

Eating to Save the Planet

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As Shabbat begins and Passover ends, I commence my remarks this evening with a story about matzah, the unleavened bread that has sustained and afflicted Jewish people throughout the last week. Admittedly, this tale, told in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary* by Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, is of doubtful historical accuracy; but it is meaningful nonetheless: “[O]ne spring, before Passover, [Rabbi Yisrael Salanter] was called to certify the kosher status of a matzah factory. As he inspected the factory, he observed the conditions thoroughly. He saw that the matzah, the unleavened bread, was made according to the letter of [Jewish law]. Yet, after inspecting every aspect of the factory, Rabbi Salanter refused certification. Why? ... [H]e refused to certify the factory’s products because of the poor treatment of its workers. The women were overworked, their pay was insufficient, and their needs were ignored. Because his moral compass would not allow the consumption of products made unethically, Rabbi Salanter refused to certify the factory’s matzah as fit for use on the holiday when Jews tell the story of their ancestors’ release from enslavement.”ⁱ

The moral of the story is clear: Even for those who have no problem eating pork or shellfish, not to mention bread during Passover, we must concern ourselves with whether our food is **kosher**—that is, fit to be eaten by ethical people who are concerned about the wellbeing of all God’s children.

Today is Earth Day. As we mark this occasion focused on preserving creation in 2022, we are increasingly aware that the future of our planet and of all God’s creation is endangered. In the words of the World Wildlife Fund, “Humans and wild animals face...challenges for survival because of climate change. More frequent and intense drought, storms, heat waves, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and warming oceans can directly harm animals, destroy the places they live, and wreak havoc on people’s livelihoods and communities. As climate change worsens, dangerous weather events are becoming more frequent or severe. People in cities and towns around the United States are facing the consequences, from heat waves and wildfires to coastal storms and flooding.”ⁱⁱ

Last fall, *The Guardian* reported that “a major new study has found” that “[t]he global production of food is responsible for a third of all planet-heating gases emitted by human activity, with the use of animals for meat causing twice the pollution of producing plant-based foods.”ⁱⁱⁱ Raising cows, whether for meat or dairy, presents the most issues, including methane released in cattle waste, massive

deforestation to create grazing land, and tremendous drains on water supply. Other mammals are not far behind.

Nearly forty years ago, for reasons unconnected to the environment, I decided to abstain from eating mammalian meat, and I have kept to that practice ever since. My reasoning was and remains based on my understanding of Torah's dietary injunctions.

God's initial instruction to humans about what to eat is found in the very first chapter of Genesis, as part of the creation story: "And God said, 'Look, I have given you all the seed-bearing plants on the face of the earth, and every tree that has in it seed-bearing fruit—these are yours to eat. And to every land animal, and to every bird of the sky, and to all that creeps on the earth in which is the breath of life, I [give] all green vegetation for food.'"^{iv} In other words, God prescribes a vegan diet for all living things.

Apparently, though, that doesn't work out so well. After the flood, God tells Noah and his children: "Any small animal that is alive shall be food for you, like green grasses—I give you [them] all. But flesh whose lifeblood is [still] in it you may not eat."^v The medieval commentator RaDaK explains: "That is, you must slaughter the animal before you eat it. Cutting flesh of a living animal is cruel."^{vi} One may infer that, before the flood, humans were so full of lust for meat that they would tear limbs from living animals for food. Perhaps that was the violence that enraged God to the point of sending a flood to destroy all but Noah's family and two animals of each non-human species.

RaDaK, though, draws a different conclusion, writing: "Apparently, Noah was given the right to eat meat in return for having kept the animals alive."^{vii} From this argument we may infer that human beings in 2022 only retain the right to eat animal flesh if we, like Noah, keep the animals alive. On this Earth Day, though, we know that human activity is driving animal species to extinction.^{viii} Arguably, then, contemporary humans have forfeited the right, earned by Noah, to eat meat.

As a twenty-year-old, my logic was that God prefers veganism, but had made a compromise with Noah, and then a more restrictive arrangement with the Children of Israel in the kosher laws, distinguishing between those animals that we may eat and those that must be avoided. I confess that the specifics of traditional kosher laws have never been meaningful to me. Instead, I have made my own compromise between veganism, on the one hand, and eating all animals, on the other. Reasoning that mammals are closest to humans, I chose not to eat their meat, a commitment I have maintained for nearly four decades. More recently, as my son

Daniel has made me aware of the negative environmental impact of dairy farming, I have switched to plant-based milk and almost never consume dairy.

I confess that my own dietary habits have little impact on the future of our planet. Even if our entire congregation—heck, all the Jewish people in the world—stopped eating meat, we would not successfully end harmful global climate change. On this Earth Day, we must sadly acknowledge that great damage has already been done and that the full impact remains to be felt. Still, climate scientists tell us that we can, and we must, slow the warming of our planet. Every step we take does make some difference.

Two thousand years ago, Rabbi Tarfon seems to have anticipated our problem, when he taught, *Lo alecha ham'lachah ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimenah*, “You are not required to complete the task, but neither are you free to avoid it.”^{ix} We who cannot individually, or even collectively, arrest global warming nevertheless bear a weighty responsibility to do what we can. Eating to save the planet may be a good start.

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz, “Kashrut and Food Justice,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 154.

ⁱⁱ [Effects of Climate Change | Threats | WWF \(worldwildlife.org\)](https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/effects-of-climate-change).

ⁱⁱⁱ Olivar Milman, “Meat accounts for nearly 60% of all greenhouse gases from food production, study finds,” September 13, 2021, [Meat accounts for nearly 60% of all greenhouse gases from food production, study finds | Meat industry | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2021/sep/13/meat-accounts-for-nearly-60-of-all-greenhouse-gases-from-food-production-study-finds).

^{iv} Genesis 1:29-30.

^v Genesis 9:3-4.

^{vi} Kimchi (RaDaK) to Genesis 9:4.

^{vii} Kimchi (RaDaK) to Genesis 9:4.

^{viii} Stephen Leahy, “One million species at risk of extinction, UN report warns,” *National Geographic*, May 6, 2019, [One million species at risk of extinction, UN report warns \(nationalgeographic.com\)](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/05/06/one-million-species-at-risk-of-extinction-un-report-warns/).

^{ix} Pirkei Avot 2.16.