Vegetarianism From A Jewish Perspective

By Rabbi Alfred S. Cohen

"Animals should be seen but not hurt" was the message on the red T-shirt worn by Marcia Pearson, a fashion co-ordinator from Seattle. "For professional athletes, a vegetarian diet can't be beat" was the message of Peter Burwash, a top-ranking tennis player from Canada. Sporting a variety of banners and mouthing numerous slogans, hundreds of vegetarians convened for the fourth annual congress of the North American Vegetarian Society.

The Vegetarian Society is not just another conglomeration of assorted oddballs. As the New York Times reported, there are well over 10 million vegetarians in this country. New York alone is supporting 35 vegetarian restaurants for about 100,000 strict vegetarians, and there are perhaps half a million who are part-time vegetarians. As one said, "There is more glamour and respectability now to vegetarianism, and we love it."[1]

The vegetarian phenomenon is rapidly winning adherents all over the world. Where once a non-meat-eater might be viewed as an anomaly, or possibly be suspected of following some exotic

1. Aug. 2, 1978.

Rabbi, Young Israel of Canarsie; Faculty Member, Yeshiva University High School, Boys

Eastern cult, vegetarianism today scarcely merits a raised eyebrow. Not only is it an increasingly familiar phenomenon, but more and more we also find vegetarians putting meat-eaters on the defensive.

A surprising gamut of motives brings individuals to renounce meat and adhere to a diet which is far removed from the American ideal of "a chicken in very pot" or "meat and potatoes" as the typical dinner. The motives include health-consciousness, figure-consciousness, belief in macro-biotics, fear of pollution, and moral, even religious reasons. As with so many other social and ideological movements which sweep American society, Jewish people, particularly young people, are caught up in the wave of enthusiasm. There are many, many Jewish vegetarians, and more than a few are quite Orthodox in the full sense of the word. It therefore becomes a subject of considerable interest to investigate vegetarianism vis-a-vis Judaism and to determine if there is anything in Judaism which might oppose the practice of vegetarianism; conversely, can we find within Judaism positive reinforcement for this way of life?

A cursory appraisal of two thousand years of Jewish literature reveals that our Sages and thinkers have often considered the ethics of meat-eating, and their conclusions have been varied. The Gemara censures Rabbi Judah the Prince for his apparent callousness towards an animal, and more than a thousand year later, Rabbi Moshe Isserless (Ramo) displayed a heightened sensitivity to making a blessing on garments made from animal hides. More recently, the Baal HaTanya had a surprising argument for applauding the consumption of meat, while Chief Rabbi of Israel, Avraham Isaac Kook, shrank from that practice.

It is our intent herein to examine the many references to meat-eating found in our halacha and other religious writings, so that we may arrive at an understanding of how this concept fits in with traditional Jewish teachings. Additionally, and perhaps most important of all, we shall examine the reasons why people adopt a vegetarian regimen, and see if there is anything in these philosophies which is antagonistic to the Jewish *Weltanschauung*.

Vegetarianism and The Sabbath

The suggestion that refraining from eating meat might in any way be contrary to Jewish law may at first seem absurd. However, there are in fact certain times when the Jew is *bidden* to eat meat. The question therefore becomes, how to interpret these halachic indicators — as imperatives or possibly only as permissives. In other words, does it say "Thou shalt eat meat" or maybe only "Thou may"?

The weekly Shabbat is a prime example of how vegetarianism might be proscribed by Jewish law, for there is a particular mitzva of *Oneg Shabbat*, pleasure of the Sabbath. Rambam describes the mitzva: "Eating meat and drinking wine on Shabbat are considered *Oneg Shabbat.*"[2] Since it is clear that a person must celebrate the Sabbath with food and drink — specifically meat and wine — can a vegetarian fulfill the halachic requirements of this mitzva?

Clarifying the mitzva of *Oneg Shabbat*, the Shulchan Aruch goes so far as to note that it is forbidden to fast on the Sabbath,[3] with some saying that this stricture derives from the Torah itself[4]. However, the Shulchan Aruch questions whether a person who feels pain due to eating must in fact eat heartily on Shabbat. For him, the pleasure is in *not* eating rather than in indulging. If that be the case, the Shulchan Aruch determines that such a person does not have to eat much on the Sabbath.

