

1: A VEGETARIAN VIEW OF THE BIBLE

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)

GOD'S INITIAL INTENTION WAS THAT PEOPLE BE vegetarians. The foremost Jewish Torah commentator, Rashi (1040–1105), says the following about God's first dietary law (above): "God did not permit Adam and his wife to kill a creature and to eat its flesh. Only every green herb shall they all eat together."¹ Most Torah commentators, including Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092–1167), Maimonides (1135–1214), Nachmanides (1194–1270), and Rabbi Joseph Albo (d. 1444), agree with this assessment. As Rabbi Moses Cassuto (1883–1951) in his commentary *From Adam to Noah* notes:

You are permitted to use the animals and employ them for work, have dominion over them in order to utilize their services for your subsistence, but must not hold their life cheap nor slaughter them for food. Your natural diet is vegetarian....²

These views are consistent with the Talmud, which says that people were initially vegetarians: "Adam was not permitted meat for purposes of eating."³

The great 13th-century Jewish commentator Nachmanides claims that one reason behind this initial human diet is 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 [human beings] and they have the power of affecting

their own welfare and their food, and they flee from pain and death.⁴

Fifteenth-century Jewish philosopher Rabbi Joseph Albo, adds that “in the killing of animals there is cruelty, rage, and the accustoming of oneself to the evil habit of shedding innocent blood.”⁵

God’s original dietary plan represents a unique statement in humanity’s spiritual history. It is a spiritual blueprint of a vegetarian world order. Yet many millions of people have read this Torah verse (Genesis 1:29) and passed it by without considering its meaning. After stating that people must adhere to a vegetarian diet, the Torah indicates that animals were not initially intended to prey on one another but to also subsist on purely vegetarian food:

And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creeps upon the earth, wherein there is a living soul, [I have given] every green herb for food. (Genesis 1:30)

Immediately after giving these dietary laws, God sees everything He has made and “behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Everything in the universe is as God wanted it, in complete harmony, with nothing superfluous or lacking.⁶ The vegetarian diet is consistent with God’s initial plan.

There are other indications in the early chapters of Genesis that people originally were to be sustained on vegetarian diets:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: “of every tree of the garden, you may freely eat....” (Genesis 2:16)

“...and you shall eat the herbs of the field.” (Genesis 3:18)

Chapter 5 of Genesis tells of the long lives of people in the vegetarian generations from Adam to Noah. Adam lives 930 years; Seth (Adam’s son) 912 years; Enosh (Seth’s son) 905 years; Kenan (Enosh’s son) 910 years, and so on, until Methuselah, who lives 969 years, the longest life recorded

in the Torah. After the flood, people live for much shorter periods. Abraham, for example, lives only 175 years.

Why the tremendous change in lifespans? A partial explanation may be that the change in diet contributed to the change in lifespans. Before the flood, people were forbidden to eat meat; after the flood it was permitted (Genesis 9:3). This view that meat-eating shortened lives was held by Nachmanides.⁷ Recent evidence linking heavy meat consumption with numerous diseases reinforces this point of view (see Chapter 3). Of course, a shift to sensible vegetarian diets would not increase lifespans to anywhere near those attributed to early biblical people, but recent medical evidence indicates that it would lead to an increase in the average span and quality of life.

The strongest support for vegetarianism as a positive ideal in Torah literature is in the writing of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook (1865–1935). Rav Kook was the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel and a highly respected and beloved Jewish spiritual leader. He was a mystical thinker and a great Torah scholar. He spoke powerfully on vegetarianism, as recorded in *A Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace* (edited by Rav Kook's disciple, Rabbi David Cohen, "The Nazir of Jerusalem").

Rav Kook believed that the permission to eat meat was only a temporary concession; he felt that a God who is merciful to His creatures would not institute an everlasting law permitting the killing of animals for food.⁸ He states:

The progress of dynamic ideals will not be eternally blocked. Through general moral and intellectual advancement...shall the latent aspiration of justice for the animal kingdom come out into the open, when the time is ripe.⁹

People are not always ready to live up to God's highest ideals. By the time of Noah, humanity had morally degenerated. "And God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth" (Genesis 6:12). People had sunk so low that they would eat a limb torn from a living animal. As a concession to people's weakness,¹⁰

permission to eat meat was then given: “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; as the green herb have I given you all.” (Genesis 9:3)

According to Rav Kook, because people had descended to such an extremely low spiritual level, it was necessary that they be taught to value human life above that of animals, and that they first emphasize the improvement of relationships between people. He felt that if people were denied the right to eat the flesh of animals, some might eat the flesh of human beings instead, due to their inability to control a lust for flesh. He regarded the permission to slaughter animals for food as a “transitional tax,” or temporary dispensation, until a “brighter era” dawns, when people will return to vegetarian diets.¹¹

Rabbi Joseph Albo suggests that, in the era before the flood, some people developed the mistaken idea that the reason they were not permitted to eat meat was that human beings and animals were on the same moral level—so human beings were no more responsible for their actions than were animals. Albo indicates that such a view led to moral degeneracy and ultimately to the great flood. He states that the prohibition against eating meat was removed after the flood so that human beings would realize they were on a higher level than animals, and that they therefore had a greater degree of responsibility.¹² However, the laws of *kashrut* later greatly limited the conditions under which Jews could eat meat.

