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—RABBI DAVID ROSEN,
FORMER CHIEF RABBI OF IRELAND

"The authors have powerfully united scientific and spiritual perspectives on why we—as Jews, as human beings, and as members of the global commons—should 'go vegetarian.'"

—RABBI FRED SCHERLINDER DOBB,
COALITION ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND JEWISH LIFE

"A Case for Jewish Vegetarianism' is a case for returning to our essence as beings created in the image and likeness of God. It is a guide to be ... read and a guideline to be followed."

—RABBI RAMI M. SHAPIRO,
SIMPLY JEWISH AND ONE RIVER FOUNDATION

"Judaism ... inspires and compels us to think before we eat. 'A Case for Jewish Vegetarianism' provides many powerful reasons for us to be even more compassionate through the foods we choose to consume."

—RABBI JONATHAN K. CRANE,
HARVARD HILLEL

"The case for Jewish vegetarianism is increasingly compelling, for ethical, environmental and health reasons--this provocative and important booklet makes that case lucidly from all three perspectives."

—RABBI BARRY SCHWARTZ,
CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS TASK FORCE
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A CASE FOR JEWISH VEGETARIANISM

FOR ANIMALS, FOR YOURSELF,
AND FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

RABBINIC STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT

“In contemporary society, more than ever before, vegetarianism should be an imperative for Jews who seek to live in accordance with Judaism’s most sublime teachings. In highlighting these values in relation to our contemporary context, this important pamphlet helps us advance the supreme Jewish goals of tikkun olam (healing and improving our world) and kiddush haShem (sanctifying the Divine Name).”

—RABBI DAVID ROSEN, FORMER CHIEF RABBI OF IRELAND, DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS, INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT OF THE WORLD CONFERENCE OF RELIGIONS FOR PEACE

“Torah is clear: God’s original intent is for humans to be vegetarian; eating meat is a concession to our passions and blinds us to our divine nature and mission. ‘A Case for Jewish Vegetarianism’ is a case for returning to our essence as beings created in the image and likeness of God. It is a guide to be ... read and a guideline to be followed.”

—RABBI RAMI M. SHAPIRO, DIRECTOR, SIMPLY JEWISH AND ONE RIVER FOUNDATION; AUTHOR OF MINYAN: TEN PRINCIPLES FOR LIVING A LIFE OF INTEGRITY, AND THE WAY OF SOLOMON: FINDING JOY AND CONTENTMENT IN THE WISDOM OF ECCLESIASTES

“How anyone could read these facts and continue a meat-centered diet, I have no idea. The authors have powerfully united scientific and spiritual perspectives on why we—as Jews, as human beings, and as members of the global commons—should ‘go vegetarian.’ Giving their analysis its due will reward the careful reader, just as moving to vegetarianism will reward those readers who are open to the truth.”

—RABBI FRED SCHERLINDER DOBB, BOARD MEMBER OF THE COALITION ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND JEWISH LIFE, COCHAIR OF RELIGIOUS WITNESS FOR THE EARTH, ADAT SHALOM RECONSTRUCTIONIST CONGREGATION OF BETHESDA, MARYLAND

“The case for Jewish vegetarianism is increasingly compelling for ethical, environmental, and health reasons—this provocative and important booklet makes that case lucidly from all three perspectives.”

—RABBI BARRY SCHWARTZ, MEMBER OF THE CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS’ TASK FORCE ON KASHRUT, CHAIR OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECOKASHRUT, CONGREGATION M’KOR SHALOM OF CHERRY HILL, NEW JERSEY

“We all must eat to live, and Judaism invites us to eat conscientiously. Indeed, it inspires and compels us to think before we eat. ‘A Case for Jewish Vegetarianism’ provides many powerful reasons for us to be even more compassionate through the foods we choose to consume.”

—RABBI JONATHAN K. CRANE, DIRECTOR OF GRADUATE PROGRAMMING AT HARVARD HILLEL; ADJUNCT INSTRUCTOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, WHEATON COLLEGE (NORTON, MASSACHUSETTS).

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INTRODUCTION

The Variety of Jewish Arguments for Vegetarianism

Vegetarianism is becoming more and more popular in North America, Europe, and Israel as individuals from all walks of life adopt plant-based diets out of concern for animals, the environment, and their health. A *Time* poll reports that 10 million Americans consider themselves practicing vegetarians, and according to the National Restaurant Association, as many as 20 percent of American college students identify themselves as vegetarians.¹ Overseas a recent British study indicated that 2,000 Britons go vegetarian every week.²

There are persuasive reasons to go vegetarian, but are there also “Jewish” reasons to go vegetarian? Many Jews think so.

Some Jews base their vegetarianism on the Torah’s mandate not to cause *tsa’ar ba’alei chayim* (suffering to animals). They have decided that the suffering inflicted on animals on today’s factory farms defies Jewish ethics and law. According to the former chief rabbi of Ireland, David Rosen, “The current treatment of animals in the livestock trade definitely renders the consumption of meat halachically [according to Jewish law] unacceptable as the product of illegitimate means.”³

Some—like the first chief rabbi of pre-state Israel, Rav Abraham Kook—have been moved by the fact that the Garden of Eden and the future messianic era are described as being vegetarian. Similarly, Rabbi Ephraim Luchitz, author of the classic Torah commentary *Kli Yakar*, believed that the ethical underpinnings of *kashrut* (the Jewish dietary laws) point toward the ideal of vegetarianism.