In the Shulchan Aruch, Rabbi Yosef Karo further probes the ruling that one should eat on Shabbat as part of the mitzva of *Oneg Shabbat:*

> A person who fasts each day, and would have pain from eating during the Sabbath day, since it would be a change in his normal eating schedule — there are those who say that they have observed several pious persons and men of deeds, who used to

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2. הלכות שבת פרק ל — הלכה י.
3. אורח חיים רפ"ח ס' א.
4. תשובות הרשב"א תרי"ד.

> fast on the Sabbath for just that reason, and they say that this is what Rabbi Judah the Hasid used to do...[5]

If it is even permissible to *fast* on the Sabbath under these circumstances, certainly it would be permissible to abstain from eating meat if there is an aversion to it. Further substantiation for this can be found in the commentary of Rabbenu Yonah on the Talmud. In discussing the laws of a mourner, the Gemara teaches that one whose close relative has died but has not yet been buried, (called an *Onen)* may not eat meat or drink wine. However, on the Sabbath the *Onen* eats meat and drinks wine. On this teaching, the Rabbenu Yonah writes: he is *permitted* to eat meat and drink wine, if he so wishes, but he is not obligated, for an *Onen* has to observe all the mitzvot of Shabbat, and eating meat and drinking wine are not mitzvot of Shabbat...[6]

Later authorities also accept this view.[7] Thus, there seems to be little halachic controversy concerning vegetarianism and the Sabbath. If a person is more confortable not eating meat, there would be no obligation for him to do so on the Sabbath.

YomTov

The application of the halacha of vegetarianism with respect to YomTov is somewhat more complex than that regarding Shabbat. Whereas we have shown that on Shabbat one is not obligated to eat meat if he derives no pleasure from it, that is not sufficient reason to excuse one from eating meat on YomTov.

On Shabbat, the Jew is bidden to enjoy *Oneg Shabbat;* however, on YomTov the Torah specifically indicates *"vesamachta bechagecha"*, "you shall rejoice on your Festivals." Consequently, the Rambam wrote:

> A person is obligated to rejoice and be of good

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5. Ibid.
6. רבנו יונה מועד קטן.
7. דרכי משה, יורה דעה שמ"א.

> spirit during the Festival, he, his wife and children, and all those who are with him ... How is this done? He gives sweets and nuts to the children ... and the adults eat meat and drink wine ... and there is no *simcha* (joy) *except with meat and wine.*[8]

Following the Rambam's view, therefore, we would have to state unequivocally that an observant Jew must eat *some* meat during the Festivals. However, not all halachic authorities accept the Rambam's explanation. The Beit Yoseph, as a matter of fact, cites a Talmudic text which specifically counters the Rambam. He writes:

> "Our Rabbis taught that a person is obligated to bring joy to his wife and children and members of his household during the Festival. He rejoices with wine ... Rabbi Judah ben Betairah says, in the days when the Temple was in existence, there was no rejoicing without meat ... but now that there is no longer the Temple, there is no rejoicing without *wine...*"[9]

Following the original text in the Talmud, therefore, the Beit Yoseph rejects the reading of the Rambam. In his authoritative Code of Jewish Law (Shulchan Aruch), he omits any mention of the obligation to eat meat on a Festival, as a factor of the mitzva of "*simcha.*" Bringing the halacha up to date in our own time, the Chafetz Chaim briefly notes that while the Beit Yoseph does in fact reject the opinion, other halachic authorities try to bridge the gap between them.[10] Rabbi Joel Sirkes (the Bach) agreeing that the

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8. טור אורח חיים תקכ"ט.
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10. אורח חיים תקכ"ט. A study of the first Mishna in Nedarim 66 shows that the Rambam once again maintained that one is obligated to eat meat on Saturday and Holidays — whereas the other commentaries including the Shulchan Aruch only saw fasting as being forbidden.

    It would be interesting to ascertain how the Rambam reconciled his opinion with the talmudic text *Hullin* 11B where it is stated that one is obligated to eat meat on one Holiday only — namely Passover — when one is obligated to partake of the Paschal Lamb.

    See also Rambam פרק ג הלכות דעות.

requirement "to rejoice" is fulfilled by drinking wine alone, nevertheless maintains that someone who also eats meat in rejoicing on the Festival has fulfilled a positive mitzva of the Torah.

