

JUDAISM ON MEAT-EATING

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In the developed countries, people are becoming increasingly aware of their diets. Our food choices are no longer driven simply by the preferences in taste. Many of us now concern ourselves with the effect food may have on our health and even on the health of our planet. The issue of consumption of meat, particularly, with its proven harmful effect on human health and environment has gained the most attention.

As a person who thought about health and ethical consequences of today's meat-based diets and as a Jew, I wanted to learn more about Jewish dietary laws and their underlying reasons; and, specifically, what the Scriptures say about meat-eating and treatment of animals.

Traditionally, Western Jews have eaten as much meat as the non-Jews, with consumption of meat increasing in proportion to the growing prosperity. Most of the modern day Jews live on a predominantly meat-based diet. A Jewish celebration (*simcha*) usually consists of some of these traditional animal-based foods, like brisket, gefilte fish, chicken soup, or chopped liver.

Ancient Hebrews ate meat, but sources tell us that meat was eaten sparingly and was not affordable by everyone. As an agrarian society, biblical Jews used animals mainly for labor and, according to Elijah Judah Schochet's "Animal Life in Jewish Tradition," "slaughter of animals for food had been uncommon." The main foods were vegetarian in nature, as well as milk (particularly, goat's and sheep's milk) and milk products. The eating of meat has been interpreted as luxury ("when the Lord thy God shall enlarge thy borders") (*Deuteronomy 12:20*) and was usually reserved for special occasions or was only affordable by the rich.

It comes as a surprise to some that the first Jewish dietary laws laid out in Genesis (the first of the five books of the Torah) allowed only vegetarian foods. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve subsisted on vegetarian foods:

"And God said: 'Behold, I have given you every herb-yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree that has seed-yielding fruit – to you it shall be for food.'" *Genesis 1:29*.

Between the time of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden and the time of Noah, humanity had disgraced itself: the earth became "corrupt ... and filled with violence" (*Genesis 6:11*). "And God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth." (*Genesis 6:12*). After the flood, God explicitly allowed Noah and his family to eat meat:

"Every moving thing that lives shall be for you; as the green herb have I given you all." *Genesis 9:3*.

When Israelites were in the wilderness, God gave the Israelites manna, a plant-based food to eat. In the desert, Israelites were permitted to slaughter and eat animals only as part of the sacrificial services. When the Israelites cried out for meat (*Numbers 11:4*), God did provide meat in the form of quail, but became angry and sent plague in which many Israelites died (*Numbers 11:4-33*). Only after entering the land of Israel, God permitted people to eat meat even if it was not slaughtered for sacrificial purposes:

“When the Lord your God shall enlarge your border as He has promised you, and you shall say: ‘I will eat flesh,’ because your soul desires to eat flesh; you may eat flesh after all the desire of your soul.” *Deuteronomy 12:20*.

Although the Torah allows consumption of meat, it sets strict rules (known as Jewish dietary laws or laws of kashrut). The dietary laws include:

1. a prohibition against mixing meat and milk (“You shall not seethe a kid in its mother’s milk” (*Exodus 23:19, 34:26, Deuteronomy 14:21*));
2. a prohibition against the consumption of blood (“Only flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall you not eat.” *Genesis 9:4*. “You shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh; for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof.” *Leviticus 17:14*);
3. a list of permitted mammals, fish and fowl; a prohibition against eating certain animals;
4. the ritual slaughter (*shechitah*) of animals for food: “Then shall you slaughter of your herd and of your flock.” (*Deuteronomy 12:21*).

The mandate of “not boil[ing] a kid in its mother’s milk” is an extension of command against cruelty to animals. Also, according to some authorities, because it was a pagan form of hospitality and pagan form of worship of the time to offer meat boiled in milk, the Jews thus separated their practices from those of the pagan people.

The rationale for the prohibition against consuming blood has been given that blood is the life itself and is rightly belongs to God (“blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh.” (*Deut. 12:23*)). Modern rabbi Samuel Dresner explains in “The Jewish Dietary Law”: “The removal of blood which kashrut teaches is one the most powerful means of making us constantly aware of the concession and compromise which the whole act of eating meat, in reality, is. And it teaches us reverence for life.”

Only certain animals are allowed for consumption, and forbidden foods are listed in Leviticus (11) and Deuteronomy (14:3-20). According to Elijah Schochet “Animal Life in Jewish Tradition”: “Only quadrupeds which chewed their cud and had parted hoofs, such as the cow, sheep, goat, gazelle, and hart, were fit for food, these being by and large the herbivorous ruminants. Animals possessing only one of the two required characteristics, however, such as camel, rockbadger, and pig, were forbidden, as of course, were animals which neither had split hoofs nor chewed their cud. Animals which died of natural causes were prohibited, as were those torn by wild beasts. Only fish possessing both fins and scales were permitted, while the majority of insects were forbidden. All land creatures that crawled on their bellies or moved on many feet were prohibited. Numerous birds were outlawed, notably predatory fowl and wild waterfowl.”

