

MOOSHY

*Sermon for Parshat Re-eh
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I want to teach you a new word that I have learned recently.

The word is Mooshy.

Does anyone here know what Mooshy is?

To be technical, Mooshy is not really a word. It is an acronym. But I think it is one of the most important words that I have learned in a long time, and I hope that you will share my excitement for this word and what it represents.

But before I tell you what Mooshy means, and why I am so excited about it, I need to give you some background.

There are two points of view that have coexisted within the Jewish tradition down through the centuries. The majority view is that meat is one of the blessings that God has given us, and that we are permitted---more than permitted---we are supposed to eat meat--provided that we eat it under certain restrictions. It has to be kosher meat; it has to be properly slaughtered, the blood has to be drained out, etc. The other view that is found in the Jewish tradition is the view that vegetarianism is the most ethical way in which to eat. Not everyone knows this, but a good case can be, and has been, made for vegetarianism, from the very beginning of the Jewish tradition until our own time.

And the purpose of Mooshy is to reconcile these two conflicting and contradictory points of view.

Those who advocate vegetarianism have considerable evidence on their side. They can point out that in the first pages of the Bible, Adam and Eve are told that they can eat from all of the trees in the garden—except one. What does that mean? The implication is that they can eat from any of the trees---but only from the trees. Adam and Eve were meant to be vegetarians.

It was only with Noah, who lives---not in the Garden but in the real world---the world of work, that the eating of meat is permitted. It is permitted—but only on one condition. The Torah says: “Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat. You must not, however, eat flesh with its life blood still in it.”

And then, in the sedra of Shemini, we have the laws of kashrut. They provide a list of those animals that we can eat, and those animals that we cannot eat. And further on, in chapter seventeen of the book of Vayikra we are told that “if anyone slaughters an ox or a sheep or a goat and does not bring it to the Tent of Meeting to present it as an offering before the Lord, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that person. He has shed blood. That person shall be cut off from among his people.” That worked when the people all lived

around the central shrine. But what do you do when the central shrine is in Jerusalem, and you live many miles away---in Beersheva or in the Galilee? Are you supposed to take an animal with you and travel many miles with it, and offer part of it as a sacrifice whenever you want to eat meat? That would obviously be difficult to do. And so we are told in Devarim that if it is too far to go to the central shrine whenever you want a meat meal, you may slaughter and eat meat where you live, but again, only under certain conditions. And that meat that you are allowed to eat at home, and not as part of a sacrifice in the central shrine, has an interesting name. It is called “basar ta-avah”---which means: ‘meat that you crave’ or ‘meat that you lust after’. There is clearly a negative connotation to that phrase: meat that you lust for. It sounds like the Torah grudgingly and reluctantly gives in to the human being’s craving for meat, but that it does not really approve of it.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, as well as Rabbi Shlomo Goren, who was the Chief Chaplain of the Israeli Army and then the Chief Rabbi of Israel, were both vegetarians. Rabbi Kook predicted that when the Messiah comes, the lion would lie down with the lamb, which means that animals will become vegetarians in that day too. And he predicted that in that time, when the Holy Temple is rebuilt, only flour offerings would be offered on the altar. That is why it says at the end of the Amidah: v’arva L’adonai minchat Yehudah---that the meal offering--the flour offering--will be pleasant to the Lord. The implication is that there will be no meat offerings in the Temple in the time to come.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Yiddish writer who won the Noble Prize in Literature, used to say that he was a vegetarian ‘for health reasons’. When they asked him whether that meant that meat was bad for his health, he said: “No. It means that it is bad for the health of the animal.”

And so, you see that there is a long and noble tradition of vegetarianism within Judaism.

But---on the other hand---there is a tradition, which is much better known, a tradition of eating meat.

I will give you one simple proof.

Picture with me for a moment what the menu was at your grandparents’ table on Friday night. What did they eat?

I imagine that they started with gefilte fish, and then that they then ate fricassee or chopped liver, and then they probably had chicken soup, and then that they ate chicken or brisket. Isn’t that so?

Can you imagine your grandparents celebrating Shabbat with veggie burgers?

I don’t think so.

There is a wonderful story that is told about Rabbi Asher Bloch, of blessed memory. Rabbi Bloch was the rabbi of the Little Neck Jewish Center in New York, and he was a truly spiritual person. And back then, long before it became fashionable, Rabbi Bloch used to study Hinduism and Buddhism, and other Eastern religions.

Dr. Heschel heard about this, and so he called him in one day, and said to him: “If you study Eastern religions, then shouldn’t you study Hassidism as well. Have you ever spent a Shabbat in a Hassidic home?”

Rabbi Bloch said that he never had, and so Dr. Heschel made arrangements for Rabbi Bloch to spend a Shabbat at the home of a Hassidic family on the East Side. He arrived before sunset, gave a gift to his hostess, and went to services with his host. When they came back from the synagogue, the house was radiant with the spirit of Shabbat. The tablecloth and the dishes were the best, the candles shone brightly, and the house felt as if it was welcoming royalty.

But when the first course was served, Rabbi Bloch had to turn it down, because he was a glatt vegetarian, and so he did not eat fish. Then came the second course, and again, he had to turn it down because it was chopped liver, and he did not eat meat. When the third course came, and it turned out to be chicken soup, By now, Rabbi Bloch was feeling embarrassed, and so he said to his hostess: “Didn’t I tell you that I am a vegetarian?”

The rebbitzen replied: “We thought that we understood why you said that. You are a Conservative rabbi, and so you can’t eat by your members. So to them you say that you are a vegetarian. But here? Here you can eat.”

