the consumption of flesh when it involves raising animals under cruel conditions in crowded cells, where they are denied fresh air, exercise, and any emotional attachments?

Argument #6: Vegetarianism favors the environment.

Judaism teaches that the earth is the Lord's and that people are to be partners and co-workers with God in protecting the environment. The Talmudic sages indicated great concern about reducing pollution. While God was able to say, "It is very good" when the world was created, today the world faces many environmental threats. Thus, could God favor meat-centered diets which involve extensive soil depletion and erosion, air and water pollution related to the widespread production and use of pesticides, fertilizer, and other chemicals, and the destruction of tropical rain forests and other habitats?

Based on Deuteronomy 20:19, 20 which prohibits the destruction of fruit-bearing trees in time of warfare, the Talmudic sages also prohibited the waste or unnecessary destruction of all objects of potential benefit to people. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch stated that this prohibition (bal tashchit) is the first and most general call of God: We are to "regard things as God's property and use them with a sense of responsibility for wise human purposes. Destroy nothing! Waste nothing!" He also stated that destruction includes using more things (or things of greater value) than is necessary to obtain one's aim.

Hence, could God favor flesh-centered diets which require up to 20 times more land, ten times more energy and water, and far more pesticides, fertilizer, and other resources, than vegetarian diets?

Argument #7: The non-economical use of resources to support meat consumption yields many negative repercussions for humanity.

Helping the hungry is fundamental in Judaism. The Talmud states, "Providing charity weighs as heavily as all the other commandments of the Torah combined" (Baba Batra 9a). Farmers are to leave the gleanings of the harvest and the corners of the fields for the poor. On Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, while fasting and praying for a good year, Jews are told through the words of the Prophet Isaiah, that fasting and prayers are not enough; they must work to end oppression and "share thy bread with the hungry"(Isaiah 58:6-7)

Hence, could God possibly favor a diet that involves the feeding of over 70 percent of the grain grown in the U.S. to animals destined for slaughter while 20 million people die annually due to hunger and its effects? Could He support a diet that involves the importing of beef (the U.S. is one of the world's leading importers) from countries where people are starving, to satisfy the needs of fast-food restaurants? Using grain and similar resources to directly feed human beings rather than in the preparation of meat could greatly offset these negative effects.

While not a pacifist religion, Judaism mandates a special obligation to work for peace. While many commandments require a certain time and/or place for their

performance, Jews are to constantly "seek peace and pursue it" (Psalms 34:15). According to the Talmudic sages, God's name is peace, peace encompasses all blessings, and the first words of the Messiah will be a message of peace. While the Israelites did go forth to battle, they always yearned for the time when "nations shall beat their swords into plowshares...and not learn war any more. (Micah 4:3,4)" Since the sages taught that one of the roots of war is the lack of bread and other resources, could God support the notion of a diet that involves the wasteful use of land, water, energy, and other agricultural commodities, and thus perpetuates the widespread hunger and poverty that frequently leads to instability and war? The above arguments strongly indicate to me that vegetarianism is the diet most consistent with Jewish values and God's preferences. I invite the reader to further investigate these arguments and sources, including other explanations and understandings that would defend meat consumption as acceptable within the ideal diet for Jews. I believe that my position would still remain strong. I feel, however, that to complete my arguments, I should address some of the challenges to my assertion that the ideal diet for Jews is vegetarianism.

Counter-argument #1: Inconsistent with Judaism, vegetarianism elevates animals to a level equal to or greater than that of people.

Response: Concern for animals and the refusal to treat them brutally and slaughter them for food that is not necessary for proper nutrition and, indeed, is harmful to human health, does not mean that vegetarians regard animals as being equal to people. Also, as indicated, there are many reasons for being vegetarian other than animal rights, including concern for human health, ecological threats, and the plight of hungry people.

Because humans are capable of imagination, rationality, empathy, compassion, and moral choice, we should strive to end the unbelievably cruel conditions under which farm animals are currently raised. This is an issue of sensitivity, not an assertion of egalitarianism with the animal kingdom.

Counter-argument #2. Vegetarianism places greater priority on animal rights than on the many problems related to human welfare.

Response: Vegetarian diets are not beneficial only to animals. They also improve human health, help hungry people through better sharing of food and other resources, put less stress on endangered ecosystems, conserve valuable resources, and reduce the potential for war and violence. In view of the many global threats related to today's livestock agriculture, working to promote vegetarianism may be the most important action that one can take for global survival.

Counter-argument #3. By putting vegetarian values ahead of Jewish teachings, vegetarians are, in effect, creating a new religion, with values contrary to Jewish teachings.

Response: Jewish vegetarians are not placing so-called vegetarian values above Torah principles. They are saying that basic Jewish teachings that mandate that we treat animals with compassion, guard our health, share with hungry people, protect the environment, conserve resources, and seek peace, point to vegetarianism as the ideal G-d directed diet for Jews today. Rather than rejecting Torah values, Jewish vegetarians are challenging the Jewish community to apply Judaism's glorious teachings.

Counter-argument #4. Jews must eat meat on Shabbos and Yom Tov.