A further support for the view that eating meat is not necessarily a mitzva on YomTov may be derived from a different source in the Talmud. In Bava Bathra 60b, the Gemara records that after the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, the Sages were so overcome by the enormity of the disaster which had befallen the Jewish people, that they contemplated forbidding people from getting married or eating meat, as a sign of mourning for the Destruction. (For a number of reasons, these ordinances were not later enacted). Studying this text, the Tosafot ask a simple question — how could the Sages consider forbidding people from getting married, when it is a mitzva in the Torah? The answer to that question need not concern us here; however, from the mere fact that Tosafot *does not ask the same question* concerning the prospective prohibition upon eating meat, we may clearly infer that eating meat, even on a Festival, is not mandated by the halacha.[11]

In summing up this point, it is only proper to note that while in truth the Shulchan Aruch, which is the foundation for normative law for Jews today, does not insist upon the necessity to eat meat as *simchat YomTov* — nevertheless, there are many equally illustrious halachic authorities who maintain that it is certainly desirable, even if not strictly required, and that it is a mitzva to mark the joy of the Jewish Festivals with special meat and drink. In that sense, vegetarianism would be antagonistic to the *spirit* of Jewish thought on YomTov, even if not to the actual letter of the law.

Moral Considerations

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of the Messiah, "the effect of knowledge will spread
animals ... and sacrifices in the Temple will consist of v
and it will be pleasing to G-d as in days of old..."[13] The in
is that if there will be no animal sacrifice in the Temple, t
will be no animal slaughter whatsoever.

Our Rabbis teach that consumption of meat was no
the original Divine plan at the world's creation. After th
of Heaven and Earth and all living creatures, the A
instructed Man as to his proper relationship with th
Creation: (Genesis 1:29) "Behold I have given to
vegetations ... for food." Since there was a bond interr
living things, life was sacred, and Man was not permitte
life, even for his own sustenance.[14] Ramban explains this
"because creatures which possess a moving soul have
superiority and in this respect are somewhat similar to t
possess intellect (Man), and they have the power of affec
welfare and their food and they flee from pain and death
is a measure of kinship between man and beast, and acc
the original design of the world, the beast was to serve
mankind, but not to be his food.

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vegetarian. Those vegetarians who look to Rav Kook as a mentor
relying on a false rumor.

13. עולת ראיה חלק א P. 292.

14. See תו"ס סנהדרין נו: which is of the opinion that Adam was in fa
to consume meat; Adam was only forbidden to kill the animal — if
however died by itself, then the meat was permitted.

15. בראשית פ' נח.

Now while it is true that the above sources certainly accord with vegetarian claims, it is simply not accurate to base Jewish thought only on the experiences of Adam. There is the entire Torah which has to be considered, and what emerges from that presents a somewhat different picture. A few chapters after the Creation account, the Torah records a major upheaval of the original world-society, in the Deluge wherein all that had been was wiped away. The post-Diluvian world had different standards. Speaking to Noah after he emerged from the Ark, G-d specifically

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l not become something negligible; man still had to
respect for the dignity of the animal's life. That
applies to all mankind. As for the Jewish people, the
lded many more restrictions upon them, further
ways of eating meat.
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of the relationship between the animal and human
diminution of the spirituality which was in each:

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16. Ibid.
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> sense had risen to a point of demanding justice for animals. "The first man had not been allowed to eat meat" (Sanhedrin 59b) ... But when humanity, in the course of its development suffered a setback and was unable to bear the great light of its illumination (i.e. the Flood) ... it was withdrawn from the fellowship with other creatures ... The long road of development, after man's fall, also needs physical exertion, which will at times require a meat diet, which is a tax for passage to a more enlightened epoch, from which animals are not exempt.[18]

If a person tends toward vegetarianism because he sees it as a lifestyle consonant with the way the All-Mighty really wanted the world to be, there can be no denying that he has a valid point of view. However, to claim that the Torah and Talmud share with vegetarianism an abhorrence to animal slaughter as a cruel and inhumane act, is simply false. A truer understanding of Jewish law and tradition would indicate that many Rabbis viewed the Torah's license to eat meat as a necessary dispensation, a reluctant permission as it were, not as an indication that eating meat was a desirable pursuit. On the other hand, it is quite wrong to view this reluctance as arising out of a feeling that slaughter is cruel. The reasoning is quite different. Let us proceed to examine it.

