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Summer Sermon Series

In Parshat Balak, the prophet Balaam refers to the Israelites as, “a people who dwells apart.” A people who dwells apart? Yes! In fact, the Jewish nation stands alone in many ways as compared to other nations.

It is safe to say that the Jews are one of the most involved and engaged peoples. We’ve had a tremendous impact on the world. The Torah gives us a code to live by in which we apply ethics, empathy, and mindfulness to how we live our daily lives. I am truly proud to be a member of this tribe that stands alone in so many ways. But I am also disappointed in our Jewish leadership for not confronting a real and severe problem happening right now in our kosher meat industry, a situation that goes against the very tenets of ethics, empathy, and mindfulness.

Don’t worry – I’m not about to preach the virtues of vegetarianism. I love meat and so do my husband and children. But I always took for granted the fact that our kosher meat was produced in accordance with the rules of shechita, the method by which an animal is slaughtered with a single stroke of the knife so as to cause less suffering. The Talmud has rules against tzaar baalei chayim, the suffering of animals. Our religious law mandates kindness to animals, prohibits abuse and obligates animal owners to be concerned with their well-being. Another pat on the back for the Jewish people – pass me the brisket! Unfortunately, however, the kosher meat industry has tied itself up with the factory farming industry and consequently, all of our Talmudic values have gone out the window.

Factory farming is a grotesque practice in which large corporations run farms that try to maximize output by minimizing cost at the expense of the animals. Without going into too many of the horrific details, I’ll just say that in the process thousands of animals are crammed into windowless sheds, crates, and wire cages and suffer abuse, pain, and cruelty from the day they are born until the day they are loaded onto the trucks that take them to the slaughterhouse.

I’ll never be able to erase the images I’ve seen online that expose the inhumanity that is factory farming. Not only because it’s heart-wrenching to witness abuse to any living

creature, but also because I know that this is happening with the kosher meat I'm eating. Some of you may remember an incident in 2008 when PETA, using hidden cameras, exposed the horrific abuse of the cattle at Agriprocessors, one of the largest kosher slaughterhouses in the U.S. This specific story ends well in the sense that the CEO, Sholom Rubashkin, was sentenced to 27 years in prison on 86 counts of bank fraud, mail fraud, and money laundering. But although Sholom Rubashkin's cruel operation was shut down, the problem persists. Agriprocessors was simply a slaughterhouse, the endpoint for the animals that are raised and fed at industrial farms. And factory farming is an entire industry that nobody will be shutting down anytime soon.

The magnitude of suffering that occurs on factory farms, in my opinion, no longer makes this meat kosher – even if it is being slaughtered appropriately by a shochet. This is because the Jewish people have very clear guidelines that are the touchstone of Jewish living on how to treat Hashem's creatures: "Just as he is merciful, so shall you be merciful."

Several commandments demonstrate concern for the physical and psychological suffering of animals:

- We may not plow a field using animals of different species because this would be a hardship to the animals (Deut. 22:10).
- We are required to relieve an animal of its burden, even if we do not like its owner, do not know its owner, or even if it is ownerless (Deut. 22:4).
- We are not permitted to kill an animal in the same day as its young (Lev. 22:28).
- We are specifically commanded to send away a mother bird when taking the eggs because of the psychological distress this would cause the animal (Deut 22:6-7). In fact, the Torah promises that a person who sends away the mother bird will be rewarded with long life, precisely the same reward that is given for honoring one's mother and father (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16) and for observing the whole Torah (Deut. 4:40)

Furthermore, under Jewish law, animals have some of the same rights as humans. Animals rest on Shabbat, as humans do (Ex. 20:10). And we are forbidden to muzzle an ox to prevent it from eating while it is working in the field (Deut. 25:4), just as we must allow human workers to eat from the produce they are harvesting (Deut. 3:25-26).

All of these laws should prevent us from having to worry about the animals that become our kosher meat. But knowing what I know, I feel duped, I feel lied to, I feel sad. We are supposed to be able to trust our fellow Jews to do the right thing when they are depended upon. We depend on kosher slaughterhouses to not only slaughter the animals halachically, but to make sure the animals are being raised halachically before they purchase them. We depend on corporations such as Agriprocessors because, as a society, we are so far removed from our food system. We don't have a local West Bloomfield meat farm with a community shochet. We don't grow the majority of our own food. We weren't even aware until recently, and some of you not until today, about factory farming.

As Americans, we depend on the government to make laws for our food system that will keep us safe. They have allowed factory farming to become the new norm. However, as Jewish people, we have the Torah as a back-up system to protect us when the government fails. But we have been deceived. The meat we are consuming goes against the very laws of the Torah which tell us how to treat animals. Is the meat we are eating actually kosher? And if not, what are we supposed to do about it? Do we turn a blind eye because it is too daunting a task and too inconvenient to get involved?

The good news is that the solution to the problem is more achievable than we realize. There are already several Jewish organizations working on bettering our food system. One that is specifically addressing the issue of factory farming is Grow and Behold Foods, a purveyor of kosher, pasture-raised meats that are raised on small family farms. Their producers adhere to the strictest standards of animal welfare, worker treatment, and sustainable agriculture. The problem is that they are one of just a few. They are not local in Michigan and shipping the meat is expensive. More importantly, most Jewish people across the U.S. have not heard of them, nor do they know why it is important to purchase meat from companies like them.

But if our Jewish leadership unifies on this issue and prioritizes humane kosher food, things could change. The American Jewish community would become aware. We might begin to support more companies like Grow and Behold Foods. Jewish Federations could start allocating funds to supporting humane farms or towards subsidizing the cost for people in their community. Our dollars would then become our voting voices. More farms would become humane and thus would begin a chain of change.

Implementing change is one of the Jewish community's greatest strengths. Just look at how we have contributed to science, medicine, literature, music, philosophy... Surely, we can ban together to influence agriculture and fix a problem that impacts not only us, but all Americans who consume meat. By making this issue a priority in our community

and by influencing our Jewish leadership across the country, we can continue to say that the Jewish nation is a nation that stands alone. We can be “The Group” that brings ethics, empathy, and mindfulness to America’s farming industry.