

Parashat Matot

The Vows of Vegetarianism and Peace

Discovering Your Own Healthy Diet

My husband and I were both vegetarians for several years before we embraced the Torah way of life. Most of our friends from the Yeshiva had been vegetarians as well. We were part of “The Return to Nature” movement so prominent in the seventies. How could we take a sacred life merely to indulge in our own gluttonous pleasure? Later, we realized that vegetarianism had saved so many of us from numerous un-kosher foods, making us more sensitive to spirituality and open to accepting the Torah. Today, I have several orthodox Jewish friends who are not only strictly vegan, but moreover, hardcore ‘raw foodies.’ However, when my husband and I began learning in the Yeshiva, we were taught that when we eat with the intention to use the energy to further our uniquely human service of G-d, we could lift up even meat. When we eat in order to have energy to learn Torah and perform mitzvot, the animals we eat are elevated along with us, and become reunited with their G-dly source. Conversely, if we eat solely for our own selfish desires, we swallow the meaningful life of even a vegetable with no excuse. “It’s not fair!” cries the helpless plant. My sister, who had been vegetarian since she was twelve because she didn’t want to take the life of an animal, and because she disliked the taste of meat, has in her later years begun to relish bone broth. Still, an avid health foodie, she now understands the importance of protein and minerals from bone broth which supports the body’s detoxification process. Today, the health food world claims that bone broth is one of the most powerful superfoods on the planet. Slow cooking draws out collagen, marrow and other healing elements from the bones, including amino acids, minerals, glycine, and gelatin – which help heal the gut and reduce inflammation. Having recently emerged from my juice fast, I’m still vegetarian. I feel great implementing my yearly vegan detox for about six weeks every summer. I believe there is no right diet for everyone. It really depends on the individual constitution. Each of us must get to know our own body and discover the way different foods affect us.

Human History from Herbivore to Carnivore

Originally, both Adam and Chava, and their descendants for 1600 years, were vegetarian ‘fruities.’ Their diet consisted of seed, herb, tree, and fruit as it states, “Behold, I have given you every seed-bearing herb which is upon the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; it will be yours for food” (*Bereishit* 1:29). According to Rabbi Yosef Albo, the original Divine plan was for humanity to refrain from killing and eating meat because killing animals is cruel and ingrains negative traits in the human character. The only reason Hashem permitted meat to Noach and his descendants was that people had degenerated into bestial, violent and corrupt behavior, equating humans and animals. This prompted G-d to cleanse the world with the great flood. After the flood, G-d implemented a new world order in which people would recognize humanity’s Divine purpose and moral superiority over the animals. In order to emphasize the differences between animal and human being, Hashem permitted eating flesh of animals: “Every moving thing that lives shall be yours to eat; like the green vegetation, I have given you everything” (*Bereishit* 9:3). Our dominion over animals reminds us that we are charged with divine responsibility to perfect the world (*Sefer Halkkarim*, Book III, chapter 15).

The Gravity of Keeping Your Word

If a person no longer desires to be a vegetarian, is he permitted according to Jewish law to switch to eating meat without any spiritual ritual transition? Most of us, Jewishly-under-educated Jews would have no idea that a decision to become a vegetarian, among other major decisions, may constitute a vow, and that we may need to have our 'vow' annulled. *Parashat Matot* teaches the laws of vows:

ספר במדבר פרק ל

(ג) אִישׁ כִּי יִדַּר נֶדֶר לַיהוָה אוֹ הִשָּׁבַע שְׂבִיעָה לְאִסּוֹר אֶסֶר עַל נַפְשׁוֹ לֹא יַחַל דְּבָרוֹ כְּכֹל הַיֵּצֵא מִפִּי יַעֲשֶׂה:
 “When a man makes a vow to Hashem or takes an oath imposing an obligation or prohibition on himself, he shall not break his word; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips” (*Bamidbar* 30:3).

רש"י על במדבר פרק ל פסוק ג

(ג) נדר - האומר הרי עלי קונם שלא אוכל או שלא אעשה דבר פלוני יכול אפי' נשבע שיאכל נבלות אני קורא עליו ככל היוצא מפיו יעשה ת"ל לאסור איסור המותר ולא להתיר את האסור:
 לא יחל דברו - כמו לא יחלל דברו לא יעשה דבריו חולין:

This is when one says, “Behold I take upon myself an obligation which is sacred to me as an offering, that I will not eat or that I will not do such and such a thing... i.e., to forbid for himself something which is permissible to him... (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 30:3).