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A talmudic passage often cited in support for the vegetarian contention that Judaism disapproves of eating meat is found in Bava Metzia 85a: Rabbi Judah the Prince was a great Rabbi and supreme teacher, who compiled the Mishna, the basis of the Talmud and the fundamental redaction of the Oral Law. For many years of his life, Rabbi Judah suffered from a variety of intestinal problems which caused him great pain. What had this sainted scholar done to merit so much pain in his life? The Gemara found the answer in an episode where Rabbi Judah was walking in the

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18. תעלה אורות.

marketplace, and suddenly a calf that was being led to the slaughter fled its keepers and ran to hide behind him. However, Rabbi Judah pulled the calf out from its shelter behind his legs and returned it to the slaughterers, admonishing the calf, "Go, for you were created for this purpose." For this callous lack of pity for the animal who was afraid of dying, Rabbi Judah was punished with years of pain.[19]

However, it would be fallacious to interpret this text as indicating that Rabbi Judah was at fault because he condoned the slaughter of an animal. In fact, many Talmudic commentaries are puzzled by the story — after all, what did Rabbi Judah do wrong? Was he not correct in telling the animal to go willingly to its end, for in truth it exists for the benefit of man? The Geonim, however, indicate that while his conclusions cannot be faulted, his *attitude* was lacking in compassion. Here was an animal who had fled to him personally for help — his failure to be moved by its distress bordered on hardness of heart, unbefitting a person suffused with so much Torah knowledge. In a similar vein, the Maharshah notes that the text tells us it was a *calf* being led to its slaughter, not a mature animal. It is one thing to see a mature animal, which has lived a number of years, being taken to slaughter to provide meat for men to eat. It is quite another thing for a tender young calf, who has not even had time to taste of life's joys, to be summarily taken to the slaughter. No, he was not "created for this purpose."[20] Thus, Rabbi Judah erred in lacking pity for the young animal which ran to him for safety.

Let us not misread this episode as an indictment of those who eat meat, for it is not that. On the other hand, it is an excellent illustration of the high level of thoughtfulness for all living creatures which Judaism expects from its adherents.

Elsewhere the Talmud discusses the consumption of animal

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19. His suffering continued for many years, until by an act of great kindness to a cat, Rabbi Judah evidenced that he had attained a higher level of compassion.
20. בבא מציעא פה.

flesh in the light of the Torah's permission to eat it:

> The Torah teaches one the proper way to act: That a person should not eat meat except in certain circumstances ... he should only eat it with appetite. One might think that he should go out to the marketplace to buy meat — but the Torah writes "from your flocks" (i.e. not to go out and seek it and spend extra money for it, but only if it is available from your flocks). The Torah says 'you may slaughter from your flock and from your herds' — this teaches us that *some* of the animals may be slaughtered, but he should not slaughter *all* of them.[21] Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah learned from this that there is a proper proportion of a man's flocks which might be slaughtered, so that only occasionally would a person use his animals for food, and not on a regular basis.

Furthermore, the Hida, writing on this passage, notes: Our Rabbis taught us proper behavior, that a person should not eat meat excpet in certain circumstances, which means that if he does not have a strong and healthy constitution, then he may take money to buy meat.[22] Furthermore, the Maharshal writes that Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Nachman taught that one should eat meat for the strengthening of his body and ought not to hurt his body through excessive abstentions; however, he should not do it only for pleasure.

In Bina Bamikra we find a beautifully sensitive citation from Sefer HaChasidim: "And that which the Torah permitted the eating of meat to those who study Torah and observe the mitzva of Tfillin, it is because the Torah and the Tfillin are formed from the hide and the sinews of the animals, and after we have used parts of the animal in order to fulfill the needs of the mitzva, therefore we

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21. חולין פד.

22. חיים שאל סימן מ' אות ו'.

may find therein justification for using the rest of the animal for the eating of flesh.[23]

The Torah bids us "Be holy" (Leviticus 19:2), and our Rabbis have found many ways to understand this mitzva. Perhaps the most famous lesson was taught by the Ramban: "Be holy by abstaining from those things which are permitted to you ... For those who drink wine and eat meat all the time are considered 'scoundrels with a Torah license'."[24] Again we find reinforcement for the view that albeit the Torah permitted the eating of animal flesh, this was always understood within the teachings of Jewish tradition as permission for occasional indulgence, but certainly not as something to be sought after.

We may therefore conclude that when a vegetarian is loath to eat meat because he does not want to take an animal's life merely for his own pleasure, that person is acting well within the spirit of Jeish belief and philosophy. He is not denigrating a Torah value, for the Torah does not establish the eating of meat as a desirable activity, only as something which is not forbidden to do. Moreover, the less meat eaten, the better, and one who indulges himself by eating meat too often is "disgusting", though he be within the technical limits of the Torah.

