

Eating with values: Meat consumption as a spiritual practice

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Relevant Torah Sources

1) Genesis 9:1-7

G-d blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth. The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky – everything with which the earth is astir – and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand. Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it. But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man! Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed. For in His image did G-d make man. Be fertile, then, and increase; abound on the earth and increase on it

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת נֹחַ וְאֶת בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר
 לָהֶם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ:
 וּמִוְרָאֲכֶם וּחַתְכֶם יִהְיֶה עַל כָּל חַיַּת
 הָאָרֶץ וְעַל כָּל עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר
 תִּרְמַשׁ הִיאֲדָמָה וּבְכֹל דְּגַי הַיָּם בְּיַדְכֶם
 נִתְּנוּ: כָּל רֶמֶשׂ אֲשֶׁר הוּא חַי לָכֶם יִהְיֶה
 לְאֹכְלָה כַּיֶּרֶק עֵשֶׂב נִתְּתִי לָכֶם אֶת כֹּל:
 אֲדָּ בְּשָׂרׁ בְּנִפְשׁוֹ דָּמוֹ לֹא תֹאכְלוּ: וְאֵדָּ
 אֶת דַּמְכֶם לְנַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם אֲדָרֵשׁ מִיַּד כָּל
 חַיָּה אֲדָרֵשׁנּוּ וּמִיַּד הָאָדָם מִיַּד אִישׁ אָחִיו
 אֲדָרֵשׁ אֶת נַפְשׁ הָאָדָם: שִׁפְךָ דָּם
 הָאָדָם בְּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשְׁפָּךְ כִּי בְצַלֵּם
 אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת הָאָדָם: וְאַתֶּם פְּרוּ
 וּרְבוּ שְׂרִצּוּ בָאָרֶץ וּרְבוּ בָּהּ:

2) Leviticus 19:1-2

And the Lord spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the entire Israelite congregation, and say to them “You shall be holy”, for I, the Lord your G-d, am holy.

וַיְדַבֵּר יְקֹנֶק אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל כָּל
 עַדַּת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ
 כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְקֹנֶק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

3) Deuteronomy 12:20-23

When the Lord enlarges your territory, as He has promised you, and you say, “I shall eat some meat,” for you have the urge to eat meat, you may eat meat whenever you wish. If the place where the Lord has chosen to establish His name is too far from you, you may slaughter any of the cattle or sheep that the Lord gives you, as I have instructed you: and you may eat to your heart’s content in your settlements. Eat it, however, as the gazelle and the deer are eaten: the unclean may eat it together with the clean. But make sure you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh.

כִּי יִרְחִיב יְקֹנֶק אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֶת גְּבוּלְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר
 דִּבֶּר לְךָ וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲכַלְהָ בָּשָׂר כִּי תֵאָוֶה
 נִפְשֶׁךָ לְאָכֹל בָּשָׂר בְּכֹל אֹתוֹ נִפְשֶׁךָ
 תֹאכַל בָּשָׂר: כִּי יִרְחַק מִמֶּךָ הַמָּקוֹם
 אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְקֹנֶק אֱלֹהֵיךָ לְשׁוֹם שְׁמוֹ שָׁם
 וַיִּבְחַת מִבְּקִרְךָ וּמִצִּיאָנָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְקֹנֶק
 לְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָה וְאָכַלְתָּ בִשְׂעָרֶיךָ בְּכֹל
 אֹתוֹ נִפְשֶׁךָ: אֲדָּ כַּאֲשֶׁר יֹאכַל אֶת הַצִּבִּי
 וְאֶת הָאֵילִן כִּן תֹּאכְלֶנּוּ הַטָּמֵא וְהַטְּהוֹר
 יִחַדּוּ יֹאכְלֶנּוּ: רַק חֹזֵק לְבַלְתִּי אֲכַל הַדָּם
 כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְלֹא תֹאכַל הַנֶּפֶשׁ
 עִם הַבָּשָׂר:

Commentary on Torah Sources

4) Nachmonedes, Leviticus 19:1

The Torah has admonished us against immorality and forbidden foods but permitted relations between husband and wife and the eating of [certain] meat and wine. If so, a man of desire could consider this to be permission to be passionately addicted to relations with his wife... and be among winebibbers and gluttonous eaters of flesh... and behold s/he will be an abomination with the permission of the Torah.

Therefore, after listing matters altogether prohibited, the Torah in general terms commands us to practice moderation even in matters which are permitted.