Although not described in the Bible (it is addressed by Talmudic rabbis), ritual slaughter (*shechitah*) is one of the central elements of *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws). The laws of *shechitah*, arguably, provide the most humane method of slaughtering animals. An animal's throat is cut with a single, swift, uninterrupted horizontal sweep of a perfectly smooth knife in such a way as to sever the trachea, esophagus, carotid arteries, and jugular vein. The instant and profuse loss of blood is supposed to render the animal unconscious in a very short time thus minimizing the pain.

Jewish dietary laws apply only to animals foods. All fruits, vegetables, unprocessed grains, and anything that does not contain meat or milk products is kosher. The koshering process (the process by which meat becomes fit for consumption) involves a many-step complex practice of removing all blood from the flesh. Thus, the butcher removes veins, sacs and various membranes that collect blood, and then soaks, salts, and rinses the meat to further extract the remaining blood. By these complex regulations, Jews have tried to obey the Torah's proscription on consumption of blood.

There are no reasons given in the Bible for the prohibitions or requirements of the dietary laws. Scholars have proposed many theories ranging from hygienic to moralistic and nationalistic, i.e.: many of the forbidden animals are injurious to health, aesthetically repulsive, or that the rules simply reminded Jews of their status of holy people, etc. The Scripture simply states that these laws are to be obeyed in order that Israel should be "a holy people unto the Lord," and "distinguished from other nations by the avoidance of unclean and abominable things that defile them." Exodus 22:30, Deut. 14:3-21, Lev. 11:43, 20-24.

Judaism prohibits causing needless suffering to animals and mandates their humane treatment - concept known as "*tsa'ar ba'alei chayim*" (literally, "pain of living beings"). Compassion towards animals is drawn from the following verses of the Torah:

The verse: "wherefore have you smitten your ass?" (*Numbers 22:32*) – Talmud interprets to treat animals humanely.

From Deuteronomy' chapters on day-to-day treatment of domestic animals:
"You shall not muzzle the ox when he threshes out the corn." *Deuteronomy 25:4*;
"You shall not plow with an ox and ass together." *Deut. 22:10*;

A person should not eat before first providing for his animals: "And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be satisfied." (God provides food for the cattle before people, so people should imitate God.);

Animals as well as people should be allowed to rest on Sabbath (*Exodus 20:8-10*)
The Fourth Commandment designates the Sabbath as a day of rest for man and his work animals alike;

It is forbidden to sacrifice a newborn ox, sheep or goat until it has had at least 7 days of warmth and nourishment from mother (*Leviticus 22:27*);

And whether it be ox or ewe, you shall not kill the animal and her young both in one day (Leviticus 22:28);

We are forbidden to take the mother bird and her young together (*Deut. 22:6-7*);

We should not boil a kid in the milk of his mother (*Exodus 23:19, 34:26, Deut. 14:21*);

Animals should not be allowed discomfort of heavy burden. *Exodus 23:5*.

Any deliberate impairment of the reproductive organs of fauna was forbidden.

Rabbis strongly disapproved of hunting as a sport. Jewish people do not hunt animals for sport.

The Hebrew Scriptures describe humans and animals as having the same essence: “*nephesh*” (translated as “soul” in *King James’s* version of the Bible and “being” for humans and “creature” for animals in *Revised Standard* version). Rabbi J.H. Hertz wrote that man and animal differ in the capacity for reason, but the capacity for feeling “exists not only in men but in most living things.” 13th century Jewish commentator Nachmanides advocated the kinship between all sentient beings: “Living creatures possess a soul and a certain spiritual superiority which in this respect make them similar to those who possess intellect and they have the power of affecting their own welfare and their own food, and they flee from pain and death.”

Rabbi Abraham Kook, based on the prophecy of Isaiah predicted that people will be vegetarians again in the time of the Messiah. Just as at the beginning of the time there was no eating of meat, in the messianic era as described by the prophet Isaiah, there will be a return to the original state. Both Isaiah and Hosea depict the messianic era in the figurative language of a new Garden of Eden wherein all animals will coexist peacefully:

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them... and the lion shall eat straw like the ox... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters over the sea.” *Isaiah 11:6-7, 9*.

Many Jewish vegetarians believe that it would be more consistent with the Jewish religious tradition to adhere to a vegetarian diet. Vegetarianism seems to be the logical extension of the prohibition of the Jewish dietary laws. No pain would be inflicted on an animal if it is not slaughtered, and no procedure for removing the blood from the product will be necessary because vegetarians do not consume blood.

Advocates of Jewish vegetarianism believe that Judaism teaches that humans are partners with God in preserving the world, sharing food with the hungry, and preserving our health. Thus, turning to vegetarianism will help alleviate multitude of problems in

today's world, such as world hunger, depleting resources, and myriad deadly diseases caused by animal-based diet.