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Let us now give serious attention to other considerations which are factors for those who opt to become vegetarians, some of which stem from what might be termed "spiritual worldviews". An exponent of such ideas, writing in *Vegetarian Times* (March/April 1978) declares:

> "In Buddhism the first precept is "not to kill but to cherish life." To eat the flesh of animals, then, is to encourage their slaughter, to be an accessory after the fact of their killing. How can anyone who professes to abhor violence and the suffering it causes

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23. בינה במקרא P. 203.
24. רמב"ן פ' קדושים.

> inflict them on others — in this case animals — either by directly destroying them through so-called sport or hunting, or indirectly sanctioning their killing by buying their flesh and consuming it? We pride ourselves on being beyond the low level of morality of "might is right," which is universally condemned, yet we condone it every time we put into our bellies the flesh of helpless animals — animals that for the most part have served us and have every right to life as we on this planet."

Obviously, Judaism shares this aversion to animal suffering, for the admonition to have respect for the sensitivities even of animals is a basic tenet of our faith, having its origin in the Torah; as our Rabbis teach, the prohibition of causing pain to a living creature derives *"d'oraitha"*, from the Torah itself, and not only from Rabbinic decree. Furthermore, the Torah which forbids destroying a fruit tree even in war time, would never sanction the sheer *waste* (not to speak of the barbarism) of hunting animals simply for the "sport". Commenting on hunting as a sport, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, the world-famous Nodah BiYehudah, wrote, "I am amazed at the very concept ... we never find such a thing in the Torah other than Nimrod or Esau (both hunters, both infamously wicked), and this is not the way of the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."[25]

Concern for animal life is a hallmark of Jewish thinking, evident in any number of legal dicta in many areas. For example, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Ramo) notes that although it is a mitzva to make a blessing when putting on a new garment for the first time, to thank G-d for his bounty, there are those who refrain from reciting the blessing if the garment or shoes are made out of leather, for the verse says "G-d's mercy it upon all his creatures."[26] Although the Ramo notes that this is not a conclusive argument

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25. נודע ביהודה יורה דעה שאלה י.
26. אורח חיים רכ"ג.

for omitting the blessing (since the animal might have been dead anyway, and not been killed for that purpose), yet he stresses that there are many[27] who will not recite the blessing in such an instance. Ramo seems to approve of the rationale, for "how can a Jewish person kill, with his own hands, a living thing without any purpose and only for beauty or plesaure"?[28]

In embodying the concept of compassion for all living things into actual practice, I do not think there is anywhere a legal or religious system which can compare to the Torah's teachings. According to the Torah, it is forbidden for a person to slaughter an adult animal and its offspring on the same day — it would be just too cruel to wipe out two generations at one time; although the Torah permits taking animal life when it is needed for the benefit of man — yet man may not do this with viciousness. And even if the *animal* cannot be aware that its calf will die on the same day — yet *the Jew* must not allow himself to become callous about spilling blood.

> And therefore the essence of the prohibition is not in not killing that animal and its offspring on one day ... but rather ... the most important is that we should not become cruel...[29]

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Some vegetarians espouse their cause as being the only humane way to act, maintaining that slaughter of an animal is necessarily painful to the creature, and thus always cruel. In *Vegetarian Times* (March/April 1978) we find:

> According to research involving hypnotism even the fast death of decapitation causes pain that lasts for some time after the killing. Years ago at an

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27. In some editions the word "many" is not found.
28. Ibid.
29. רמב"ן דברים כ"ב פסוק ו.

> execution in Paris a hypnotist had his subject experience the pain of the condemned man; reportedly it went on for a long time after the head rolled, just as a chicken runs about for some time when her head has been cut off. Similarly, alligators which are dead to all appearances are cut open and their hearts are still beating; fish which have been cleaned of all internal organs are known to snap at those who pass too close. The implications are that immense suffering goes on in the nervous systems of animals not only before the slaughter and during it, but also afterwards.

I do not see why we have to accept these "implications" as truth, nor act upon them. The fact that animal muscle tissue moves even after the head is severed is simply the automatic reaction of the nerve endings. There is no reason to assume that "immense suffering" is taking place, when the animal is already dead; whatever movement there is, is just that — automatic movement, and not the expression of pain.

Nevertheless, Jewish law is extremely careful to assure that even a momentary pain which might ensue at the instant of slaughter, be reduced as far as possible.

> "The regulations of slaughter, in special prescriptions, to reduce the pain of the animal registers a reminder that we are not dealing with things outside the law, they are not automatons devoid of life, but with living things."[30]

All the laws of Shechita stress the absolute necessity of severing the trachea and esophagus so rapidly that the animal can have no awareness; the slaughter is as painless as it is possible to make it. That is why shechita requires severing the jugular "for this is where most of the blood will come out, and also since the prohibition of causing pain to an animal is proscribed by the

30. עורות "Loc Cit".

