

Flexing Our Compassion Muscle Through Our Food Choices©
Congregation Shaarei Kodesh, Parashat Noach 2020/5781
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Synagogue Vegan Challenge

One of my favorite scenes from the movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, is when the outsider, the WASP, meets his fiancé's very Greek family for the first time. They meet for a huge meal, and the fiancée's aunt asks the prospective groom if she could prepare a plate for him. He says sure, but his Greek fiancé adds, "Ian is a vegetarian; he doesn't eat meat." She famously responds, "he don't eat no meat, what do you meat he don't eat no meat!?" The crowd becomes silent and after a long pause she says: "Oh that's ok, that's ok: I make lamb."¹

Growing up in an immigrant Jewish household, the smorgasbord of meat at family gatherings was similar this movie scene. My Hungarian grandmother made us kosher lamb chops every time we came over to visit. It was only much later when I realized how much she spent on the meals for her grandchildren! Our large holiday meals are usually filled with not just one meat course, but multiple meat dishes.

It is important to note that our meat consumption is connected to our family's story. As recent immigrants to America, my grandparents remembered the lives they lived in Europe. They lived in poverty; Shabbat was the rare time when they would taste a bit of meat. Meat on Shabbat and Yom Tov is an integral part of our tradition. Eating meat and drinking wine on Shabbat became connected with the concept of *Oneg Shabbat*, a celebration of joy. But there is another side to eating meat that we as Jews living in the modern age have not yet come to terms with: excess.

I had the first realization of this idea when I was a rabbinical student. I received a Shabbat dinner invite from a friend: "All Meat Shabbat Dinner - Every dish you eat, from the *Challah* to the dessert, will have meat in it, Vegans and Vegetarians are not welcome."

After some thought, I turned down the invite and I began thinking more about my meat consumption. What I learned is that meat and Judaism may be synonymous, but not without reservation, and our tradition, beginning with the two-first parshiot of Genesis, can teach us lessons on how our diets can give us insight into how we live our lives, and how we treat animals.

But let's go back to the beginning, literally. In the Beginning...we were vegans, or we subsisted on a plant based diet. In Genesis 1:29 - 30, God says to Adam and Eve: "See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food." Rashi comments on the line, "They shall be yours for

¹ https://youtu.be/iFemw_6a-Tg - Scene from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*

food and for all the animals on land" He equates animals and beasts to them (humans) concerning the food (they are to eat). He did not permit man and his wife to kill any creature in order to eat meat.

God sees that all flesh is evil, he chooses Noah and his family to save along with sets of animals to repopulate the earth, destroys all other life, and then, we get this line: Genesis 9:2-4: "The fear and the dread of you [mankind] shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky – everything with which the earth is astir – and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand.

כל־רֶמֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר הוּא־חַי לְכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאַכְלָה בַּיּוֹק עַשְׁבָּנְתִּי לְכֶם אֶת־כָּל:
Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these.

אַךְ־בָּשָׂר בְּנֶפֶשׁוֹ דָמוֹ לֹא תִאכְלֵה:
You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it."

We can now eat meat, but, there's a caveat: you can't eat flesh with its life-blood in it. The Rabbis call this prohibition Ever MinHaChai, a limb torn from a live animal. It's at this point that we learn about the seven Noahide mitzvoth, commandments that apply for all humanity, and they are pretty good start. Idolatry, blasphemy, murder, incest and adultery, robbery are outlawed, and court systems must be set up. But what's the deal with *Ever Min HaChai* - the prohibition of eating flesh cut from a living animal? And why the switch from plant based diet, vegan, to plant and meat eaters, omnivores?

Nachum Sarna, in the JPS commentary says that "eating meat was a concession to human weakness, but it is also not a license for savagery." In other words, many commentators believed that this concession was given so that we had some sort of outlet for our rage and thirst for blood, but the limits of being totally violent to animals curbs this innate feeling.

I'll be honest, I don't agree with this take.

