

COMMUNICATIONS

VEGETARIANISM AND JUDAISM

TO THE EDITOR:

Rabbi J. David Bleich's article, "Vegetarianism and Judaism" (Summer, 1987) is a welcome addition to the recent proliferation of considerations of this topic. Jewish vegetarians are pleased that such a noted scholar has clearly indicated in a prestigious Orthodox journal that religious Jews who are vegetarians are not violating halacha.

However, Rabbi Bleich's article makes several incorrect assumptions about today's Jewish vegetarian movement.

Some of the areas where Rabbi Bleich's assumptions can be challenged include:

1. He implies that Jewish vegetarians are putting animals at a level equal to or higher than that of people.

Concern for animals and a refusal to brutally treat and slaughter them for food that is not necessary and, indeed, is harmful to human health, does not mean that animals are regarded as equal to people. Also, many people are vegetarians for reasons other than animal rights, such as preservation of health, reduction of ecological threats, and help for hungry people. The vast majority of vegetarians consume milk and eggs and use other animal products such as leather.

2. Rabbi Bleich implies, based on a statement of Rabbi Kook, that people's concern for animals involves an improper ordering of priorities, since the world faces so many problems of human welfare.

Vegetarian diets not only reduce brutal treatment of animals, but also have many positive benefits for humanity, including improving human health,

reducing stress on threatened ecosystems, conserving resources, and providing the potential to reduce widespread hunger, through less waste of food, land, energy, water, and other resources.

3. Rabbi Bleich asserts that there is a danger to Judaism if the renunciation of the eating of meat is posited as a moral norm for mankind, putting, in effect, vegetarian values over Jewish teachings.

Fortunately, we don't have an "either/or" situation here, either Judaism or vegetarianism. Jewish vegetarians are not, God forbid, placing so-called vegetarian values above Torah principles. They are saying that it is basic Jewish values and mandates—to act with compassion to animals, guard our health, share with hungry people, protect the environment, conserve resources, and seek peace—which point strongly to vegetarianism, especially in view of the harm related to modern methods of raising animals on factory farms. Rather than rejecting Torah values, Jewish vegetarians are challenging the Jewish community to apply Judaism's glorious teachings.

In view of the strong Jewish mandates to be compassionate to animals, preserve health, help feed the hungry, protect the environment, and pursue peace, and the very negative effects that flesh-centered diets have in each of these areas, how do Jews today justify not being vegetarians?

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RABBI BLEICH RESPONDS:

Professor Schwartz is certainly correct in assuming that individuals who

adopt a vegetarian life-style because of sincere concerns related to health—regardless of whether or not those concerns are scientifically cogent—do not merit censure for having adopted a value system that is at variance with the teachings of Judaism. With regard to the other points raised, a careful reading of my comments will indicate that his accolade—no less than his critique—misses the mark.

SHIVA IN YERUSHALAYIM

TO THE EDITOR:

I have come to appreciate your publication for its scholarly presentation of important contemporary issues. The study of its contents offers me the opportunity to expand my knowledge and to consider material from an intellectual perspective. In that light, I was puzzled when I came across the article in your Summer, 1987 (22:1) edition, "Shiva in Yerushalayim" by Devora K. Wohlgelernter.

As I began to read, I realized that

this "Letter to My Chana" was not intended just to offer me new intellectual and scholarly insights.

It is now ten days since I first read this article. And I can tell you that Mrs. Wohlgelernter's words had the most profound effect that an author can hope to achieve—they have affected my life. Her willingness to share with all of us the appreciation which she had for that special life who was Chana Pere, in the midst of the unspeakable pain of her loss, has given us the opportunity to focus again on the special gifts from HaShem which children are to us. My relationship with my own children has benefitted from the love which this magnificent Jewish mother has for her child. And so, too, my relationship with HaShem.

I hope that you will please thank her for me, and that you will continue to use your journal to present material which touches all aspects of our lives.

AVRAHAM Y. HACHOHEN

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