Torah; and therefore also the knife may not have any nicks, lest it cause any pain to the animal."[31]

In trying to clarify what the Jewish point of view is on the question of a vegetarian way of life, we have to understand that there is a distinction between supporting a certain point of view and making that point of view the cornerstone of our moral code. In every mitzva, in countless teachings, the Jew is taught to have compassion for all living things — yet that compassion does not override other values which are also fundamental to Judaism.

For all the 613 commandments of the Torah, there is no mention of any reward. The only exceptions are honoring one's parents — and the mitzva of "sending the mother bird from the nest." Certainly this must be one of the most unusual precepts of any religious code:

> If you chance upon a bird's nest on the road, in a tree or on the ground, and there are fledglings or eggs, and the mother is roosting on the fledglings or on the eggs — do not take the mother together with her children. You shall surely send away the mother, and you may take the fledglings for yourself; so that it may be good for you and you will have long life. (Deut. 22:6-7)

What is the reason for this commandment, which apparently ranks in importance with the command to honor one's father and mother, which is one of the Ten Commandments? The Gemara debates the question: one view is that just as G-d has pity upon his creatures, so, too, must man emulate Him. Send away the mother bird so that she will not suffer the pain of seeing her chicks taken away from her. There are those who disagree, saying that it is not possible to assert that this is the primary purpose for the command to send away the mother bird. However, even the latter group agrees that while compassion for the bird might not be the *primary*

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31. פרי מגדים end of Preface to the Laws of Slaughtering.

consideration for the mitzva, it is undoubtedly one of the reasons why we were so commanded.

Compassion for an animal's pain is an important aspect of the Divine commandments; yet it is not the overriding feature of the mitzva. As the Rambam wrote, "If someone cries out in prayer — O, You Who had pity on the mother bird and commanded us not to take the fledglings while the mother is watching; O, You Who forbade us to slaughter an animal and its calf on one day; O, G-d, have mercy on us in the same way" — then, we *silence that person*, because these commandments are simply the decree of the Torah, and are not commanded to us out of pity for the animals, since if it were out of compassion for the animal, the Torah would *not have allowed us to slaughter the animal at all.*"[32]

It would be intellectually dishonest to maintain that Judaism shares with vegetarianism an abhorrence to eating the flesh of animals. We have to treat animals humanely, but as Rambam points out, compassion for animals cannot be the most important aspect of our mitzvot, for were that truly so, we would not be permitted to slaughter them at all. What we are in fact commanded to do is to reduce to the barest possible minimum any measure of pain which may be necessary to inflict upon them.

Nevertheless, a person who feels an emotional or intellectual distaste for the concept of killing an animal in order to satisfy one's appetite, will find support in the writings of our great Rabbis.

Rabbi Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, approved of many vegetarian attitudes. One time he was asked to comment upon a recommendation to split the two functions involved in animal slaughter between two separate people — the checking of the knife, inspection of the lungs and liver for disease would be carried out by a Rabbi learned in this field, while the actual physical slaughter would be carried out by a G-d fearing person. Although this is not generally accepted in the world, nevertheless it is proper that this kind of work be performed by those people who have not yet reached the level of refined sensitivity. And learned people, men of ethics, knowledge, and religion, they are fit to be supervisors of the technicalities, so that killing the animals should not become barbaric."[33]

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Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, the towering [illegible] who founded the major Hasidic movement

In summation, I think our investigation well demonstrates that Judaism is a religion which places great emphasis on justice and compassion for all G-d's creatures. The Torah and all our teachings forbid the causation of the slightest unnecessary pain to anyone or to any thing, and include many strict regulations to assure that the slaughter of animals will be carried out in this spirit. And as Judaism seeks at all times to reduce our involvement with the physical and turn our hearts to spiritual pursuits, it recommends reducing the frequency of eating meat. On the other hand, animal sacrifice and consumption of animal flesh are at times mandated by halacha, and we cannot therefore find these activities morally unjust. If we had the wisdom to perceive the mystical unity of all Creation as expressed in the Torah's teachings, in the way Reb Shneur Zalman did, we would appreciate the beauty and compassion of the mitzvot.