Within liberal Judaism, the Central Conference of American Rabbis—the Reform movement’s rabbinical organization—has

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suggested the value of vegetarianism as a potential aspect of the Jewish dietary laws since the late 1970s, noting that a vegetarian *kashrut* observance “would be in consonance with the principle of *ts’ar ba’alei chayim*—prevention of pain or cruelty to animals.”⁴ As this booklet went to press, the Reform rabbinical organization was considering a resolution in favor of vegetarianism as part of its larger struggle to articulate landmark guidelines for a Reform practice of *kashrut*. These rabbis cited Jewish mandates to preserve health, the ecological principle of *bal tashchit* (not to waste or unnecessarily destroy anything of value), and the mandate of *ts’ar ba’alei chayim* in their argument in favor of vegetarianism.⁵

Other Jews, like the late Yiddish writer and Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, have allied themselves with those who suffered in the *Shoah* (Holocaust) by refusing to condone the killing of any

“There has been enough killing in the world.”

—RAV SHRAGA FEIVEL MENDLOWITZ, FOUNDED DEAN OF NEW YORK’S MESIVTA TORAH VO DAATH, ON WHY HE BECAME A VEGETARIAN AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

innocent creature. Singer candidly expressed his views on eating meat through his writings. In one of his novels, a character remarks, “As often as Herman had witnessed the slaughter of animals and fish, he always had the same thought: In their behavior toward creatures, all men were Nazis.”⁶ In a similar spirit, Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz (1886-1948), founding dean of New York’s Mesivta Torah VoDaath, renounced eating meat after the *Shoah*, saying, “There has been enough killing in the world.”^{7,8}

Quite simply, many Jews have concluded that we cannot be *rachmanim b’nei rachmanim* (compassionate children of compassionate ancestors) while supporting the cruel conditions under which animals are raised and slaughtered by the billions for their flesh, eggs, and milk.⁹ For example, chickens raised for their eggs begin their short lives by having their sensitive beaks sliced off with a hot wire when they are only a few days old. They spend the rest of their lives in windowless buildings where they are crammed so tightly into cages that they can never even stretch a wing. Cattle raised for beef are castrated, dehorned, and branded without painkillers. Along with “dairy cows”

who are “worn out,” cattle raised for food have their lives ended after a nightmarish ride to the slaughterhouse, during which they go without food or water and often endure life-threatening weather extremes. Many animals are so sick and injured when they arrive at the slaughterhouse that they cannot even walk—the industry calls these animals “downers.”

Vegetarianism as a Statement of Jewish Values

In an age filled with violence, Jews think of vegetarianism as more than just a smart, healthy dietary choice motivated by self-interest. Jewish dietary practices have always aimed to elevate eating to a spiritual level and to use our daily actions to make a statement about our deepest values. As Singer put it, vegetarianism “... is my protest against the conduct of the world. To be a vegetarian is to disagree—to disagree with the course of things today ... starvation, cruelty—we must make a statement against these things. Vegetarianism is my statement. And I think it’s a strong one.”¹⁰

Of course, Singer’s statement is not only strong, but deeply Jewish, resonating with core traditional values like *ts’ar ba’alei chayim*. Indeed, Singer is only one of several Jewish literary giants who adopted and advocated vegetarianism as a protest against the *Shoah*, the violence from which it arose, and the injustice that they saw in eating animal flesh.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon, a Nobel laureate and winner of the Israel Prize for Literature for his foundational contributions to modern Hebrew fiction, was another committed vegetarian. In a gentle protest against the custom of serving meat on *Shabbat*, Agnon wrote about his own vision of a vegetarian Sabbath: “The table was well spread with all manner of fruit, beans, greenstuffs and good pies ... but of flesh and fish there was never a sign.”¹¹ Also among the well-known Yiddish writers who adopted vegetarianism were the influential I.L. Peretz, a founding father of modern Yiddish literature, and Melech Ravitch, who was

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—I.B. SINGER, YIDDISH WRITER AND NOBEL LAUREATE

widely regarded as the dean of Yiddish poetry. Franz Kafka, whose books still influence Western literature, was also a vegetarian and an animal-protection advocate.

As Jews, we know that silence in the face of injustice amounts to complicity. Jewish vegetarianism allows us to take a stand for Jewish values and against the silence that surrounds our mistreatment of animals.

FOR ANIMALS ...

Judaism and Kinship With Animals

Before modern science taught us that we share up to 98 percent of our genetic composition with other primates such as chimpanzees, the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) emphasized a special kinship between humans and animals.¹² Humans and larger land animals were created on the same day of creation, the sixth day (Genesis 1:24-26).¹³ However, air and water animals had, at that point, already received the honor of the very first blessing in the Torah, “Be fertile and increase ...” (Genesis 1:22). Humans were not far behind. Our blessing—the second in the Torah—comes a few verses later (Genesis 1:28). Both blessings begin with the phrase, “Be fertile and increase” The parallel between the blessings suggests common needs and underscores a common divine concern for all life. Humans are uniquely created in the image of God, but we, nonetheless, have much in common with the animals with whom we were created.

What is especially remarkable in the creation narrative is that the first relationship established in the Torah is not between humans and God but between humans and animals (Genesis 1:26-29). These often misunderstood verses speak of human “dominion” over animals. According to the ancient rabbis, the implication is that humans, like kings, have special responsibilities and duties to care for the rest of creation as partners with—but never in place of—God. In Rav Kook’s words, “No intelligent, thinking person



We share 98 percent of our genetic make-up with chimpanzees.

could suppose that when the Torah instructs humankind to dominate ... (Genesis 1:28) it means the domination of a harsh ruler, who afflicts his people and servants merely to fulfill his personal whim and desire, according to the crookedness of his heart. It is unthinkable that the Torah would impose such a decree of servitude, sealed for all eternity, upon the world of God, Who is ‘good to all, and His mercy is upon all His works’ (Psalms 145:9), and Who declared, ‘The world shall be built upon kindness’ (Psalms 89:3).”¹⁴



Omar, rescued from a dairy farm, now lives with former member of Congress Charlie Rose.

