

BECHUKOSAI (LEVITICUS 26:3-27:34)

Confessions of a Would-Be Vegetarian

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

G-d has created a world for us to use. He is the Owner, and we are the borrowers. G-d has, in His infinite kindness, given us permission to partake of the bounty available to us in His world.

But, we do have to pay our “rent.”

If you will follow My laws and are careful to keep My commandments, I will provide you with rain at the right time, so that the land will bear its crops and the trees of the field will provide fruit...You will have your fill of food, and you will live securely in the land. (Leviticus, 26:3, 5)

In various places throughout the Torah, we come across many commandments concerning our food. Yes, G-d agrees to feed us. But we must be prepared to show our appreciation by “giving back.”

When we harvest our fields, we are supposed to leave some of our crops to be gathered by the poor. From that which we do gather, approximately 2% is given to the Priest. From the remainder, 10% goes to the Levite (who, in turn, gives 10% of what he received to the Priest). From the remainder, 10% is designated, some years to be given to the poor, and some years for the owner to bring to Jerusalem for his own consumption. (These laws, which apply only in the Land of Israel, are in affect, to an extent, even in non-Temple times. Israeli produce may not be eaten before tithes have been separated.)

One may not eat one's produce before separating tithes. The same rule applies to certain meats:

A firstling animal which must be sacrificed as a first-born offering ... whether it is an ox, sheep, or goat, it belongs to G-d... All tithes of the herds and flocks shall be given... with every tenth one being consecrated to G-d. (Ibid. 27:26, 32)

Before we are allowed to consume foods, we must express our thanks to G-d for giving us those foods. The way we thank G-d depends upon the food.

As mentioned above, all Israeli produce requires the separation of tithes. All breads have to have a portion removed from the dough. (*Challah*) Wine has special rules regarding who may make it and who may handle it. All foods require the recital of a Blessing before eating or drinking.

By far, the food with the most complex prerequisites to consumption is meat. Before you eat it there are many steps of preparation that must be gone through.

This concept gives lie to the mistaken notion that the animals are equal partners with humans; that we may not put them to our personal use.

Noah brought two of each non-kosher animal into the Ark. However, when it came to the Kosher animals, he brought seven pairs of each Kosher animal. (According to some commentaries, there were a TOTAL of seven of each Kosher animal; three pairs, and one extra male, for a sacrifice.) Noah understood why G-d had him bring extra Kosher animals. After he left the Ark, he built an altar and brought burnt offerings from each Kosher animal.

G-d's reaction?

G-d blessed Noah and his sons, and He said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land...Every moving thing that lives will be food for you, like the green vegetation [i.e., just as until now, Adam and his descendants were allowed to eat vegetation, I am now extending your menu to include meat] I have given you everything...But flesh, with its soul, its blood you shall not eat. (Genesis, 9:1, 3-4)

There, you have it. G-d permitted the human race to kill and eat animals after the flood. When the Torah was given to Israel, He limited our meat consumption to Kosher animals, killed in a very specific way, and subsequently inspected, and cleaned for blood removal.

In previous messages, I have made reference to the fact that when I moved into my current home, I became the owner of a "miniature farm," complete with a coop and seven chickens. (See "Yerachmiel's Ark.")



[caption id="" align="aligncenter" width="150"] The "girls" from the backyard[/caption]

The chickens lay eggs almost every day, providing my family with a fresh and tasty alternative to what I call "plastic factory eggs" from the supermarket.

However, as chickens get older, their eggs have more of a tendency to have blood spots, which create a problem for the Kosher consumer. Preparing an omelet is a time-consuming effort, because each egg must be checked, and the blood spots and meat spots must be removed. For some time now, I've been suggesting that their days were numbered.

A few months ago, I bought some newly-hatched baby chicks. The babies are growing rapidly, and no longer fit in their cage. They need the larger coop, but when one of the babies found her way into the coop, the older chickens pecked her to death. There was no choice; it was time to dispatch the oldsters to the refrigerator!

For months now people have been asking me, "How can you eat a pet?" I responded that chickens are not pets. You don't become emotionally attached to creatures that peck at your hand and at each other. Chickens are not nice creatures. They steal from each other and think only of themselves. No "Lassie" here!

A friend of mine who lives in Israel trains *Shochtim* -- animal slaughterers. He regularly comes to the U.S., so we arranged that on his next visit, he would come by and turn my chickens into ... well, chicken.

He called me the other day and said that he was in for a very brief visit and could come the next day. Since he is a teacher, he advised me to invite whoever might be interested in watching. I called a rabbi and a few rabbinical students and made the appointment for them to come the next morning.

