VEGETARIAN IDEOLOGY IN TALMUDIC LITERATURE AND TRADITIONAL BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

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It is quite impossible to imagine that the Lord of all works, Who has compassion for all His creatures, Blessed be He, would enact an eternal law in his “very good” creation so that the human race can survive only by transgressing its moral sensibilities and shedding blood, even if only the blood of animals.1

Let me make it plain at the outset that Judaism is not a vegetarian religion.2 Many Rabbinic texts display a favorable attitude toward the consumption of meat, which they consider to be a satisfying and wholesome food. In addition, eating fish and meat on the Sabbath and festivals is deemed to be an especially appropriate way to honor those sacred days.3 Nevertheless, in recent years many works have been published that try to demonstrate that, in the modern world, meat-eating is incompatible with Jewish values. Various justifications of this view are advanced, of which the most important are the pain caused to animals by the modern food industry, the ecological damage caused by the meat-packing industry, and the health hazards associated with the consumption of meat, hazards we are aware of today but that were unknown in the past.4 Even though I accept these

1 Rabbi A.I. Kook, The Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace from a Torah Perspective, collected and edited by David Hakohen (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 8 (Heb.).
arguments—especially the concern for causing pain to animals—my aim in the present article is not to offer halakhic or meta-halakhic arguments in favor of vegetarianism. It is rather to extract from the Talmudic literature and the traditional commentators those voices that provide support for the vegetarian ideology.

Before I begin, it is important to note the widespread contemporary consensus that there is no such thing as objective, neutral, and totally unbiased exegesis. As Dana Nolan Fewell asserts, the very choice of a research topic is the result of subjective factors. The present article, too, was not written from an “objective” or “neutral” standpoint, but out of emotional engagement with its theme. As a vegetarian since childhood and a vegan for the last twelve years, on the one hand, and as an observant Jew who teaches Bible at the religiously affiliated Bar-Ilan University, on the other, I want to see whether it is possible to build a bridge, however flimsy, between these two essential elements in my life. You might say that I am trying to do for the vegetarian party what religious feminist scholars like Phyllis Trible have done for feminist ideology, trying to bring distant realms—their religious faith and their feminism—closer together.

My ideology clearly influenced my choice of topic and decision to present one side of the coin, the more subversive and lesser-known one—the support for vegetarianism in the Talmudic literature and traditional commentaries (although here and there I have cited opposing voices, the dominant ones, so as to present a fuller picture). Still I have endeavored, and, I hope, successfully, not to distort the texts and not to allow my ideological fervor to win out over intellectual honesty.

Biblical scholarship related to ecology has flourished in recent years, as attested by the Earth Bible series, edited by Norman C. Habel, and many other studies. But this literature focuses on Mother Earth.

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