In light of the conditions faced by the billions of farmed animals and fish killed annually in the U.S., we might pause to ask what happened to our vision of kinship and obligation. All God’s creatures are born with particular desires. Just as dogs take pleasure in playing or running in the park, mother cows bond strongly with their young, and chickens enjoy dustbathing and roosting. All creatures share the desire for clean air, clean water, exercise, and so on. Yet, the animals whose parts appear in our supermarkets are raised in dark, windowless animal factories where they are fed the “rendered” parts of their slaughtered brethren and more than half of all the antibiotics produced in the U.S.¹⁵ Chickens and “dairy cows” are treated as nothing more than meat, milk, and egg machines. Cattle are mutilated, left to suffer in extreme weather, and forced to spend about half their lives on stinking feedlots, where they are fed unnatural diets that cause many of them to die from bloat and other digestive disorders. Those who live long enough to be slaughtered often survive only because their feed is laced with drugs to keep them alive through conditions that would otherwise kill them.

Just as animal and human lives are linked in the biblical narrative of creation, our lives are linked together today by the question of diet. Health-care costs directly attributable to meat consumption are estimated at more than \$123 billion a year, and the cost of human misery caused by obesity, heart disease, cancer, and other meat-related ailments is incalculable (see the article by Dr. Jay Lavine included with this text).¹⁶ The plight of humans and animals is linked today as it was on the sixth day of the creation narrative—this time in suffering.

Animals Are Not Ours to Eat

Even before recent studies indicating that vegetarianism can extend life and improve health became a part of the contemporary medical canon, Judaism's textual canon had a pro-vegetarian bias. The biblical drama is rooted in the real, day-to-day struggle of living the way that God wants us to live. The greatest Jewish heroes—the patriarchs and matriarchs—are deeply human. The Bible tells of their foibles and weaknesses as much as it tells of their strengths and grandeur. We, therefore, have few visions of perfection in the Bible, which largely describes the world of human beings after their exile from the Garden of Eden—a world of compromise in which humans wage horrific wars, enslave each other, sacrifice animals, and eat meat. But what do we see in the visions of perfection found in the *Tanakh*? What is the diet of Eden and the messianic era?

“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”
(GENESIS 1:29).

While humans dwelled in Eden, God commanded all creatures to adopt an entirely plant-based diet. “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” (Genesis 1:29). Immediately after this command, God described creation as *tov meod* (very good). This is the only time in the narrative that God calls creation *tov meod* instead of merely *tov* (good). Significantly, this is repeated twice, in reduced form, in Genesis 2:16 and 3:18.

One of the foremost Jewish Torah commentators, Rashi (1040-1105), remarks on Genesis 1:29-30, “[God] did not permit Adam to kill any creature and to eat its flesh, but all alike were to eat herbs.”^{17,18} All the most eminent Torah scholars agree that the diet of Eden was vegetarian, and virtually all agree that it was vegan (without animal products of any kind, including eggs and dairy products).

Thus, we are confronted with a powerful fact: God's original intent for humans was that they be vegetarian. The Torah only reluctantly allowed meat-eating (Genesis 9:3) after “God saw how corrupt the

earth was, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth” (Genesis 6:12). As a whole, the textual tradition links the beginning of meat-eating with the beginning of human degeneracy.

Moreover, the end of meat-eating is linked with redemption. Envisioning the messianic era, Isaiah links vegetarianism and the harmonious world of redemption. Consider the following famous passage, which helped persuade Rav Kook that the messianic era would be vegetarian:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
The leopard lie down with the kid;
The calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together,
With a little boy to herd them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
Their young shall lie down together;
And the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw (Isaiah 11:6-7).

Animals who would normally prey on each other will dwell peacefully together under the shepherding of a mere child—the Messiah who is still to come. God's original vegetarian plan for creation, as articulated in Genesis 1:29-30, is renewed. Thus, the Jewish vision of vegetarianism is linked to perhaps the two most profound and well-known portrayals of the ideal world in the *Tanakh*, the Eden of the creation story and the messianic visions of Isaiah.

The prophets Joel (Chapter 4:18) and Amos (Chapter 9:14) also suggest vegetarianism as a symbol of messianic days. The popular author, Rabbi Rami Shapiro explains, “My own view is that a vegetarian diet may, in fact, hasten the coming of *Moshiach* (the Messiah). The more we live as if this were the messianic age, the closer we are to it.”¹⁹

Since meat-eating is linked to degeneracy, and vegetarianism is linked to the messianic era, it would, therefore, appear that the Torah views meat-eating as a problem. It is no coincidence that the laws of *kashrut*, in general, do not restrict the consumption of plant food unless it has become contaminated by animal products. Thus, the *Kli Yakar* and Rav Kook observe that the complexity of the laws

surrounding meat imply a rebuke. Significantly, there is no specific Jewish blessing for meat as there is for bread, fruit, wine, and vegetables. Many contemporary rabbis also believe that the laws of *kashrut* provide guidance back to vegetarianism. In the words of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, a highly respected contemporary Torah commentator, “The dietary laws are intended to teach us compassion and lead us gently to vegetarianism.”²⁰

Tsa'ar Ba'alei Chayim: The Jewish Principle of Compassion for Animals

Jewish legal tradition mandates that Jews observe the principle of *tsa'ar ba'alei chayim*. The ancient rabbis perceived that this law came directly from the Torah, and thus, they placed it at the highest level of Jewish law.