In a subjective aside, I wish to concur with the comment of the *Vegetarian Times* (Nov./Dec. 1977, p. 38) that "although many feel that the vegetarian diet is more spiritually oriented than one containing meat, a vegetarian is not necessarily more spiritual or involved than his or her meat-eating neighbor." How painfully true! Let me direct the reader's attention to an ancient Rabbinic dictum: "He who takes pity on the cruel, ends up being cruel to those who ought to be pitied." Vegetarian ideologues who spout allegedly superior moral sensitivities often lack consistency in their ethical beliefs. Unfortunately, there are too many people today who are very much concerned with animal welfare, but who are not in the slightest bit moved by the lack of proper children's shelters, or at the thought of thousands of fetuses aborted annually. Is their pity for life not somewhat misplaced? The Psalmist praises G-d, "for His compassion is upon *all* His creatures." Someone who finds himself committed to a vegetarian regimen out of moral considerations ought to carry that super-sensitive moral refinement into all areas of human activity, and not confine it to the animal kingdom. If he can do that, then he is truly an admirable and ethical human being; otherwise, should we not label him a hypocrite?

Health Motives

Thousands of people become vegetarians for reasons which have nothing to do with the supposed immorality of taking animal life. On a far more pragmatic level, they renounce meat out of a conviction that meat offered on the market today is irretrievably contaminated with chemicals and additives, and that cattle are raised in such a way that meat is an odious, potentially dangerous food to eat. Some of the proof tendered to support this contention paints a truly gruesome picture of the meat-producing business in America, enough to make the most confirmed meat-and-potatoes man blanch at the thought of what he is consuming:

> The life expectancy of a steer, once two to four years, is now eighteen months. A steer is born. The moment he is dry from the womb, he is taken from his mother. The cattleman places him on a "Calf starter ration" consisting of milk powder, synthetic vitamins, minerals, and antibiotics — because suckling temporarily reduces the amount of salable milk produced by the mother. Just 25 pounds of calf food replaces the 225 pounds of milk he would normally drink. The drug-spiked food also reduces the calf's natural desire for activity, thus reducing his need for more energy-sustaining food.
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> When the steer arrives at the commercial feedlot, he is forced off the boxcar and through a tank filled with pesticides that cleanses him of worms and flies. He is then confined in a pen continuously lit to encourage him to feed around the clock. Several times a day, his trough is refilled with a feed mixture computer-blended that morning. In addition to starchy, high-protein grains, these ingredients may include urea carbohydrate mixtures and artifical roughage such as ground-up newspaper mixed with molasses, tasteless plastic pellets, feathers, or treated wood mixtures. In fairness, we must state that this is

not a common practice, though it does exist.

Sometimes, the force-feeding of a steer will create a painful liver abscess which can slow his rate of weight gain. But this is no longer a problem for feedlot owners; cattle with abscessed livers are simply treated with 75 milligrams daily of the antibiotic oxytetracycline. During his marathon feeding our steer gains upwards of three pounds of muscle and fat a day.

By now, our steer more resembles a test tube than an animal, but his chemical diet isn't quite complete. He is sprayed and dusted with pesticides from time to time, and he eats the insecticide with his feed. It passes through his digestive system and is eliminated in his manure, where it serves the purpose of keeping flies from breeding. Charcoal may be added to dairy feeds to absorb the pesticide, preventing their excretion into the milk.

After four months of ingesting the equivalent of three huge dinners a day, the steer weighs about 1200 pounds, almost enough for slaughter. During the last three to five days, he is fed a booster of 1,000 milligrams of oxytetracycline or chlortetracycline a day, and given one last shot of streptomycin for the road to the slaughter house.

Meat packers used to hang beef in a refrigerated room for fourteen to twenty-one days to tenderize it. But this lengthy process took up warehouse space, and caused both meat and profits to shrink. Now meat is tenderized on the hoof or dipped in a solution of enzymes prior to freezing.

McClure also describes how meat managers use sodium sulfite, a powerful chemical illegally used to hold the color in meats, to change the color of rotten meat from green to red. Treated ground meats like chuck, round, sirloin, and sausage are especially

> dangerous because the chemical is mixed throughout to completely disguise the rotten odor and color.
>
> The increase of environmental contaminants and the rise of cancer has made scientists more concerned with the investigation of long-range toxins — substances which are toxic over a long period of time. The damage from some of these toxins may not show up for twenty or thiry years, while others may wreak havoc after a year or two. The F.D.A., more concerned about substances that can cause immediate damage in humans or in laboratory animals, is shortsighted about the restriction of chemicals that may be long-term toxins.[35]

If the nauseating depictions of the vegetarians are indeed true and the meat we are ingesting is as dangerous to our health as they claim, it may well be that Jewish law would require us to cease consuming this dangerous substance.

