

PARSHAT SHMINI

Rabbi Michael Gold

THE ETHICS OF EATING ANIMALS

“Speak to the people of Israel, saying, These are the beasts which you shall eat among all the beasts that are on the earth.” (Leviticus 11:2)

The second half of this portion deals with the Jewish dietary laws. There are certain animals, fish, birds, and even insects which may be eaten. Most of the animal kingdom is off limits for food consumption.

Why does the Torah allow the eating of animals? After all, in the Garden of Eden we were vegetarians. As we read in synagogue on the last day of Passover, in the Messianic Age even animals will be vegetarian. The lion will lie down with the lamb (actually Isaiah says the wolf will lie down with the lamb – Isaiah 11:6). In the Torah, the eating of animal flesh is a divine compromise God makes after the Noah flood. And the Jewish dietary laws are a further limitation on the eating of meat. Maybe we humans should give up eating meat altogether?

As many of you know, I teach secular ethics on a college level. One of the topics we discuss is the ethics of eating meat. As I read my students' papers, I am convinced that most of them are vegetarians or even vegans. Yet I know that many of them probably wrote their animal rights papers while munching down on a hamburger. Perhaps it is easier to say you are a vegetarian than to be a vegetarian. As a philosophy professor, I try to teach both sides of the issue.

Those who favor animal rights often quote utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer. He coined the term “speciesism”. Speciesism is like racism. To favor one species (humans) over another is equivalent to favoring one race over another. Those who favor animal rights also quote deontological philosopher Tom Regan. Just as humans are not objects but subjects, so animals are subjects of their own lives. Both philosophers give powerful arguments for becoming vegetarian.

Others give philosophical arguments defending the eating of animals. The

strongest refutation is that in nature animals eat each other. Lord Alfred Tennyson, in his poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.* wrote “nature red in tooth and claw.” Benjamin Franklin defended eating fish by saying the fish eat each other. But as we have learned from philosopher ass David Hume, “we cannot learn an ought from an is,” we cannot learn ethics from nature.” Because animals eat animals does not mean that humans ought to eat animals.

There is a fascinating argument brought by some philosophers that harkens back to Noah and the ark. The important point for humans is the survival of species as a whole, not individual animals. Philosopher Ronald Dworkin (1931 – 2013) has observed, “We tend to treat distinct animal species (though not individual animals) as sacred. We think it very important, and worth a considerable economic expense, to protect endangered species from destruction.”

Michael Pollan, author of *Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006) uses this approach. He describes how he read Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* while eating a steak dinner. Out of the cognitive dissonance of that moment, he thought about a defense for eating meat. He quoted something written by Leslie Stephen in the 1800’s, “The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon. If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all.” Animal species flourish because we eat them. But Pollan makes another very important point; we must find ways to limit the factory farming and other suffering we inflict on the animals we eat.

From a Jewish perspective, many people quote the late Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865 – 1935), the first Chief Rabbi of what would become the state of Israel and a vegetarian. Others argue that since God permits the eating of meat, it is arrogant to forbid what God has permitted. So, the debate regarding eating animals continues. I believe the Jewish dietary laws are a compromise worthy of ethical consideration.