Jewish scripture indicates that acts of human kindness toward animals are parallel to the divine concern for God’s human “flock.” Consider one of the most enduring images in the *Tanakh*, which



Egg-laying chickens suffer from intensive confinement, filthy conditions, and debanking.

likens God to a good shepherd, “The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me to water in places of repose; He renews my life ...” (Psalms 23:1-3). Looking at this passage today, we might note that it does not say, “The Lord pumps me full of antibiotics and hormones, locks me in a crowded, ammonia-filled shed, and slits my throat on an assembly line.”²¹ Yet these are the practices of today’s “shepherds.” According to Psalm 145:9, a touchstone for rabbinic teaching on compassion for animals, God’s “mercy is upon all his works.” Taking into account the Jewish

principle of *imitatio dei* (the ethical emulation of God), we ought to ask where human tenderness and mercy are on today’s factory farms.

Unfortunately, the commandment to be compassionate to animals has often been burdened with concessions to human convenience that have obscured its implications in the realm of our dietary

choices. Given modern realities, this ethical blindness to the suffering of fish and farmed animals is especially troubling. Consider that chickens raised for their flesh are typically given only half a square foot of living space. Consider that every year, millions of male chicks are thrown into garbage bags or grinders where they suffocate or are crushed or hacked to death because they cannot lay eggs and have not been genetically engineered to produce excessive flesh.²² Consider that approximately 40 percent of cows raised for their milk are lame and that 50 percent suffer from mastitis, a painful swelling and infection of the udder that is aggravated by the unnaturally high volume of milk that they are bred to produce.^{23,24} Consider that more than 100,000 cattle a year are crippled during the harsh journey to the slaughterhouse.²⁵

Fish, too, must be included in the mandate of *tsa'ar ba'alei chayim*. Although fish cannot express pain and suffering in ways that humans can easily recognize, common sense—as well as studies by marine biologists—tells us that fish do feel pain. Dr. Donald Broom, a professor of animal welfare at Cambridge University, explains that “the pain system in fish is virtually the same as in birds and mammals.” Fish, of course, suffer when they are impaled, thrown, crushed, and left to die slow, painful deaths by suffocation. Today, the fishing industry captures fish—along with nontarget animals such as dolphins, birds, and turtles—in huge trawlers’ nets and drags them, together with the rocks and debris caught in the net, along the ocean floor for hours. As they are pulled from the depths of the ocean, fish undergo excruciating decompression—often the intense internal pressure ruptures their swimbladders, pushes their stomachs through their mouths and makes their eyes bulge out of their heads. Once they are tossed aboard the ship, many surviving fish slowly suffocate or are crushed to death, and others are still alive when their throats and bellies are cut open. Franz Kafka was aware of the cruelty involved in fishing and found a special peace of mind when he stopped eating fish and other animals. While watching a fish swim gracefully, he remarked, “Now I can look at you in peace; I don’t eat you anymore.”²⁶



Trawlers drag sea animals together with rocks and debris for hours.

A MEDICAL PERSPECTIVE ON JEWISH DIET

BY J.B. LAVINE, M.D.



When Ashkenazi Jews, those of central and eastern European origin, emigrated to the United States, they brought more than their religious heritage with them. They brought schmaltz (rendered chicken fat), kishka (stuffed beef casing), and corned beef. Instead of suffering from pogroms, they began suffering from heart attacks, diabetes, cancer, and kidney stones. Perhaps the average Jewish diet should be considered one of the enemies of the Jewish people.

Most people realize that the cholesterol and saturated fat in animal products can lead to heart attacks. The cause of heart attacks, atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), is preventable and even reversible by lifestyle change incorporating a low-fat vegetarian diet.¹

Cancer of the colon and rectum is the number one cause of death due to cancer in nonsmokers. Ashkenazi Jews have one of the highest rates of this cancer of any group in the world. This proclivity is felt to stem more from diet than from genetics.² A meat-rich diet has been linked with colon cancer in many studies, whereas a fiber-rich plant-based diet helps prevent it.^{3,4,5} In regions of the world where people follow the latter type of diet, colon cancer is rarely seen. When they adopt “Westernized” modes of eating, however, the incidence rises dramatically.⁶

Jews also have a higher than expected rate of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma,³ another of the major cancer killers. Meat and milk consumption has been linked with the disease in a number of studies.^{7,8,9} Workers in the meat industry have also shown increased risk. Leukemia and other viruses in cows, chickens, and other animals may play a role.¹⁰

Two other cancers, pancreatic and ovarian,³ may be more common in Jews,³ and associations with animal product consumption have been made here as well.^{11,12}

But aren’t dairy products and fish healthy, as the media frequently suggest? As mentioned, some studies have associated dairy products with ovarian cancer and lymphoma, to which we can add prostate cancer.¹³ Most people already know about milk fat. But dairy products also appear to raise insulin levels in the body,¹⁴ which may increase the risk of diabetes and which may be an independent risk factor for heart disease as well.¹⁵ The healthiest sources of calcium are many dark, leafy green vegetables, rich in all the important minerals and in health-promoting phytochemicals.

Claims that fish would benefit vegetarians by lowering cholesterol levels, blood pressure,¹⁶ etc., have not stood up to scrutiny.¹⁶ Contamination of fish by environmental toxins, which

could increase the risk of cancer, heart disease, and other chronic ailments, is well known. And diets rich in animal flesh protein may promote loss of calcium from the body¹⁷ or retention in the form of kidney stones.¹⁸ A total vegetarian diet remains the ideal.

