

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 29: Ethical Issues in Tanach 7: Vegetarianism

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Animal welfare has always been important in Jewish law. The Torah commands us to help take the weight off of a donkey that has collapsed under its load, even if the owner of the donkey is our adversary (Shemot 23:5).

When God states that “I will give grass in your field for your livestock, and you will eat and be satiated” (Devarim 11:15), the Talmud notes the order of the verse. Since “the grass in your field for your livestock” precedes “and you will eat and be satiated”, this teaches that we must feed our animals before feeding ourselves (Gittin 62a). In Psalms we read that God has compassion over all of His creatures (Tehilim 145:9) and so, *imitatio Dei*, we strive to do the same.

The Israeli scholar and commentator Nechama Leibowitz (d. 1997) quotes Rabbi Moshe David Cassuto (d. 1951) who states that when God told Adam that He had given him vegetation to eat (Bereishit 1:29), it implied that animals must be used only for work, not for consumption. Meat only became permitted after the Flood (see Bereishit 9:3) as a concession, conditional on the removal of blood from the meat, as elsewhere (Vayikra 17:11) the Torah states that the “soul of the animal is in the blood” (*Studies in Bereishit* pp. 76-77). Animal welfare still remains a critical principle, as implied in the laws of *shechita* (see Dr. Stuart Rosen, *Physiological insights into Shechita*, *The Veterinary Record*, 154(24):759-65).

Yet Nechama Leibowitz also notes that Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (d. 1935) went further and saw the initial prohibition of eating meat as the ethical ideal for mankind. Rabbi Kook describes the permissibility of meat following the moral and spiritual decline of the generation of the flood as: “a temporary dispensation (lit. tax) that will pass before a brighter era” (*Tallelei Orot* 8).

According to Rabbi Kook, meat is permitted but vegetarianism is the ethical ideal.

Nevertheless, eating meat is considered an important part of Jewish tradition and practice; the Talmud states that: “Joy only comes through eating meat and drinking wine” (Pesachim 109a). This clearly cannot be true for someone who finds the consumption of meat abhorrent, for eating it would not bring joy. However, given the special *simcha* (joy) and *oneg* (delight) we aim to experience on Shabbat and Yom Tov (see Yeshaya 58:13), according to some rabbinic opinions one who does eat meat should certainly do so on these special days. Indeed, for meat-eaters, refraining from eating meat is considered a sign of mourning (see *Shulchan Aruch* YD 341:1).

Nevertheless, while we are permitted to eat meat, the Torah contains vast sections detailing the commandments to bring animal offerings in the Temple. To our modern mind, offering animals in the Temple may seem like a very alien idea. The next article will draw our attention to the profound psycho-spiritual explanations of the biblical offerings and how they actually relate to us today, even though the Temple was destroyed almost 2,000 years ago.