It is well known that Jewish law places the highest priority upon the preservation of life; virtually every mitzva of the Torah can be ignored, if that will save a life. Eating on Yom Kippur, driving on the Sabbath — almost anything is permitted in order to preserve life.[36] What is possibly less well-known is the corollary to that principle of the supreme importance of human life — namely, that one is forbidden to take any action which can put one's life in danger, whether immediately or over a long term.[37] The Talmud warned that it is forbidden to drink from water that was left uncovered, since it might have been poisoned by a snake. Even if it is doubtful whether the snake actually deposited its venom in the water, one must refrain from taking a chance and drinking it.[38]

Similarly, Rabbinic law forbids drinking directly from a

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35. New Vegetarian P. 72.
36. יומא פב.
37. עבודה זרה ל: — בבא קמא קטו:.
38. יורה דעה קט"ז ס"ק ה — חולין ט:.

stream of water, lest he swallow a dangerous insect. Even if others had drunk from the stream before him, without harm, he could not take a chance. Our Rabbis further decreed it a violation of a religious precept to walk near an unsteady wall or enter a ruined building, due to the danger of collapse.

Following the many precedents prescribed in the Code of Jewish Law, we would have little difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that, if indeed eating meat is injurious to one's health, it is not only permissible but possibly even mandatory[39] that we reduce our ingestion of an unhealthful product to the minimum level.

Kashruth

A uniquely Jewish reason for becoming a vegetarian is the motivation to follow the laws of kashruth properly. Volumes upon volumes of Jewish Law books detail the myriad requirements involved in observing the kashruth laws. Not only are there minute regulations for the slaughter and preparation of the animal, but there are also many laws forbidding the combination in any way of meat and milk, or the dishes used therefor, or the utensils, etc., etc. A person who avoids eating meat, avoids many of the problems involved in its preparation. Interestingly enough, there is a clear historical precedent for such a course of action:

The Midrash tells us that it is customary for Jews to eat foods prepared with milk on Shavuot, because on the first Shavuot in the

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39. However, it would be mistaken to conclude that the Jewish law would forbid people from eating these foods altogether. Based on the Talmudic dictum "Shomer Petaim Hashem", "G-d watches over simpletons," our Rabbis have come to the conclusion that, although an act should actually be forbidden because it poses a danger to the individual — yet, if many people do engage in it, we can rely on the fact that the All-Mighty watches over those people, who are not wise enough to watch out for their own welfare. *Nidah* 31a, *Yevamot* 72A and *Shabbat* 129B. Also see *Trumat Hadeshen* #211.

In our own generation, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein has written that one could not forbid smoking, although smoking may pose a danger to health, following the same reason we have to avoid any possible transgression, even if only inadvertent.

A growing dilemma on the American Jewish scene is the increasing unreliability of kashruth supervision, or, more correctly, the increasing *implications* of such unreliability. It is rumored that even the former bastions of unimpeachable kashruth have had

therefore must avoid that possibility.[41] (Apparently, in those days, people did not go to butcher stores to purchase kosher meat, but rather had to see to the animal's *shechita* and kosher-rendering personally. Obviously, there would be many occasions where a person ignorant of the law would mistakenly assume the meat was kosher). The Ramo agrees with this opinion, in stating, "The reason that an *Am Haaretz* may not eat meat is that he is not conversant with the laws of Shechita..."[42]

Thus, there is ample precedent for refraining from eating meat in a situation where there is doubt whether that meat is truly kosher within the meaning of halacha. If a person sincerely doubts whether he can rely upon either the knowledge or trustworthiness of the kashruth supervisor, he is then certainly well-justified in deciding not to eat meat at all. In this aspect of his decision, he would not in any way be acting contrary to Jewish law.

However, I do not wish in any way to suggest that this decision is a moral imperative for a conscientious, kashruth-observing Jew. While there are undoubtedly areas of kashruth supervision which could be improved, nevertheless, there are enough kashruth supervisions of sufficient reliability in this country to allow strictly-observant Jews to eat meat without qualms. If this be the rationale for a person's decision to stop eating meat, it seems to have no real justification.

That wises of all men, King Solomon, noted that there is nothing new under the sun. Although vegetarianism has the glamor of a new fad for many people, our research shows that Judaism dealt with these "modern ideas" millenia ago. Once again we are awed by the scope, perceptiveness and sensitivity of our great Sages.

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41. Ibid.
42. תשובות רמ"א שאלה סה.