Chicken soup is not Jewish medicine. Prevention is.¹⁹ Jews are commanded to preserve their health and to avoid

anything harmful to health. Since nutrition is the main determinant of health and the heart of preventive medicine, becoming a vegetarian is the best way to fulfill these mandates. With all the often preventable diseases mentioned above lurking around the corner, the only question should be, “If not now, when?”²⁰ “Choose life, so that you and your offspring may live.”²¹

¹Ornish D, Brown SE, Scherwitz LW, et al. Can lifestyle changes reverse coronary heart disease? *The Lancet* 1990;336:129-133.

²Feldman GE. Do Ashkenazi Jews have a higher than expected cancer burden? Implications for cancer control prioritization efforts. *Israel Medical Association Journal* 2001;3:341-346.

³Wargovich MJ, Baer AR, Hu PJ, and Sumiyoshi H. Dietary factors and colon cancer. *Gastroenterology Clinics of North America* 1988;17:727-745.

⁴Willett WC, Stampfer MJ, Colditz GA, Rosner BA, Speizer FE. Relation of meat, fat, and fiber intake to the risk of colon cancer in a prospective study among women. *The New England Journal of Medicine* 1990;323:1664-1672.

⁵Singh PN, Fraser GE. Dietary risk factors for colon cancer in a low-risk population. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 1998;148:761-774.

⁶Diet, Nutrition, and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases. Geneva: World Health Organization, 1990:34.

⁷Ursin G, Bjelke E, Heuch I, Vollset SE. Milk consumption and cancer incidence: a Norwegian prospective study. *British Journal of Cancer* 1990;61:454-459.

⁸Chiu BC-H, Cerhan JR, Folsom AR, et al. Diet and risk of non-Hodgkin lymphoma in older women. *JAMA* 1996;275:1315-1321.

⁹Zhang S, Hunter DJ, Rosner BA, et al. Dietary fat and protein in relation to risk of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma among women. *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* 1999;91:1751-1758.

¹⁰Metayer C, Johnson ES, Rice JC. Nested case-control study of tumors of the hemopoietic and lymphatic systems among workers in the meat industry. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 1998;147:727-738.

¹¹Zheng W, McLaughlin JK, Gridley G, et al. A cohort study of smoking, alcohol consumption, and dietary factors for pancreatic cancer (United States). *Cancer Causes and Control* 1993;4:477-482.

¹²Kushi LH, Mink PJ, Folsom AR, et al. Prospective study of diet and ovarian cancer. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 1999;149:21-31.

¹³Chan JM, Stampfer MJ, Ma J, et al. Dairy products, calcium, and prostate cancer risk in the Physicians’ Health Study. *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 2001;74:549-554.

¹⁴Liljeberg Elmstahl J, Bjorck I. Nukj as a supplement to mixed meals may elevate postprandial insulinaemia. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 2001;55:994-999.

¹⁵Despres J-B, Lamarche B, Mauriege P, et al. Hyperinsulinemia as an independent risk factor for ischemic heart disease. *The New England Journal of Medicine* 1996;334:952-957.

¹⁶Lavine JB. Blood pressure and cholesterol in fish-eaters versus vegetarians. *The Lancet* 1996;348:1460 (letter).

¹⁷Hu J-E, Zhao X-E, Parpia B, Campbell TC. Dietary intakes and urinary excretion of calcium and acids: a cross-sectional study of women in China. *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 1993;58:398-406.

¹⁸Curhan GC, Willett WC, Rimm EB, Stampfer MJ. A prospective study of dietary calcium and other nutrients and the risk of symptomatic kidney stones. *The New England Journal of Medicine* 1993;328:833-838.

¹⁹Lavine JB. Chicken soup or Jewish medicine. *Chest* 2000;119:1295.

²⁰Hillel. *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:14

²¹Deuteronomy 30:19

Given these facts, it seems that *ts'ar ba'alei chayim* must speak to our dietary choices or become a meaningless phrase.

FOR YOURSELF ...

A Change of Heart for Your Heart

In recent years, congregations across the country have taken a strong stand against smoking because of the well-documented health risk that it poses. Yet meat and other animal products are still served in many synagogues despite conclusive evidence indicating that eating meat is just as harmful as smoking cigarettes. According to the National Cancer Institute, tobacco accounts for 30 percent of all cancer cases, while dietary factors—including the consumption of animal products—contribute 35 percent or more.²⁷

The three biggest killers in the U.S.—heart disease, cancer, and stroke—are all preventable, to some degree, through lifestyle changes such as the adoption of a low-fat vegetarian diet.²⁸ This is of special concern to Jewish populations that appear to be at increased risk for some diseases linked with animal products, as detailed in the article by Dr. Jay Lavine included in this text.

Researchers like Dean Ornish of the Preventive Medical Research Institute and Caldwell Esselstyn of the Cleveland Clinic have demonstrated that a vegan diet is so powerful that it is an essential component of heart-disease reversal programs.

However, the primary power of vegetarian living lies in its ability to prevent a wide variety of health problems. The American Dietetic Association suggests that there is a positive relationship between a vegetarian diet and a reduced risk of several chronic degenerative diseases and conditions, including obesity, coronary artery disease, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and some types of cancer.²⁹ When we consider that humans are primates whose teeth, intestinal structures, and dietary needs are

The American Dietetic Association suggests that there is a positive relationship between a vegetarian diet and a reduced risk of several chronic degenerative diseases and conditions, including obesity, coronary artery disease, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and some types of cancer.

geared toward eating plant foods, not muscle tissue from animals, the health benefits of a vegetarian diet are not surprising.³⁰

As a result of health concerns, some congregations have replaced traditional animal-based *onegim* (receptions), Passover *sedarim*, and social dinners with vegetarian versions. Popular vegan fare at today's synagogue *onegim* includes hummus, tabouli, marinated or roasted vegetables, fresh fruit platters, bagels (of course) with new dairy-free *parve* spreads, and low-fat baked goods.³¹ Thanks to medical experts like renowned Harvard researcher William Castelli, M.D., who stated that a “low-fat plant-based diet would not only lower the heart attack rate about 85 percent, but would lower the cancer rate 60 percent,” congregations are beginning to acknowledge the benefits of a vegetarian diet.³²



“[T]he ability of a physician to prevent illness is a greater proof of his skill than his ability to cure someone who is already ill.”