Then, it began to sink in. Do I really want to KILL my chickens? Do I really want to EAT my chickens? After months of watching their antics, running and wing-flapping and squawking around my back yard, making me laugh and giving me eggs, do I really want to put them in a soup pot?

I concluded, yes, I would have him slaughter the chickens. It is, after all, a Mitzvah. We are supposed to do Mitzvahs, even when we don't feel totally up to it. But I really wasn't sure how I felt about the whole process. In the rabbinic world, it is common for a Mohel to also be a Torah Scribe and/or a *Shochet*. I already am a Mohel and a Scribe. My friend was offering to teach me how to be a *Shochet*. Till now, I had thought it was a great idea. Now I wasn't so sure. I had a sneaking suspicion that by the end of the day, I would decide that the killing of Kosher animals was not to become part of my resume. In other words, I was wimping out!

I won't offend the faint of heart by going through the details of the process. But let me tell you why I changed my mind.

Rabbi Yisroel Landsman is an old friend of mine. [***NOTE: Since the time of this writing, my friend Rabbi Landsman tragically passed away at the age of 54.***] Rabbi Landsman is a full-time student of Torah. He has, over the years, involved himself in various part-time activities to support his family while he studies. I met him while he was doing magic and animal shows.

Yisroel owned monkeys and pigeons and snakes and all types of exotic animals. I find it interesting that a lover of animals would now earn his keep by becoming a slayer of animals!

Yisroel is a compassionate type of guy who gives me a bear hug every time he sees me. He is a deeply spiritual person who profoundly feels the beauty of every Mitzvah. When he prepared to slaughter the chickens, it was clear that he was about to commence an activity that would bring him closer to G-d.



[caption id="attachment_3941" align="aligncenter" width="150"] Inspecting the knife to insure that it is totally sharp and flawlessly smooth[/caption]

Rabbi Landsman recited a Blessing: *“Baruch atah... You are blessed, O G-d, King of the universe, who have made us holy with Your commandments, and commanded us concerning slaughtering.”*

“...made us holy with Your commandments...” Is there anything holy about killing chickens?!

Rabbi Landsman showed his respect for the sanctity of Mitzvahs. He also demonstrated great sensitivity by avoiding unnecessary distress of the chickens. He instructed us to hold the chickens in a way that would prevent them from seeing their fellow chicken being slaughtered. We even had to make sure that they wouldn't see the knife!

In Jewish society, a *Shochet* is an esteemed and respected member of the community. In order to qualify as a *Shochet*, one must be well-versed in all of the intricate laws. In fact, Rabbi Landsman told us that when a potential *Shochet* undergoes an exam to be certified, he is expected to get 100 on the test. A 99 is a failing grade. When it comes to Kashrus, there is no room for error. There is no such thing as “almost Kosher!”

The *Shochet* is required to review all of the laws on a monthly basis. He also needs to be recognized as a truly honest and G-d-fearing person. After all, a person who is less than totally honest may be tempted to cover up the fact that he made a mistake and invalidated an expensive animal.

(The story is told about the *Shochet* who consulted Rabbi Yisroel Salanter about the possibility of resigning his position as *Shochet*. “I don't want to do this anymore,” he said. “I'm afraid I might make a mistake and cause people to eat non-Kosher.”

“So who then should be our *Shochtim*?” responded the rabbi. “People who are NOT afraid to cause us to eat non-Kosher?!!”)

I have seen how animals are treated when prepared for non-Kosher slaughter. The abuse is unspeakable. When observing human beings acting in such an inhuman fashion it is easy to understand why some people choose to become vegetarians. If I weren't Jewish, I don't think I would become a vegetarian, but I might give serious thought to only buying Kosher meat.

When you compare a professional animal killer to a *Shochet*, you are, to a certain extent, comparing an almost-animal to a human. You are taking a person who couldn't care less about the suffering of G-d's creatures, and trying to compare him to a sensitive and devout man of G-d.

We have in our hands the ability to bring sanctity to everything we do. Cruel people mistreating animals make the world into a crueler place. Holy people like my friend Rabbi Landsman transform mundane things like eating dinner into a sublime religious experience.

When we finished cleaning, soaking, and salting the chickens, I offered each of the participants the opportunity to take a chicken home. I put a chicken in a pot this morning and made a soup. I invited one of the rabbinical students to join me for lunch. Would I be able to bring myself to eat it?

As it turns out, it was one of the most delicious bowls of soup I've had in a very long time. It was fresh. It was tasty. It was holy!!!

Well, what about my resume? Will Rabbi Seplowitz the Mohel and Torah Scribe be able to bring himself to becoming Rabbi Seplowitz the *Shochet*?

Would that I may someday be worthy of qualifying for such a lofty calling.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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