

# Vegetarianism

## Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Noach*, God gives, for the first time, permission to eat meat:

כָּל־רֶמֶשׂ אֲשֶׁר הוּא־חַי לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ כִּי־רַק לְעֹשֶׁב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל  
Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat. As with the green grasses,  
I give you all these. [Gen. 9:3]

Restriction: Meat must not come from a living animal:

אֶדְ-בַּשָּׂר בְּנֶפֶשׁוֹ דָּמוֹ לֹא תֹאכְלוּ  
You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it. [Gen. 9:4]

Eating animals was not allowed before. God told Adam and Eve:

נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל־עֵשֶׂב | זֶרַע זֹרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ  
פְּרִיעֵץ זֶרַע זֹרַע לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ  
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. [Gen.1:29]

Even the animals were vegetarian:

And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to every  
thing that creeps upon the earth, where there is life, I have given every  
green herb for food. And it was so. [Gen. 1:30]

On Noah's Ark, predators lived in peace with herbivores, since they  
all survived the Flood. Noah could not have fed them meat.

## Evidence of desire for meat

-In the desert, after Exodus, people not satisfied with manna. They  
wanted meat. God reluctantly gives it to them and loses it:

The Israelites wept and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember  
the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt... Now our gullets are shriveled.  
There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!" ... The Lord  
was very angry, and Moses was distressed. ... [God told him:] Say to the  
people: ... tomorrow you shall eat meat, for you have kept whining before  
the Lord... The Lord will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall eat

[meat] not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and it nauseates you. [Num. 11:4-6,10,18-20]

-The Sages say: *En simchah ella be-bassar ve-yayin* -- There is no rejoicing except with meat and wine. The Rambam states:

On the ... holidays, a person is obligated to be happy and in good spirits ... Children should be given roasted seeds, nuts, and sweets. One should buy women pretty clothes and jewelry according to one's means. Men should eat meat and drink wine, for there is no rejoicing without meat and wine. (שְׂמֵחִין שְׂמֵחָה אֵלָּא בְּבֶשֶׂר וְיַיִן שְׂמֵחָה אֵלָּא בְּיָיִן) [Hilchot Yom Tov 6:17-18]

-Some rabbis in the Talmud argued that the above quotes from Genesis did not technically prohibit meat to Adam. [Sanhedrin 59b]

## Why did God allow eating meat?

It is strange because there was only one couple from each species right after the flood. There was a need to preserve them, at least for a while.

**-Desire.** People wanted meat.

**-Survival.** After the Flood there were no plants left for the survivors to eat, so they had to eat meat. Once allowed, the leniency became permanent. [Abravanel]

**-Reward.** It's a reward to people for rescuing the animals. Ramban:  
When all flesh became corrupt and [God] decreed they would die in the flood, Noah saved some animals for the preservation of the species.  
Therefore, God gave man permission to slaughter and eat animals.  
[Ramban on Gen.1:29]

This means that people acquired greater rights over animals by virtue of having rescued them from annihilation, kept them alive, and extracting a guarantee from God that God would never again destroy life on earth.

**-Need for violence.** Before the Flood, the earth was "filled with violence" [Gen. 6:13] and God had to "reboot" it. God concluded that people needed violence, and so He lowered His standards. He allowed people to kill animals, so hopefully they won't kill human

beings, created in God's image. But the killing must have a practical, useful purpose – food, worship, use of skin and bones, etc.

But later, God's laws of kashrut greatly limited people's permission to eat meat: Only certain animals, only after they are properly slaughtered, no blood, no hard fat, no carrion, no mixing with dairy, etc. In particular, we can't eat animals that eat other animals. The Kli Yakar (16<sup>th</sup>-century Prague) said:

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... Perhaps because of the bother and annoyance of the whole procedure, he will be restrained from such a strong and uncontrollable desire for meat. [Quoted in Abraham Chill, *The Commandments and Their Rationale*, 1974, p 400]

So eating meat was another concession to human frailties to get the Jews to accept Torah – until such time as they will no longer want to do it (as happened with slavery, polygamy, death penalty, sacrifices, captive woman, sotah, etc.)

**-Superiority of man over beast.** Before the flood people believed humans and animals were on the same level, and so believed they, too, were not responsible for their actions. After the flood, allowing people to eat meat made them realize they were on a higher level than animals, and must be more responsible. [Rabbi Joseph Albo (15<sup>th</sup>-century Spain), *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* 3:15; Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, first Chief Rabbi of Israel, on Gen. 9:3]

-Rabbi Albo: Cain offered grain, while Abel offered animals [Genesis 4], because Cain believed animals were equal to humans and so he had no right to kill them for offering. When he saw that God accepted Abel's animals, he concluded he could also kill Abel.