—MAIMONIDES

Moreover, the move toward healthier food is representative of the traditional Jewish approach to medicine, which, unlike the typical allopathic emphasis on “early diagnosis and cure,” puts the focus on prevention.³³ This emphasis was expressed by Maimonides when he observed that “the ability of a physician to prevent illness is a greater proof of his skill than his ability to cure someone who is already ill.”³⁴

Vegetarianism—and to an even greater extent, veganism—perhaps more than any other lifestyle change, can help prevent disease. According to Rabbi David Rosen, “As it is halachically prohibited to harm oneself and as healthy, nutritious vegetarian alternatives are easily available, meat consumption has become halachically unjustifiable.”³⁵

FOR THE ENVIRONMENT ...

Bal Tashchit: The Jewish Principle of Not Wasting

Another case for Jewish vegetarianism rests upon ecological concerns about how the consumption of meat, dairy products, and eggs wastes resources and leads to massive pollution. About 70 percent of

the grain produced and nearly half of all the water consumed in the U.S. is used to raise farmed animals, creating unprecedented inefficiency.^{36,37} This inefficiency often weighs most heavily on the poor. According to the environmental think tank Worldwatch Institute, “In a world where an estimated one in every six people goes hungry every day, the politics of meat consumption are increasingly heated, since meat production is an inefficient use of grain—the grain is used more efficiently when consumed directly by humans. Continued growth in meat output is dependent on feeding grains to animals, creating competition for grain between affluent meat-eaters and the world’s poor.”³⁸

In sharp contrast to the Jewish Torah principle of *bal tashchit*, humans’ animal-based diet has created the most wasteful and inefficient food-production system in history. Forests, wetlands, and other wildlife habitats have been transformed into crop and grazing lands that are used to support the modern meat-based diet. Since the grain fed to farm animals is an energy-intensive product, meat-based diets burden our limited supply of fossil fuels.³⁹

Animal agriculture also wastes water resources. In California, clean water is in short supply, in part because of the grossly inefficient use of water in the state’s factory-style dairy industry, now the biggest in the world. In fact, nearly one-third of all irrigation water in California is used for livestock.⁴⁰ At the same time, pollution from animal agriculture is responsible for most of today’s water pollution and is a major contributor to air pollution. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, waste from hog, chicken, and cattle operations has polluted 35,000 miles of rivers in 22 states and contaminated groundwater in 17 others.⁴¹ A comprehensive 2002 report on factory-farm pollution issued by the Sierra Club summarizes the situation:

Factory farms are big polluters, largely due to the huge amount of animal waste their operations generate. In 1997

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, waste from hog, chicken, and cattle operations has polluted 35,000 miles of rivers in 22 states and contaminated groundwater in 17 others.

alone, U.S. beef, pig, and chicken operations generated 291 billion pounds of manure. In that year, Americans only produced approximately one-sixth of that amount. In order to deal with vast amounts of manure, animal factories generally use open pits, known as lagoons, to store liquefied manure. . . . In most cases, the waste is ultimately disposed of on land, allowing it to run off into nearby streams or seep into underground water supplies. The contents of this waste, including ammonia, pathogens, pesticides, antibiotics, and hormones can end up in our drinking water and in our bodies. In addition to water pollution, factory farms often emit irritating and health-threatening pollutants into the air. Ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, carbon dioxide, particulate matter, methane, dust, and allergens have all been traced back to animal factories.⁴²

Livestock operations, in fact, account for 15 to 20 percent of all global methane emissions, which contribute substantially to the greenhouse effect.⁴³ In response to these facts, many environmentalists—religious and secular—have argued that the best thing you can do to show that you care about the earth is adopt a low-impact plant-based diet.

Beyond *Bal Tashchit*: From Not Wasting to a Concern for All Life

Recent Jewish environmentalism has primarily championed the principle of *bal tashchit*, but a Jewish ecological ethic supplements the broad concern for ecosystems addressed by *bal tashchit* with a special concern for sentient life. Where secular environmentalism might raise concern about endangered species but be unconcerned with animals whose populations are stable, Judaism emphasizes God’s special concern for all living beings. For example, in the traditional Sabbath morning liturgy, Jews sing praise to the “God of all creatures, endlessly extolled, You guide the world with kindness, its creatures with compassion.”⁴⁴ In the words of Psalm 147, we arise daily and thank God, Who “gives the beasts their food, and to ravens that for which they call.”⁴⁵ As the great 20th century Jewish theologian and Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, “The secret of every being is the divine care and concern that are invested in it.”⁴⁶



*“God of all creatures,
endlessly extolled, You
guide the world with
kindness, its creatures
with compassion.”*

—SABBATH
MORNING LITURGY

Another reason to see vegetarianism and our relationship with animals at the heart of a Jewish ecological ethic is that God directly enters into a covenant with animals. This is especially remarkable given that the covenantal relationship that God has with the Jewish people is arguably the most central theme of the entire *Tanakh*. The first covenant in the Torah, the Noahide covenant, is between God and all that lives. According to Genesis 9:8-10, “And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that is with you—birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well—all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth’”

The fact that animals can enter into a covenant suggests that they have the biblical equivalent of what we might call basic rights. The Torah does not suggest that trees or plants have such rights, so it may be that God’s covenant with animals provides a needed Jewish textual basis for a more profound extension of moral concern for the environment.