Isaak Hebenstreit, a Polish rabbi who wrote *Kivrot Hata'avah* (*The Graves of Lust*) in 1929, contends that God never wanted people to eat meat, because of the cruelty involved; people shouldn't kill any living thing and fill their stomachs by destroying other life. He asserts that God temporarily gave permission to eat meat because of the conditions after the flood, when all plant life had been destroyed.¹³

Just prior to allowing Noah and his family to eat meat, God says:

And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all wherewith the ground teems, and upon all the fish of the sea; into your hands are they delivered. (Genesis 9:2)

Now that there is permission to eat animals, the previous harmony between people and animals no longer exists. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), the outstanding German neo-Orthodox Torah commentator, argued that the attachment between people and animals was broken after the flood, a rift that initiated a change in the relationship of people to the world.¹⁴

The permission given to Noah to eat meat was not unconditional. There was an immediate prohibition against eating blood: “Only flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall you not eat.” (Genesis 9:4) Similar statements are made in Leviticus 19:26, 17:10 and 12 and Deuteronomy 12:16, 23, and 25, and 15:23. The Torah identifies blood with life: “...for the blood is the life” (Deuteronomy 12:23). Life must be removed from the animal before it can be eaten, and the Talmud specifies an elaborate process for doing so.

A modern Conservative rabbi, Samuel Dresner, commenting on the dietary laws, indicates:

The removal of blood which *kashrut* teaches is one of the most powerful means of making us constantly aware of the concession and compromise which the whole act of eating meat, in reality, is. Again it teaches us reverence for life.¹⁵

Biblical commentator Rabbi Moses Cassuto states:

Apparently the Torah was in principle opposed to the eating of meat. When Noah and his descendants were permitted to eat meat this was a concession conditional on the prohibition of the blood. This prohibition implied respect for the principle of life [“for the blood is the life”] and an allusion to the fact that in reality all meat should have been prohibited. This partial prohibition was designed to call to mind the previously total one.¹⁶

Immediately after permission is given to eat meat, God says, “And surely, the blood of your lives will I require” (Genesis 9:5). The rabbis base the prohibition of suicide on these words.¹⁷ The fact that this statement

comes directly after flesh is permitted perhaps also hints that eating meat is a slow form of suicide. Maybe God is warning us: “I prefer that you do not eat meat. But if you choose to eat meat, there will be a penalty—your life blood will I require.”¹⁸ In other words, if people choose to live amid violence, by slaughtering and eating animals, they must pay a penalty—their lives will be shortened. This speculation is consistent with the decrease in biblical lifespans that occurred after permission to eat meat was given, and also with modern research in health and nutrition.

According to Rabbi Isaac Arama (1420–1494), author of *Akedat Yitzchak*, after the Israelites left Egypt, God tries to establish another non-meat diet: manna.¹⁹ The Torah introduces the story of the manna with the following Divine message, which Moses conveys to the Israelites in response to their concern about what they will eat in the desert:

God said to Moses, “Behold! I shall rain down for you food from heaven; and the people shall go out and gather a certain portion every day...” (Exodus 16:4).

Manna is described in the Torah as a food that does not come from animals and that tastes, “like coriander seed” (Numbers 11:7). The rabbis of the Talmud held that the manna had whatever taste and flavor the eater desired at the time of eating. It must also have had sufficient nutrient value because Moses says that “it is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat” (Exodus 16:15). Rabbi J. H. Hertz (1872–1946), former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, comments on God’s beneficence in providing the manna to sustain the Israelites: “God in His ever-sustaining providence fed Israel’s host during the weary years of wandering in His own unsearchable way.”²⁰

The manna teaches the Children of Israel several lessons, which are significant from a vegetarian point of view.

(1) God provides for our needs; sufficient manna is available for each day’s requirements. In the same way, vegetarian diets can result in enough food for all. A meat diet leads to scarcity of food for some and the potential for violence (see Chapters 4 and 6).

(2) We should be content with what we have.²¹ In the Bible, each person was to gather one omer (a measure) of manna, but some gathered more and some less. When they measured it out, they found that whether they had gathered much or little, they had just enough to meet their needs. As it is written, “They gathered out an omer, and he that gathered much had nothing left over, and he that gathered little had no lack; everyone according to his eating had they gathered” (Exodus 16:18). Again, a vegetarian diet provides enough for everyone’s needs. With a meat-centered diet, some eat more than they need, and many are malnourished.