**-Higher spirituality.** Animals were not far from humans before the Flood. Ramban:

[Living creatures possess] moving souls that have some stature. They resemble [human,] intelligent souls and they can affect their own welfare, seek their food and flee from pain and death. As it says in Ecclesiastes:

Who knows whether the spirit of man really goes upward, and the spirit of the beast really goes downward to the earth? [Eccl. 3:21]

But the “new” humanity was more spiritual than the “old”, which increased its distance from animals. Higher life-forms are elevated when they eat lower life-forms. [Akedat Yitzchak (15th-century Spain) 41:1]

The Talmud says that only scholars should eat meat:

It was taught in a baraita that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said ... Anyone who engages in Torah study is permitted to eat the meat of animals and fowl,

and anyone who does not engage in Torah study is prohibited to eat the meat of animals or fowl. [Pesachim 49b].

Eating meat is only appropriate when expected to result in an elevation.

-But could this elevation not have occurred before the Flood?

## Arguments against vegetarianism

It is not necessary to be a vegetarian because:

-God said we may eat meat.

-The patriarchs had no qualms about eating meat:

-Abraham fed his three guests meat [Gen. 18:7]. The Sages tell us that he even slaughtered three calves in their honor when one would have been enough. [Bava Metzia 86b]

-Isaac asked Esau to go hunt and bring him meat, before giving him his blessing. [Gen. 27:3]. His wife Rebecca promptly cooked two kids. [Gen. 27:9]

-Isaac slaughtered animals to make a feast for his friends. [Gen. 31:54]

-Joseph served meat to his brothers. [Gen. 43:16]

Why didn't they have qualms?

-Eating meat was the norm at the time of the Talmud.

-Vowing not to eat meat is a form of self-affliction. [Ketubot 71a]

-First recorded case of *mishloah manot* (gifts of food on Purim) is a gift of meat: Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi sent Rabbi Oshaya wine and a leg of calf. [Megillah 7a]

-A good way in which to honor your parents is to buy them pheasant meat. [Kiddushin 31a]

Why was it the norm?

-The human anatomy suggests an omnivorous diet.

-Could it have evolved from a herbivore anatomy?

-It is claimed that shechitah does not inflict pain to the animals.

-Respect for the dignity of the animals is paramount in Judaism.

Indeed, one must not:

-Cause them pain [Bava Metzia 32b];

-Let them suffer or overburden them, even if they belong to an enemy [Ex. 23:5];

-Eat before they are fed [Berachot 40a];

-Make them work on Shabbat [Exodus 20:10];

- Harness two species together (unfair to the weaker one) [Deut. 22:10];
- Hunt them for sport [Avodah Zarah 18b];
- Take young birds before sending away the mother bird [Deut. 22:7];
- Kill a cow and her calf on the same day [Leviticus 22:28];
- Eat any part of them while they are still alive [Genesis 9:4].

#### Story in Talmud:

Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi]... suffered of kidney stones and scurvy for 13 years... [His sufferings] came to him through a certain incident... A calf was being taken to the slaughter. It broke away, hid his head under the rabbi's skirts and wailed [in terror]. He said [to the calf], "Go, you were created for this." Thereupon they said [in Heaven], "Since he has no pity, let us bring suffering upon him." [Bava Metzia 85a]

- It may bring us back to the notion that animals are equivalent to human beings.
  - Are plants next in line, after we have learned to manufacture food from its constituent molecules?
  - The Arizal, 16<sup>th</sup>-century mystic, asks whether we even have the right to eat plants. Is your blood redder than the purposeful existence of a tomato? It is not. Swallowing the meaningful life of any of God's living creations, even a vegetable, is not fair.
    - Does that mean we should eat as little as possible? Only things that die of their own accord? Dead fruit that fall off trees?
    - Are plants sentient? Do they feel pain or experience anything? (No brain or nervous system.)