The idea that an ecosystem may merit protection for the sake of the animals who live in it is expressed in a *midrash* (ancient rabbinic commentary on the Bible) that takes the form of a dialogue between the righteous King Kazia and Alexander of Macedon. Upon hearing about the lack of justice in the Macedonian judicial system, King Kazia wondered if God had punished the Macedonians by withholding rain and sun. King Kazia asked Alexander, “Does rain descend in your country?” Alexander replied, “Yes.” “Does the sun shine?” asked the righteous king. Alexander again replied, “Yes.” “By heaven!” replied the righteous king. “It is not for your sake but for the sake of the cattle [that rain descends and sun shines in your country].” The *midrash* concludes that the meaning of the biblical verse, “Man and beast Thou preservest, O Lord” (Psalm 36:7) is to be understood as, “Man *for the sake of* beast Thou preservest, O

Lord.”⁴⁷ In this story, sun and rain—the essentials of a healthy environment—are provided to a wicked city for the sake of its animals. Thus, ecosystems merit protection not only because they preserve a healthy environment for humans but because they invariably sustain animals.

A vegetarian diet, of course, helps protect animal life *and* preserve the larger ecosystem.

“The Earth Is the Lord’s”

Covenants, by their nature, have stipulations. The Noahide covenant with all living creatures stipulates that God will never destroy the earth with floods again. However, according to the agreement, human beings are prohibited from eating “flesh with its life-blood in it” (Genesis 9:4). This commandment is the first of many restrictions on eating animal flesh that follow God’s begrudging concession to human weakness when the Noahide covenant allows meat-eating. This prohibition also is a foundational regulation for the biblical practice of animal sacrifice.

For many Jews today, the blood prohibition, along with the many passages referring to animal sacrifice in the *Tanakh*, are difficult to understand. One might conclude that the numerous biblical exhortations to sacrifice animals—the means by which many ancient Jews obtained their meat—imply that the vegetarian ideal of Eden has been superseded. Yet, this view is mistaken.

Far from promoting meat-eating, most scholars have argued that the ancient practice of animal sacrifice functioned to curtail and regulate the already well-entrenched habit of eating animals. As the noted contemporary Jewish scholar and author of the Anchor Bible commentary on Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom, points out, the sacrificial system outlined in Leviticus is established to provide expiation for the guilt incurred by the killing of animals.⁴⁸ The rituals of animal sacrifice, like the Jewish dietary laws that are their modern legacy, reveal great discomfort with the killing of animals. These ancient rituals are compromises between the original vegetarian paradise and the vegetarian end-of-days. They are a picture of a broken world trying to correct itself, not a paradise to emulate.

Scholars, like Milgrom, who have explored the meaning of sacrifice have concluded that it aimed to limit the consumption of animals and to remind people, in the words of the Psalmist, that “[t]he earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24:1). Milgrom explains the prohibition on eating “flesh with its life-blood in it” by stating, “The human being must never lose sight of the fundamental tenet for a viable human society. Life is inviolable; it may not be treated lightly. Mankind has a right to nourishment, not to life. Hence the blood, the symbol of life, must be drained, returned to the universe, to God.”⁴⁹



Madeline, found near a factory farm, now lives at OohMahNee Sanctuary.

By regulating the way that animals could be killed and limiting the number that could be killed, the practice of sacrifice served as a reminder of human limitation, and therein lies its relevance for Jewish ecology. Today, Jewish environmentalists have urged us to rekindle our sense of human limitation. Neither the earth nor animals belong to humans; we all belong to God.

In an age when the animals we eat are Frankenstein-like products of genetic manipulation, Jewish environmentalism asks if we have remembered that “[t]he earth is the Lord’s.” Modern turkeys, for example, have been so genetically altered that they are incapable of sexual reproduction. Similarly, chickens have been bred to grow so large, so quickly that they develop crippling leg disorders because their bodies cannot support their excessive weight. Millions of chickens die from the abnormal strain before they reach the slaughterhouse at 6 or 7 weeks of age. Given these realities, vegetarianism allows us to show a broad concern for the earth and all creatures and helps us to take a strong stand against human arrogance. It reminds us that Jewish living is not meant to be human-centered, but instead centered on God and our relationship with God.

Eco-Kashrut

We cannot conclude our discussion of Judaism, ecology, and vegetarianism without discussing one of the Jewish ecology

movement’s most popular contributions to contemporary Jewish life, the idea of *eco-kashrut*. *Eco-kashrut* is the project of highlighting the ethical aspects of *kashrut* and other Jewish observances by interpreting them in light of broad Jewish values relating to the environment, compassion for animals, health, and concern for workers.

Revitalizing the practice of *kashrut* is an urgent need. Despite the Jewish mandate of *ts’ar ba’alei chayim*, today’s woefully inadequate kosher standards do nothing to directly address the cruel conditions under which animals are actually raised. Instead, *kashrut* authorities have narrowly focused on the condition of animals at the time of slaughter. This has resulted in a scandalous situation in which kosher animals are typically raised in the same abusive manner—including intensive confinement—that characterizes the meat industry as a whole.

“Vegetarianism [is] a kashrut for our age.”