(3) Enough was provided on Friday morning so that there was no need to gather manna on the Sabbath. The people were commanded to rest on the seventh day. (See Exodus 16:5, 22–30.) With a vegetarian diet, people do not need to continually struggle for their means of subsistence. They are able to truly rest, to have a peaceful Sabbath, knowing that their needs are being met and thus there is no reason to struggle for necessities.

The Israelites are not satisfied, however, with the simple diet of manna that sustained them in the desert. They complain, “Would that we were given flesh to eat.” (Numbers 11:4) God is angry and Moses is displeased. God reluctantly provides meat in the form of quail, which is brought by a wind from the sea. While the flesh is still in the mouths of the Israelites, even before it is chewed, the anger of God is kindled against the people and He strikes them with a great plague (Numbers 11:4–33).

Note the following key points from a vegetarian point of view:

1. God wanted the people to be sustained on manna. He was displeased when they cried for flesh to eat.

2. Perhaps the many deaths due to the plague were intended to teach the Israelites that they should not eat meat, and, if they did, it would have dire consequences.

3. The place where this incident occurred was named “The Graves of Lust,” to indicate that the strong desire for flesh led to the many deaths (Numbers 11:34). While manna, their staple food in the desert, kept the Israelites in good health for forty years, many deaths occurred when they deviated from this simple diet.

When the Israelites were in the wilderness, animals could only be slaughtered and eaten as part of the sacrificial service in the sanctuary (Leviticus 17:3–5). The eating of “unconsecrated meat”—meat from animals slaughtered for private consumption—was not permitted. Every meat meal, therefore, had to be an integral part of a sacrificial rite. Maimonides states that the biblical sacrifices were a concession to the primitive practices of the nations at that time.²² (The sacrifices will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, Question 5.)

Finally, God permitted people to eat meat even if it was not part of a sacrificial offering:

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)

This permitted meat was called *basar ta'avah*, “meat of lust,” so named because rabbinic teachings indicate that meat is not considered a necessity for life.²³

The above verse does not command people to eat meat. Rabbinic tradition understands it as indicating people’s desire to eat flesh, not God’s dictum that people must do so. Even while arguing against vegetarianism as a moral cause, Rabbi Elijah Judah Schochet, author of *Animal Life in Jewish Tradition*, concedes that “scripture does not command the Israelite to eat meat, but rather permits this diet as a concession to lust.”²⁴ Similarly, another critic of vegetarian activism, Rabbi J. David Bleich, a noted contemporary Torah scholar and professor at Yeshiva University, states: “The implication is that meat may be consumed when there is desire and appetite for it as food, but it may be eschewed when there is not desire and, *a fortiori*, when it is found to be repugnant.”²⁵ According to Rabbi Bleich, “Jewish tradition does not command carnivorous behavior...”²⁶

Commenting on the above Torah verse (Deuteronomy 12:20), the respected Torah scholar and teacher Nehama Leibowitz (1905–1997) points out how odd the permission is and how grudgingly the permission to eat meat is granted. She concludes that people have not been granted

dominion over animals to do with them as they desire, but that we have been given a “barely tolerated dispensation” to slaughter animals for our consumption, if we cannot resist temptation and must eat meat.²⁷ Rav Kook also regarded the same Torah verse as clearly indicating that the Torah did not regard the slaughter of animals for human consumption as an ideal state of affairs.²⁸

Rabbi I. Hebenstreit points out that God did not want to give the Israelites who had left Egypt permission to return to a meat diet because it involved cruelty to animals. However, the “mixed multitude” (other slaves who left Egypt with the Jews) lusted for meat and inculcated this desire among the Jewish people. Hence, God reluctantly gave permission once again for the consumption of meat, but with many restrictions.²⁹

The Talmud expresses this negative connotation associated with the consumption of meat:

The Torah teaches a lesson in moral conduct, that man shall not eat meat unless he has a special craving for it...and shall eat it only occasionally and sparingly.³⁰

The sages also state that eating meat was not for everyone:

Only a scholar of Torah may eat meat, but one who is ignorant of Torah is forbidden to eat meat.³¹

Some authorities explain this restriction in practical terms; only a Torah scholar can properly observe all the laws of animal slaughter and meat preparation. While there are few conditions on the consumption of vegetarian foods, only a diligent Torah scholar can fully comprehend the many regulations governing the preparation and consumption of meat. However, master kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria explains it in spiritual terms: only a Torah scholar can elevate the “holy sparks” trapped in the animal.

How many Jews today can consider themselves so scholarly and spiritually advanced to be able to eat meat? Those who do diligently study the Torah and are aware of conditions related to the production and

consumption of meat today would, I believe, come to conclusions similar to those in this book.