This implies, that, when we take a certain obligation or restriction upon ourselves and verbalize it, with a statement such as, “I’m vegetarian!” then we have taken a vow upon ourselves and would need to get our vow annulled, in case we no longer desire to be limited by it. The *Shulchan Aruch* takes the issue of vows quite seriously and writes an introduction at the beginning of the Laws of Vows describing the severity of not fulfilling a נֶדֶר/*neder* – vow (*Shulchan Aruch, Yore Deah* 202). Normally, a vow is binding when a person takes upon himself verbally to fulfill a mitzvah, such as deciding how much and when he is going to learn, to visit the ill, to perform a certain act of respecting his parents, or to avoid eating something specific. In such cases, in order to avoid the problem of having made a vow, it is good to say “*bli neder* – without a vow.” A vow is binding sometimes even without words, such as if someone completely made up his mind to give *tzedaka* (charity). Here is what I found in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* on this topic:

A person accepted a stringency upon himself in matters permitted in order to serve as a barrier and a fence for self-control, e.g., fasting during the days of *Selichot*, or not eating meat and not drinking wine from the seventeenth of Tamuz and onwards. Even if he only acted this way one time, but intended to continue, or he behaved this way three times, although he did not intend to behave this way always, if he did not make the condition that it was without a vow (*bli neder*), and he wants to go back... he needs to be absolved. How is a vow or oath absolved? He goes to three Torah scholars, one of whom must be experienced in the laws of vows and knows which vows may be nullified and which vows may not be nullified and how they are absolved, and the scholars absolve the oath or vow for him (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 67:7-8).

A Vow Only Pertains to the Permissible Realm

If we made a promise and were unable to fulfill it, even something as trivial as a promise to play ball with our kids, it is proper to apologize and receive forgiveness. If we made a decision, even in our own mind, to give someone something, we should do so immediately and not allow regret to

stop us from fulfilling our decision, which may be considered a vow. A vow only pertains to the permitted realm. We cannot make a vow to act contrary to Torah law, such as, for example, deciding not to make Kiddush on Shabbat.

Does the Torah Permit Eating Meat?

Eating meat may actually be against the Torah in some cases, as the Torah does not permit eating meat without certain restrictions. During the forty-year wandering in the desert, the Israelites were only permitted to eat meat as part of the sacrificial service. The Talmud states that only a person who is well versed in Torah is permitted to consume meat:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים דף מט/ב

תניא רבי אומר עם הארץ אסור לאכול בשר (בהמה) שנאמר זאת תורת הבהמה והעוף כל העוסק בתורה מותר לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף וכל שאינו עוסק בתורה אסור לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף:

The unlearned may not eat meat as it states, "This is the Torah concerning animals and birds" (*Vayikra* 11:46). Whoever is involved in Torah is permitted to eat meat and chicken but whoever is not involved in Torah is prohibited from eating meat and chicken (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim* 49b).

Vegetarianism – The Ideal of the Messianic Era

Hashem only permitted meat to Noach because he studied Torah. Everything in creation needs to be elevated. Therefore, each kind is nourished by a lower creation: the vegetative by the inanimate, the animate by the vegetative, and the human may be nourished by the animate as long as we actualize our human potential by learning Torah. Without being involved in Torah, we are not on a higher level than the animals and therefore unable to elevate them (*Kli Yakar, Bereishit* 9:2). Rav Kook saw the craving for meat as a manifestation of spiritual decline. He believed that in the days of the Mashiach, all humanity will return to a vegetarian diet (*A Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace* 6:32). In the Messianic Epoch, higher knowledge (*da'at*) will spread even to animals (*Olat Rayah, Vol. 1, p. 292*). This echoes the prophecy of Redemption: "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. 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 neither hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain" (*Yeshu'ahu* 11:6-9). Although Rav Kook believed that the vegetarian virtue of the generations before Noach represented a high moral level, he himself ate chicken on Shabbat as a symbolic reminder that the Mashiach had not yet arrived. However, in the Messianic Age, humans and animals will once again become vegetarians as at the beginning of creation (*A Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace* 6: 32). Just as the predatory instinct will be removed from the animal kingdom, and creatures will no longer kill one another to live, so will people cease exploiting one another. Even the sacrificial offerings in the Third Holy Temple in Jerusalem will consist of vegetation alone (*Olat Rayah, I, p. 292*); (Based on, *The Vegetarian Teachings of Rav Kook*, Richard Schwartz, Ph.D. with the editorial assistance of Rabbi David Sears).