

PARSHAT NOACH

Rabbi Michael Gold

EATING MEAT

“Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat, as with the green grasses I give you these.” (Genesis 9:3)

I have many friends who are vegetarian, avoiding meat, chicken, and fish. I give them credit for their self-discipline. I have other friends who keep a stricter vegan diet, avoiding eggs, milk, and all animal products. (I still have not received a clear answer whether vegans will eat honey on Rosh Hashana.) Those who follow these diets are healthier than those of us who, to quote the Torah, “lust after flesh” (Deuteronomy 12:20). And yet I will admit that I love a piece of baked salmon, fried chicken, or now and again when my wife allows it, a good steak.

This raises an important ethical question. Should we be allowed to eat meat? In the Garden of Eden we were vegetarians, eating only fruits and vegetables. According to the prophet Isaiah, when the messiah comes even animals will be vegetarians. “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid” (Isaiah 11:6). Nonetheless, in this week’s portion after Noah leaves the ark, God permits him and his family to eat meat. He is only warned not to eat the blood. (This is the basis of the Jewish practice of removing as much blood as possible by soaking and salting or by broiling.) Orthodox Jews have told me, if God gives you permission to do something, is it not arrogant to refuse to do it? On the other hand, the first chief rabbi of the Jewish settlement in Israel, Abraham Isaac Kook, advocated a vegetarian diet. He taught that God only allowed the eating of meat because of the low moral level of the generation of Noah.

Is it ethical to eat meat? Many modern ethicists say no. One prominent philosopher is Peter Singer, who taught that to favor humans over animals is speciesism, no different from racism. He was a utilitarian who taught that ethics is about minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure. The pleasure of eating meat cannot justify the pain to animals. Philosopher Tom Regan takes a different approach, based on the teaching of Immanuel Kant. Kant taught that people should be treated as subjects and not objects. So too, animals are subjects of their own lives and not objects for human pleasure.

These are powerful arguments. But in philosophy, there are always arguments on both sides. Benjamin Franklin, when asked about eating fish, famously said “I will stop eating fish when they stop eating each other.” Perhaps Franklin was implying that eating flesh is built into nature, including the nature of human beings. After all, God did give us four incisor teeth and the ability to digest meat. But because we can eat meat does not necessarily mean we should eat meat.

There is a fascinating argument for eating meat brought by some philosophers that harkens back to Noah and the ark. The important point for humans is the survival of species, not individual animals. Philosopher Ronald Dworkin 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 important point; we must find ways to limit the factory farming and other suffering we inflict on the animals we eat. Reforms of the way we raise animals for meat is something that meat eaters and vegetarians can agree on.

The Jewish dietary laws are meant to limit the eating of animals and also limit the suffering of those animals we do eat. For those who choose to eat meat, these laws can give some powerful guidance.