Response: According to the the Talmud (T. B. Pesachim 109a), since the destruction of the Temple, Jews are not required to eat meat in order to rejoice in sacred occasions. Recent scholarly articles by Rabbi Alfred Cohen and Rabbi J. David Bleich conclude that Jews do not have to eat meat in order to celebrate the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. The fact that several chief rabbis, including Shlomo Goren, late Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, and Sha'ar Yashuv Cohen, Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Haifa, have been or are strict vegetarians reinforces this argument.

Counter-argument #5. The Torah mandates that we eat korban Pesach and other korbanos (sacrifices).

Response: The great Jewish philosopher Maimonides believed that God permitted sacrifices as a concession to the common mode of worship in Biblical times. It was felt that had Moses not instituted the sacrifices, his mission would have failed and perhaps Judaism would have disappeared. The Jewish philosopher Abarbanel reinforced Maimonides' position by citing a midrash that indicated that the Israelites had become accustomed to sacrifices in Egypt, and thus G-d tolerated the sacrifices but commanded that they be offered only in one central sanctuary in order to wean the Jews from idolatrous practices.

Without the Temple, sacrifices are not required today. And, Rav Kook felt, based on the prophecy of Isaiah, that there will only be sacrifices involving vegetarian foods during the Messianic Period. There is a midrash that states: "in the Messianic era, all sacrifices will cease, except thanksgiving offerings (which could be non-animal) which will continue forever".

Even if sacrifices will be restored at that time, as many other Jewish sages believed, this should not prevent people from adopting a diet that has so many personal and societal benefits today.

Counter-argument #6. Jews have historically had many problems with some animal rights groups which have often opposed kosher shechita and advocated its abolishment.

Response: Jews should consider switching to vegetarianism not because of the views of animal rights groups, whether they are hostile to Judaism or not, but because it is the diet most consistent with Jewish values. It is the Torah, not animal rights groups, that indicate how far the treatment of animals is from fundamental Jewish values. The powerful Jewish teachings on proper treatment of animals was eloquently summarized by Samson Raphael Hirsch:

Here you are faced with God's teaching, which obliges you not only to refrain from inflicting unnecessary pain on any animal, but to help and, when you can, to lessen the pain whenever you see an animal suffering, even through no fault of yours.

It is essential that the Jewish community start to address the many moral issues related to our diets. This is an issue of importance for Torah and for the future of our endangered planet.

NOTES:

1. Commenting on Genesis 1:29 Rashi states: God did not permit Adam and Eve to kill a creature and eat its flesh. Only every green herb shall they all eat together." The Talmud T. B. Sanhedrin) states: Adam was not permitted meat for the purpose of eating." Also see Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Genesis* , Jerusalem, World Zionist Organization (3rd Edition), 1976, p. 77.

2. Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, Jerusalem, World Zionist Organization (3rd Edition), 1980, pp. 135-142.

3. Quoted in *The Commandments and Their Rationale*, Abraham Chill (New York, 1974) p. 400.

4. Rav Kook, Olat Rayah, Vol. 1, p. 292; Also see Rabbi Alfred Cohen, "Vegetarianism From a Jewish Perspective", *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, Vol.1, No. 2, Fall, 1981, p. 45.

5. Rabbi Elijah J. Schochet, *Animal Life in Jewish Tradition*, New York, K'tav, 1984, p. 290. In his book, *Masterplan - Judaism: Its Programs, Meanings, Goals* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academy Publications, 1991), Rabbi Aryeh Carmell, a contemporary Israeli Torah educator, stated: "It seems doubtful from all that has been said whether the Torah would sanction 'factory farming', which treats animals as machines, with apparent insensitivity to their natural needs and instincts. This is a matter for decision by halachic authorities." Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (d. 1985), the most influential Orthodox authority in the United States for many years, indicated in

- 1982 that it is forbidden for Jews to raise calves for veal under current intensive livestock agriculture conditions since it violates the prohibition of tsa'ar ba'alei chayim (causing unnecessary pain to animals). See Igrot Moshe, Even Haezer 4:92.
6. T. B. Chulin 9a; Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, c. 427, and Yoreh De'ah c. 116.
7. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesode HaTorah, chapter 5.
8. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1971, Volume 14, p. 1337.
9. T. B. Kiddushin 66b; T. B. Baba Batra 158b; T. J. Kiddushin 4:12; T. J. Baba Batra 2:8,9.
10. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld, translator (London: Soncino Press, 1962), Vol.2, p. 282.
11. Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, *Sanction in Judaism for Peace, World Religions and World Peace*, Homer A. Jack, editor (Boston: Beacon, 1968).
12. Rabbi Alfred Cohen, "Vegetarianism From a Jewish Perspective", *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, Vol.1, No. 2, Fall, 1981.
13. Tradition, Summer, 1987.
14. Moreh Nebuchim 3:32.
15. Rabbi J. H. Hertz, The Pentateuch and Haftorahs (London: Soncino Press, 1958), p. 562.
16. Ibid.
17. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld, translator (London: Soncino Press, 1962), Vol.2, p. 292.
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