

Eating Meat: Old and New Sensitivities

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Eating meat presented an awesome problem to our ancestors. The destruction of life, any life, was perceived as a grievous sin; yet the desire to eat meat was strong.

It is instructive to read Deuteronomy 12:15-16 and 21-25 in this week's Torah portion of Re'eh, together with its companion passage in Leviticus 17:1-16, as our ancestors' attempts to solve this problem.

To understand the magnitude, the awesomeness, of the problem, we have to put ourselves into an animistic mind-set, where every part of nature has a life of its own, guarded by its own protective power. To kill a goat, even for food, was an offense against Goat. And somehow, Goat must be appeased.

Thus we find that our pre-Torah ancestors brought offerings to the Se'irim (Lev. 17:7), a word whose usual translation is simply "goats", but here may well be translated as "Goat."

This practice is clearly seen by the Torah as idolatrous, and in its attempt to stamp it out, the Torah in Leviticus introduces two new measures.

First, before any meat is to be eaten, the animal must be brought for slaughtering at the Tent of Meeting, and its blood must be dashed against the altar by the priest. A person who does not do this "has shed blood and shall be cut off from his people." (Lev. 17:4)

Second, the Torah declares that the essence of an animal's life lies in its blood *alone*. It follows that the person's sin in eating meat is diminished, so long as the blood is set aside. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that effects expiation." (Lev. 17:11)

As a result of the ritual, expiation and permission are obtained from God, permission to eat the meat, and expiation for the sin in doing so. The ancient ritual of appeasement has been transformed into a ritual of expiation.

These two innovations -- a change in practice plus a change in mind-set -- were apparently effective over time, for in our passage in Deuteronomy, we find expressed neither the animistic mind-set of the people nor Leviticus' concern about the idolatrous implementation of that mind-set.

Thus we find in Deuteronomy that if a person has a desire (using the same word as in the tenth commandment) to eat meat, but is far from the central place of worship, the long trip is not required, so long as the animal's blood is "poured out on the earth like water."

In Leviticus, any animal that is slaughtered for food must be brought to God, and its blood dashed on the altar. In Deuteronomy that procedure is no longer necessary, despite the fact that Leviticus 17:7 pronounces it to be a "law for all time, throughout the ages."

Although the changes indicate that this part of the Torah's battle against idolatry has been successful -- even more successful than envisioned in Leviticus -- nevertheless the prohibition against eating blood is continued, and, moreover, a new ritual for discarding the blood is introduced.

It is not a ritual that is the responsibility of the priest, but of the person who slaughters the animal. Removed from the context of idolatry, and the battle against idolatry, the shedding of blood is no longer a ritual of appeasement or even expiation, but a symbol of respect for life. "Do not eat blood," the Torah tells us (Deut. 12:23), "for blood is life, and you must not consume the animal's life with its flesh."

Do our practices today reflect this respect for life? How do we deal with the problem of taking the life of another creature?

In fact, to all of us who are not vegetarians, it is simply not a problem. We do not acknowledge in any way that our food once had life in its flesh.

Now of course one can point to the fact that we still do not eat blood, that our meat is salted to aid in the draining of blood. But that regulation has been subsumed into the general laws of kashrut, and the practice of salting meat has become almost exclusively the responsibility of others; the packaged meat we purchase differs little from our other packages. No one but the sensitive shochet (ritual slaughterer) is aware of the taking of life.

Certainly when we sit down to a meat meal, we have no ritual we perform, no statement we say, that indicates our awareness of what we eat. Vegetables, fruits,

wine, bread, each have their own beracha (blessing), but for meat we use only a generic beracha.

Is not this meal an appropriate occasion for each person to introduce a new ritual, a new reminder that the taking of life, even for food, is problematic?

Here is one possibility: *Baruch atah, shenatata lanu basar le'echol, vehizhir otanu al hanefesh she'haya b'tocho.* "Thank You for providing us with flesh to eat, and for alerting us to the life it once contained."

Other suggestions are welcome.

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