Rav Kook writes that the permission to eat meat “after all the desire of your soul” was a concealed reproach and an implied reprimand.³² He argues that a day will come when people will detest the eating of the flesh of animals because of a moral loathing, and then people will not eat meat because their soul will not have the urge to eat it.³³

In contrast to the lust associated with flesh foods, the Torah looks favorably on vegetarian foods. In the Song of Songs, the divine bounty is mentioned in terms of fruits, vegetables, vines, and nuts. There is no special *bracha* (blessing) recited before eating meat or fish, as there is for other foods such as bread, cake, wine, fruits, and vegetables. The blessing for meat is a general one, the same as that over water or any other undifferentiated food. Typical of the Torah’s positive depiction of non-flesh foods is the following:

For the Lord your God brings you 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 you shall eat bread without scarceness, you shall not lack anything in it....And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. (Deuteronomy 8: 7–10)

I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your corn, and your wine, and your oil. (Deuteronomy 11:14)

Among many similar statements by the prophets are:

I shall return my people from captivity, and they shall build up the waste cities and inhabit them, and they shall plant vineyards and drink the wine from them, and they shall make gardens and eat the fruit from them, and I shall plant them upon their land. (Amos 9:14–15)

Build houses and dwell in them, and plant gardens and eat the fruit of them. (Jeremiah 29:5)

Rabbi Yonassan Gershom, a Chassidic rabbi from Minnesota, remarks: “Concerning the priority given to blessings, meat is on the bottom of the hierarchy.” He notes that on Sabbaths and festivals, wine comes first. Otherwise, bread comes first, and a blessing over bread covers all other foods except wine. If there is no bread, foods are blessed in the following order: (1) wine, (2) baked grains, (3) tree fruits, (4) vegetables, (5) all other foods, including fish, meat, etc. In other words, meat has the lowest priority in the *bracha* (blessing) system. Also, when bread is eaten, a full *Birkat Hamazon* (grace after meals) is to be recited. After eating the grains and fruits (the seven species) mentioned in the Torah (Deuteronomy 8: 7–10), there is a shorter blessing recited (*al hamichya*). But if only other foods such as meat or fish are eaten, only one sentence is to be recited (*borei nefashot*). Since, as our sages taught, words have replaced sacrifices today, apparently flesh foods are least honored.

The permission to eat meat is circumscribed by many laws and restrictions (the laws of *kashrut*). Rav Kook suggests that the reprimand implied by these regulations is an elaborate apparatus designed to keep alive a sense of reverence for life, with the aim of eventually leading people away from meat-eating.³⁴ Rav Kook is not the only Torah authority to voice such sentiments. Torah commentator Rabbi Solomon Efraim Lutchitz comments in his classic work *Kli 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.³⁵

Pinchas Peli, a 20th-century Orthodox rabbi makes a similar statement:

Accordingly, the laws of *kashrut* come to teach us that a Jew's first preference should be a vegetarian meal. If, however, one cannot control a craving for meat, it should be kosher meat, which would serve as a reminder that the animal being eaten is a creature of God, that the death of such a creature cannot be taken lightly, that hunting for sport is forbidden, that we cannot treat any living thing callously, and that we are responsible for what happens to other beings [human or animal] even if we did not personally come into contact with them.³⁶

Rav Kook argued that the high moral level involved in the vegetarianism of the generations before Noah was a virtue of such great value that it cannot be lost forever.³⁷ In the future ideal period, he thought, people and animals would again not eat flesh.³⁸ People's lives would not be supported at the expense of animals' lives. Rav Kook based these views on the prophecy of Isaiah:

And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
 And the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
 And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
 And a little child shall lead them
 And the cow and the bear shall feed;
 Their young ones shall lie down together,
 And the lion shall eat straw like the ox....
 They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain....
 (Isaiah 11:6–9)

In his booklet summarizing many of Rav Kook's teachings, Joseph Green, a 20th-century South African Jewish vegetarian writer, concludes that Jewish religious ethical vegetarians are pioneers of the messianic era; they are leading lives that make the coming of the Messiah more likely.³⁹

The Jewish tradition asserts that one way to speed the coming of the Messiah is to start practicing the ways that will prevail in the messianic time. For example, the Talmud teaches that if all Jews properly observed two consecutive Sabbaths, the Messiah would immediately come.⁴⁰ This

means symbolically that when all Jews reach the level when they can fully observe the Sabbath in terms of devotion to God and compassion for people and animals, the conditions would be such that the messianic period would have arrived. Hence, based on Rav Kook's teaching, if all became vegetarian in the proper spirit, with compassion for all animals and human beings, and concern about preserving and honoring God's world, this might very well hasten the arrival of the Messiah.

Although most Jews eat meat today, the high ideal of God, the initial vegetarian dietary law, stands supreme in the Torah for Jews and the whole world to see—an ultimate goal toward which all people should strive.