—RABBI ARTHUR GREEN, DEAN OF HEBREW COLLEGE RABBINICAL SCHOOL AND BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

Fortunately, however, the *eco-kashrut* discussion has grown tremendously and is helping to change the way that Jews look at eating. Rabbi Barry Schwartz, who sits on the Reform rabbinical association’s new task force on *kashrut*, explains, “The great spiritual leader and first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Abraham Kook, famously wrote,

‘hayashan yithadesh, v’behadash yitkadesh, the old shall be made new, and the new shall be made holy.’ In this spirit, the practice of *eco-kashrut* seeks to build upon the reverence for life that is central to Judaism’s dietary laws by testing our consumption against the four-part test of *bal tashchit* (excessive waste and environmental impact), *ts’ar ba’alei chayim* (cruelty to animals), *shmirat haguf* (health) and *oshek* (labor exploitation). All indicators point to a vegetarian diet as the highest expression of an *eco-kashrut* ethic.”⁵⁰

In a similar spirit, Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, a leading Jewish environmentalist and spiritual leader of the Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Maryland, speaks of his own journey to a vegetarian *eco-kashrut* practice, “I ‘discovered’

vegetarianism, appropriately enough, at Reform Jewish summer camp. Ever since realizing in that Jewish context that one can remain healthy without compromising other life forms and the planet, vegetarianism and *kashrut* have been interwoven in my life.⁵¹ Rabbi Dobb received his ordination at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where past president Arthur Green argued that vegetarianism is the *kashrut* of our age.⁵² Summarizing his position on vegetarianism, Rabbi Dobb continues, “[T]o the extent that a Reconstructionist rabbi ever functions as a *posek* (Jewish legal decisor), I see vegetarianism as a *mitzvah* (commandment). Traditional *mitzvot* such as *bal tashchit* (not wasting) and *ts’ar ba’alei chayim* (compassion for animals) meet new understandings of eco-kashrut to make this a true theological and moral imperative.”⁵³

FOR GOD ...

The facts in this essay *alone* present a strong case for vegetarianism. Perhaps it would be reason enough for us to go vegetarian if we knew only that almost all chickens raised for meat, cows raised for milk, and hens raised for eggs live in the abject misery of intensive confinement and that almost all cattle spend at least part of their lives crammed onto feedlots. Perhaps it would be enough if we knew only that vegetarians are healthier and live longer lives. Perhaps it would be enough if we knew only that a meat-based diet wastes massive amounts of water, fuel, food, and land while simultaneously polluting our planet. *Dayenu*—it would be enough!

Yet, as Jews, we must do more than just consider these facts; we must consider them and ask what diet God prefers for us. What diet would God—Who enjoins us to guard our health, not to inflict *ts’ar ba’alei chayim*, and not to waste—prefer us to eat? Is it possible that a just, compassionate, and caring God, Who enters into covenant with “every living thing on earth” (Genesis 9:10) and Whose “mercy is upon all his works” (Psalm 145:9), would want us to continue slaughtering 10 billion farmed animals and billions of sea animals annually in the U.S. alone?

Simply by virtue of being human, we have a measure of power over the lives of many creatures. May we learn to exercise that influence with humility, a sense of kinship, and a portion of the *hesed* (loving

kindness) with which God acts. May we remember that the world that God created is not merely a collection of objects but the meeting of subjects—all creatures dear to God.

All of us, as we stand with the refrigerator open or stare at our menus with grumbling stomachs, are required to make a decision. Choose life.

This essay was written by Aaron Gross, M.T.S., Richard Schwartz, Ph.D., and Roberta Kalechofsky, Ph.D., in consultation with Jewish members of PETA’s staff. *A Medical Perspective on Jewish Diet* was written independently by Dr. Jay Levine.

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Richard H. Schwartz, Ph.D., an Orthodox Jew, is the author of *Judaism and Vegetarianism*, *Judaism and Global Survival*, and *Mathematics and Global Survival*. He is a speaker and commentator on an array of current issues. A sampling of his many articles and book reviews can be found on JewishVeg.com. He is a professor emeritus of mathematics at the College of Staten Island and president of the Jewish Vegetarians of North America.

Roberta Kalechofsky, Ph.D., is the author of 10 books and a recipient of literary fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts. She founded Micah Publications in 1975 and Jews for Animal Rights in 1985.

Jay Lavine, M.D., is an award-winning author and speaker in the areas of preventive nutrition and medical ethics. His articles have

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For More Information

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For a free copy of PETA's vegetarian starter kit, call 1-888-VEG-FOOD or visit GoVeg.com.

What You Can Do

- Engage a guest speaker to conduct a synagogue, youth group, or adult-education program on Judaism, animals, and vegetarianism. Contact us if you need help locating an appropriate Jewish educator or rabbi.
- Distribute this booklet in your synagogue or Jewish community center. We will supply free copies. E-mail literature requests to VegInfo@peta.org.
- Sign up to give a *dvar torah* (a talk on Torah/Judaism) at Shabbat services, and speak up for animals.
- Volunteer to do a program on Judaism and animals or *eco-kashrut* for your synagogue's youth group—make it an annual event.
- Suggest making a donation to an animal charity in Israel or in your local community when your synagogue is giving *tzedakah* (charity). Remember to support only cruelty-free health charities. See CaringConsumer.com for more information.
- Use this booklet and/or the primary Jewish texts to which it refers as the basis for a text study.

- Write an article for your synagogue newsletter or Jewish press on the connections between a Jewish holiday and vegetarianism. See JewishVeg.com for holiday-specific advice.

If you require help with any of these suggestions, please contact JewishVeg@peta.com. PETA will supply free copies of this booklet for you to distribute in your synagogue, youth group, or Jewish community center. E-mail booklet requests to VegInfo@peta.org.

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