### Arguments in favor of vegetarianism

- God made all creatures vegetarian in Genesis, and declared the world "very good". So vegetarianism must be the ideal.
- God did not *mandate* eating meat.
  - Except in connection with sacrifices and the paschal lamb. They require the Temple, which we don't have today. Note that sacrifices forced people to watch with their own eyes the slaughter of the animals and the preparation of the meat. Was that mandated to turn them off?
- God's promise of abundant food in the Promised Land mentions only plants, not meat; planting, not slaughtering:

-The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, fig-trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey; a land where you will eat bread without scarceness, where you will lack nothing. [Deut. 8:7-9]

-I will give you the rain for your land in its due season, the early rain and the late rain, that you may gather in your corn, and your wine, and your oil. [Deut. 11:14]

-Food-specific blessings are recited only before eating plants. In hierarchical order: Bread (*motzi*), wine (*ha-gafen*), grains (*mezonot*), fruits (*ha-etz*), and vegetables (*ha-adamah*). All other foods, including meat, get a general blessing (*shehakol*). This implies a preference for plants as food.

-The blessing after meals (*Birkat Hamazon*) is recited *only* if the meal includes bread (at least an olive-sized piece – a *kezayit*). If meat, or anything else, a much shorter blessing is recited: *Bore Nefashot*:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא נִפְשוֹת רַבּוֹת וְחֹסְרוֹנָן עַל כָּל מַה שֶּׁבְּרָאתָ  
לְהַחְיֹת בָּהֶם נֶפֶשׁ כָּל חַי בָּרוּךְ חַי הָעוֹלָמִים

*Baruch attah Hashem Elokenu melech haolam bore nefashot rabbot v'chesronan al kol ma she'barata l'hachayot bahem nefesh kol chai. Baruch chei ha'olamim.*

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Creator of numerous living beings and their needs, for all the things You have created with which to sustain the soul of every living being.  
Blessed is He who is the Life of the worlds.

-Eating meat should be an exception, not a habit. The Talmud says:

The Sages taught in a baraita that when the Torah says:

When the Lord expands your boundary... and you have the urge to eat meat, you may eat meat whenever you wish. [Deut. 12:20]

[it means] that a person should consume meat only when he has a craving for it... One should not accustom his children to eat meat and drink wine.

[Chullin 84a]

The Midrash adds:

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says: The Torah teaches us *derech erez* (proper behavior): One should eat flesh only out of desire. [Sifrei Devarim 75:5]

-You are what you eat:

-Rabbi Albo: Killing animals is a “cruel and furious act”, which makes one absorb these bad traits, coarsens the heart and deadens its spiritual sensitivity. [15<sup>th</sup>-century Rabbi Yosef Albo, Sefer ha-Ikkarim]

-Ramban: The birds and mammals forbidden by the Torah are predators; the kosher animals are not. We are commanded not to eat those animals that have a cruel nature, so that we should not absorb these qualities into ourselves. [Nachmanides]

-Lurianic Kabbalah: Living things lower on the food chain are at a higher level, and therefore propel us higher.

-Before the Flood, people lived long:

Adam 930 years; Seth 912; Enosh 905; Kenan 910 years; Methuselah 969.

After the flood, much shorter life spans:

Abraham 175, Sarah 127, Joseph 110, Moses 120.

Result of vegetarian diet? Rambam lightly suggests it:

About the length of man's life in those days [before the Flood], I say that only the persons named lived so long, while other people enjoyed the ordinary length of life. The men named were exceptions, either in consequence of different causes, such as their food or mode of living; or by way of miracles, which admits of no analogy. [Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed 2:47]

Many studies: A vegetarian diet adds a few years to life.

-But is the diet the cause of the longevity?

-If fewer plant-eating animals were raised for slaughter, there would be *a lot* more plants available to feed the starving poor.

-Today, meat is a luxury. People *can* survive on a vegetarian diet. Meat substitutes are being created (the “Impossible Burger”).

-People have free will: They can *choose* whether to harm, kill, or inflict pain on man or beast. Carnivorous animals can't. Did animals retaliate to God's allowance of meat with some of them becoming carnivores?

-The prophecy of Isaiah implies that vegetarianism is the future:

And the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together...

And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the vipers' den. [Isaiah 11:6-8]

Rav Kook (strong advocate of vegetarianism): In the days of the Messiah, we will no longer eat meat.

## **Conclusion**

Vegetarianism is allowed in Judaism, as a matter of personal preference. Few authorities encourage it, though, and many reserve it for a future time only. There are arguments for and against it. The argument that we have no moral right to kill animals is not deemed Jewishly acceptable.

Is vegetarianism part of the Jewish mission of “*tikkun olam*”, to “repair the world”?

Shabbat shalom.