5) Samuel H. Dresner, "Keeping Kosher: A Diet For The Soul", p. 15

The permission to eat meat is thus understood as a compromise, a divine concession to human weakness and human need. The Torah, as it were, says: I would prefer that you abstain from eating meat altogether, that you subsist on that which springs forth from the earth, for to eat meat the life of an animal must be taken, and that is a fearful act. But since you are not perfect humans, and your world is neither a Garden of Eden nor the Kingdom of Heaven; since your desires cannot be halted nor your nutritional requirements altered, they must at least be controlled; since you will eat meat and since, perhaps, you need to eat meat, you may eat it, but with one restriction – that you have reverence for the life that you take. "The flesh with the soul thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall you not eat" (Gen. 9:3).

6) Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Orot Essays, p. 317-319

The free movement of the moral impulse to establish justice for animals generally and the claim of their rights from Mankind are hidden in a natural psychic sensibility in the deeper layers of the Torah... "The first man had not been allowed to eat meat" (Talmud Sanhedrein 59b), as is implied in G-d's instruction to Adam: "I have given you every herd yielding seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed – it shall be to you for food" (Gen. 1:29)... [After the flood] it became necessary to confine the concern with justice and equity to mankind... But the thrust of the ideals in the course of their development will not always remain confined... What prepares the ground for this state is the commandments, those intended specifically for this area of concern.

There is hidden reprimand between the lines of the Torah in the sanction to eat meat, for it is only after "you will say, 'I will eat meat, because you lust after eating meat – then you may slaughter and eat'" (Deut. 12:20, 12:15). The only way you would be able to overcome your inclination would be through a moral struggle, but the time for this conquest is not yet...

The commandments, therefore, came to regulate the eating of meat, in steps that will take us to the higher purpose... The verse "If anyone... captures by hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten, he must pour out its blood, covering it with the earth" (Lev. 17:13) involves an acknowledgement of a shameful act. This is the beginning of

moral therapy, as is suggested in the verse, "...that you may remember and be ashamed... when I forgive you" (Ezek. 16:63). It means: Cover the blood! Hide your shame! These efforts will bear fruit, in the course of time people will be educated. The silent protest will in time be transformed into a mighty shout and it will triumph in its objective. The regulations of slaughter, in special prescriptions, to reduce the pain of the animal registers a reminder that we are not dealing with things outside the law, that they are not automatons, devoid of life, but with living things.

Other Related Sources

7) Maimonides, Hilkhos Deot 5:10

The sages commanded us in the way of the world: one should only eat meat with an appetite, as it says "You may eat meat whenever you desire it..." It is enough for the healthy to eat meat once a week on Friday night.

צוו חכמים בדרך ארץ שלא יאכל אדם
בשר אלא לתיאבון, שנאמר כי תאוה
נפשך לאכול בשר, דיו לבריא לאכול
בשר מערב שבת לערב שבת

8) Babylonian Talmud Beitza 16a

All of a person's food is predetermined at the beginning of each year, with the exception of what is brought out on Shabbat, what is brought out on *Yom Tov*, and what children bring to their Torah learning. If less, it will be less, and if more, it will be more...

A teaching: It was said of Shammai the elder that all his days he would eat in order to honor Shabbat. If he would find a nice cow he would say, "This will be for Shabbat." If he found one that was nicer, he would set aside the second one and then eat the first one. Hillel, however, behaved differently, for all his deeds were for the sake of heaven, as it is written, "Praised be G-d each day."

It was also recorded in later generations: The House of Shammai said: "Each day should be for Shabbat." The House of Hillel replied: "Praise be G-d everyday."

כל מזונותיו של אדם קצובים לו
מראש השנה ועד יום הכפורים, הוץ
מהוצאת שבתות והוצאת יום טוב,
והוצאת בניו לתלמוד תורה. שאם פחת
פוחתין לו, ואם הוסיף מוסיפין
לו...

תניא, אמרו עליו על שמאי הזקן, כל
ימיו היה אוכל לכבוד שבת. מצא
בהמה נאה אומר: זו לשבת. מצא
אחרת נאה הימנה מניח את השניה
ואוכל את הראשונה. אבל הלל הזקן
מדה אחרת היתה לו, שכל מעשיו לשם
שמים. שנאמר (תהלים סח) ברוך ה'
יום יום. תניא נמי הכי: בית שמאי
אומרים: מחד שביד לשבתך, ובית
הלל אומרים: ברוך ה' יום יום.

9) Orech Hashulchan – Orach Chayim 604:11

If one vows to eat meat only on Shabbat and Yom Tov, s/he is permitted to eat it on Yom Kippur eve because that is commonly referred to as a "Yom Tov." But this only applies during the day and not at night, when the commandment (to eat, drink and be happy) does not apply.

אם נדר שלא לאכול בשר רק
בשבת ויו"ט מותר לאכול
בעיו"כ דמקרי יו"ט בלשון
בני אדם ודווקא ביום ולא
בלילה דאין מצוה בלילה