Vegetarianism and Kashrut

What We Value and the Hierarchy of Life

by

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Not long ago, an elegant-looking woman was walking her small dog along the street in Manhattan. The dog was perfectly groomed and wore what looked to be a mink wrapping to protect it from the cool, Fall air. The woman regularly bent down to coo and talk to her dog yet when she walked along the street, she passed by numerous people in need without so much as batting an eye.

To what do we assign value?

As Jews, there is no greater value than that of a human life. Judaism teaches that to save a single life is as if to save the entire world. That is, each life is singular and infinite. Human life is of such inherent value that other than the sins of idolatry, sexual immorality and murder, we may transgress all laws of the Torah to live and affirm life.

What a statement Judaism makes! To assign such value to human life is to proclaim first and foremost that life is important and that life, human life, is good. How different Judaism is in this regard from the teachings of other people. Consider the difference between the Jewish approach to life and the Egyptian. While Judaism holds human life as the greatest value, Egyptian tradition places a higher value in creatures that are lesser than humans. In the eyes of the Egyptian, the cow or sheep might be sacred!

How different such a view is from Judaism! The creation narrative in *Bereishit* makes clear that all of creation was created *for* mankind’s benefit, so long as we maintain the sanctity of God’s creation. God created the world *for* mankind, but mankind must be responsible in his exercise of dominion.

After the drama of selling their brother, Yosef, to a caravan traveling to *Mitzrayim*, and having to look him once again in the eye, the brothers are ultimately reunited as a family with their father, Yaakov. Once again whole, they can look again toward the future as they settle in *Mitzrayim*, the land where destiny finds them and from whence they will ultimately usher the *galus* and the *geula* which will create them together as the Chosen – the *Am Segula*.

Yosef’s experience in Egypt, from his servitude in Potiphar’s house to the treachery of Potiphar’s wife and his betrayal in prison and ultimate redemption in Pharaoh’s court, had taught him well. No stranger had ever been more successful at surviving and even thriving amongst the Egyptians. He counseled his brethren not to assimilate with the people of Egypt, rather to tell the Pharaoh that they are shepherds.

Shepherding sheep, while perhaps not noble, was an honorable task among the Jews. Not so the Egyptians. Herding sheep was anathema to the Egyptians – *since all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians* 46:34. Declaring themselves to be shepherds was sufficient to convince the Egyptians to grant them wide berth.

But why would shepherds be so abhorrent to the Egyptians? According to Rashi, the explanation is that the Egyptians worshipped the sheep as gods, and therefore resented and despised those for whom these gods served as livelihood.   Yet, we later learn that Pharaoh himself owned sheep – “*appoint them as managers over the livestock that is mine* 47:6” – and that Egyptian animals, including sheep, suffered during the Ten Plagues. Is this a contradiction? Not at all. It seems that the Egyptians detested shepherds *who benefitted from their sheep* for food, wool, and milk but glorified shepherds who held their sheep in “high esteem”, that is, built sanctuaries for them, cared for them and respected them so that they could be worshipped.

Ibn Ezra observes that the Egyptians did not eat any meat and all animal products. In fact, they detested people who did. The irony of the Egyptians’ moral “high ground”! These very Egyptians who were so sensitive to the value of animal life did not give a second thought to drowning male babies in the Nile!

What kind of value system holds animals in greater esteem than humans?

People often love their animals, dressing them in fur while their fellows go cold, even defending their “rights” as others go hungry. When they do so, they run the risk of forgetting the fundamental difference between man, the “crown of creation” who was created in His image, and animals, whom God created for the sake of mankind.

Which raises the question, if mankind did not exist, what would be the purpose for animals’ existence? Indeed, the existence of animals is intimately related to mankind’s existence.

*Sefer HaIkkarim* posits that if one maintains that there is no qualitative difference between man and animal, such people would indeed be more prone to murdering one another. That is why, he elaborates, slaughtering animals for food consumption was permitted after the Flood, so that we humans would understand that there is a vast difference between man and animal. We are ever so much more significant.  Eating meat reminds us of our significance and primary role in the world.

It is telling that on the most spiritual of days – Sabbath, Yom Tov, etc. – we are enjoined to eat meat! Perhaps more telling, we only eat that meat after having upgraded the physical animal to a higher calling by adhering to all that *kashrut* represents.

Judaism values the physical *and* the spiritual. They exist hand in hand. It is good to enjoy things in this world – but not if it is done without recognizing the spiritual in it. If eating is merely a physical act, if it is devoid of the spiritual awareness of God’s role in providing the food, then regardless of the quality of the food, or the elaborateness of the table, it diminishes us as people and as God’s creatures.

Eating, like everything else that we do, demands our attention, our care and our self-respect. We really are what we eat. The laws of *kashrut* make clear that God is central to even our most physical acts – elevating them to the spiritual.

Many of Rabbi Safran’s essays can be found in *Something Old, Something New – Pearls From the Torah* available on Amazon