We have been taught that the human species survived over other human like species because we wiped them out; in other words, we owe our survival to our thirst for blood. But, the evidence does not support this widely held belief. In his book, Humankind: A Hopeful History, author Rutger Bregman attacks the beliefs that we hold about ourselves, mainly, that we are our selfishness and violence was the key to our species survival. He argues that the opposite is true - humans survived because we are inherently friendly. We are one of the only member of the animal kingdom that actually blushes which is a 'tell' that we feel love and shame; and our eyes, which have whites in them, do not allow us to hide emotions; they force us to show our true feelings to others. Other humanoid species disappeared because they wiped themselves out, while we sat on the sides lines.²

² Found in Humankind: A Hopeful History by Rutger Bregman (Part 1: The State of Nature)

In other words, we owe our survival not to our capacity for violence, but for our capacity for compassion, not just for humans, but for all creatures.

I saw that first hand this summer. We were watching something about cows, and our sons turned to us and said, "You know the meat that we eat? That comes from killing the evil and really old cows right?" We didn't lie to our kids; we told them the truth. That began Vegan month at the Baum house. We've reintroduced meat into our diet, but we have cut down significantly introducing meatless days into our weekly schedules.

People become Vegans for a variety of reasons. For most, its about health, a plant based diet is better for your heart and for keeping weight down, although you can definitely gain weight eating on a plant based diet. For others, it is also about the environment. Globally, animal agriculture is responsible for more greenhouse gases than all the world's transportation systems combined. It takes an enormous amount of water to grow crops for animals to eat, clean filthy factory farms, and give animals water to drink. By going vegan, one person can save approximately 219,000 gallons of water a year. So going plant based or Vegan can help stem the tide of Climate Change, a global crisis we are all experiencing.³

But there is another reason to eat less meat or to go exclusively Vegan or for a Plant Based diet: to exercise our compassion muscles, as our children taught us this summer.

Noah embodied this sense of compassion. The Midrash (Tanchuma, Noach 4) says that Noah was called a righteous man because he fed the animals on the ark. "Rav Achavah son of Rav Ze'ira said, "The sons of Noah . . . were all righteous because they showed compassion toward both animal and humans." The Midrash also says that Noah and his sons did not sleep the entire time they were on the ark because they were constantly feeding the animals at all hours of the night and day (Tanchuma, Noach 9).

So if we are compassionate by nature, why are we allowed to eat meat?

Rabbi Joseph Albo, a 15th century Spanish commentator and philosopher says these verses teach us that humanity was now permitted to eat meat in order emphasize his higher moral level and degree of responsibility.

Through the lens of morality and responsibility, we can return to Adam, Eve, Noah and his family, and how far we've come as humans. Human beings have become the dominant creature on earth. We are in control of the destiny of this planet, our continued existence, and the continued existence of animals. Just because we are allowed to eat meat, does not mean we have to eat meat. We are created in God's image, and we are responsible for the world.

Now that we have learned that animals actually have feelings and emotions, it should give us pause before we eat meat. I have to admit, I'm not a full Vegan, I'm a conflicted

³ <https://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/meat-environment/>

omnivore. However, when I go days or weeks without eating meat or products from animals, I feel not physically healthier, but also morally. Knowing that an animal did not have to die or feel pain for my meal brings me to higher moral place and makes me feel more responsible.

Our tradition is full of laws of how we must treat animals; with as much compassion as possible. When we sacrificed animals in the Holy Temple, the blood of the animals was a replacement for our blood. We believe that animals have a life force or living soul, *nefesh chaya*, just like we do. And how we treat those souls is what makes us truly human. The Midrash (Exodus Rabbah 2:2) says that “Moshe and King David were deemed suitable for leadership because of their compassionate treatment of sheep in their care. Rebecca, one of our matriarchs, was judged suitable as Isaac's wife because of her kindness in watering the ten camels of Eliezer, Abraham's servant.”

Our Shabbat and holiday tables are our altars, but we don't have always serve meat. When we keep the animals in mind, like Noah and his family did, and treat them compassionately by eating more Vegan/Plant Based meals, we not only improve our health, and save our planet, but we also save ourselves. We flex our compassion muscles as we lift the fork up into our mouths. And it's never been easier to create delicious Vegan meals that actually taste like meat!

We hope you join us for our Vegan programs throughout the year, and may your Vegan meals not only feed your stomach, but also your souls.

Shabbat Shalom.