I tell you that story because it makes the point that these two viewpoints have very little contact and very little understanding of each other nowadays. Those that are vegetarian know very little about those who keep kosher, and those who keep kosher know very little about those who are vegetarians.

And this is where Mooshy comes in. Mooshy is the brainchild of a young man named Aaron Potek, who is a rabbinical school student at the Yeshivat Hovevei Torah in New York. And Mooshy is an acronym that he has come up with. It stands for: Meat Only On Shabbat, Happy Occasions and Yomtov.

I think that Mooshy is a wonderful compromise between those who say that you should never eat meat, and those who say that it is all right to eat meat whenever you want to. In Eastern Europe, meat was a rare delicacy that was reserved for Shabbat, because it was expensive to eat meat every day. And that is why the zemirot that we sing on Shabbat celebrate the delight of eating meat: Ma Yididut says: “mey-erev mazminim kol miyney matamim, mib’od yom muchanim tarnigolim mifutamim” which means: in advance of the Sabbath, all kinds of tasty food has been prepared, fattened chickens have been made ready while it was still day. And the chorus is: “lihitaneg bita-anugim, barburim, slav vidagim” this is a day to delight in chicken, quail and fish. Try telling someone who grew

up on songs like this one that you should not meat on Shabbat, and he or she will look at you with bewilderment.

I know what you are thinking. You are probably saying to yourself that eating meat only on Shabbat may have made sense in Eastern Europe where people were poor. But are you going to tell me that I should cut down on my consumption of meat today, when I like meat, and when I can afford to have it whenever I want?

The answer to that question is yes, and it comes not from me, but from those who are concerned about the health of human beings and about the welfare of the world.

Let me explain why we ought to make meat a treat for special occasions, and not something that we eat everyday by giving you six simple facts. These facts come, not from me, and not from fanatic vegetarians, but from the United Nations Environmental Program. Listen to these six facts:

1. Over one billion people on this planet are either starving or are chronically undernourished. That is about one sixth of the world's population!
2. Twenty million people die each year because of hunger.
3. Three out of four of the people who die of hunger each year are children under the age of ten.
4. With the effects of the climate changes that are now taking place, such as the droughts that seem to take place every year, the lakes that dry up or become polluted, and the farmlands that used to be fertile but that are now becoming deserts, the amount of farmland that is being devoted to raising food is becoming too much for us to afford.
5. Right now, in the United States alone, more than half of all the water consumed goes to support animal agriculture. Given what the climatologists tell us, we will soon simply not have enough water to sustain this rate any longer.
6. Animal agriculture is inefficient in the extreme. You have to invest eight to twelve pounds of grain for every pound of edible beef that you get back! If we gave up raising so many animals for food, all of these crops that we are now raising to feed these animals would be enough to feed every starving man, woman, and child on the planet!

Those are shocking figures, aren't they? But they are undeniable.

These are the reasons why Mooshy has come into existence.

Mooshy strives to strike a balance between our love of meat and our concern for the planet. It knows full well the truth of the Talmudic teaching that "eyn simchah elah b'vasar"---that there is no celebration without meat. But it insists that we limit our consumption of meat to simchas, and not be profligate in the way we consume meat.

Listen to the occasions that Mooshy says we should eat meat on:

1. Happy occasions. How can you not have meat at a wedding or at a bar or a bat mitzvah party or at an anniversary? Can you imagine going to a Jewish wedding and finding that the hosts are only serving punch and cookies after the ceremony? It would not feel like a Jewish simcha if we did that, would it? And so, Mooshy does not insist on all or nothing. It says that at a happy occasion, it is right and proper to serve meat.

2. Shabbat. Mooshy understands what the rebbitzen said to Rabbi Bloch when he visited her home in that story that I told you. How can you not dignify and honor the Shabbat if not with a festive meal? And so, Mooshy says: Eat meat on Shabbat, and sing the zemirot that describe the fowl and the quail and the fish that our people eat on this day. Let the meat that we eat on Shabbat be special. And let it feel special precisely because we do not eat it every day.

And 3. Yomtov is meant to be literally ‘a good day’, and so you should add to the joy and the specialness of the day by eating meat on it. But it is precisely because we don’t eat meat every day that it feels like a holiday when we do.

I hope that Mooshy catches on; I really do. And I hope that it starts right here.

I love the idea behind Mooshy because on this, as in so many other ways, it demonstrates that Judaism is not an ‘either-or’ religion, but a ‘both-and’ religion. Some religions teach total pacifism; others see nothing wrong in going to war for a holy cause. Judaism says that wars are sometimes necessary, but they must be fought with self-control, with limits, and only when really necessary. Some religions preach abstinence from human love in order to focus on the love of God. Others preach that God has nothing to do with what goes on in the bedroom. Judaism teaches that human love is one of God’s greatest gifts to us, but that it must be controlled and sanctified. And so it is with the eating of meat. Some religions ban it completely. Other religions see nothing wrong with consuming it any way we want to. Judaism says: eat meat---but only within the law, only with self-control and only within limits.

And this is why I urge you to go on line and learn more about Mooshy, and, hopefully, join it if you will. If you do, I believe that you will honor the name of God, that you will sanctify the way you eat, and that you will help to protect the planet.

The website for Mooshy is: www.Mooshy.org. After Shabbat, go on line and learn more about this new organization, because I believe that it is a wonderful addition to Jewish life. I believe that it has the power to bring honor to the Torah, and health to our bodies, and safety to our planet.

And if you agree, will you join me and say amen.