



Animals as Food

Introduction

This section explores what Jewish tradition has to say about the consumption of animals as food—and how that has changed throughout texts and over time. An activity from this section would be a good one to do at some point during your service project if you're working with animals who will one day become food for humans, farm animals who are kept as pets or for education, or those who were saved from inhumane farming conditions.

Vocabulary

HEBREW	TRANSLITERATED HEBREW	ENGLISH
בָּשָׂר	<i>basar</i>	flesh, meat, animal
דָּם	<i>dam</i>	life-blood
בְּהֵמָה	<i>behemah</i>	domesticated animal

Activity 1:

Animal Consumption Timeline

The following are a series of texts that appear over the course of the Torah and beyond that lay down particular laws about meat consumption or which specifically address the idea of humans eating nonhuman animals. In this activity we'll be looking at them in the chronological order they appear in the texts and considering what lessons we might take away from these texts and the order in which they appear.

Read the following texts in order, then answer the questions below.

SOURCE OF TEXT	ENGLISH TEXT	HEBREW TEXT	SUMMARY OF TEXT
The Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 59b on Genesis 1:29-30 and 9:3	Adam haRishon (the first human) was not permitted to eat animal flesh, for it is written, [Behold I have given you all the herbs, etc.] to you it shall be for food, and to all the animals of the earth, (Genesis 1:29-30) implying, but the animals of the earth shall not be for you. And when the children of Noah came [out of the ark], it was permitted [for them to eat flesh], for it is said, [Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you] even as the green herb have I given you all things. (Genesis 9:3)	אדם הראשון לא הותר לו בשר לאכילה דכתיב (בראשית א, כט) לְכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָה: וּלְכָל-חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ לְכֶם וּכְשָׂבוּ בְנֵי נֹחַ הַתִּיר לָהֶם שֵׁנָאמֵר (בראשית ט, ג) כִּי־יֵרָד עָשָׂב נָתַתִּי לְכֶם אֶת-כָּל:	In Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden), all people and all animals are vegetarian.

SOURCE OF TEXT	ENGLISH TEXT	HEBREW TEXT	SUMMARY OF TEXT
Genesis 9:3-4	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.	כָּל־רֶמֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר הוּא־חַי לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ כִּי־רַק עֵשֶׂב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל־ אֲדָם־בְּשָׂר בְּנִפְשׁוֹ דָּמוֹ לֹא תֹאכְלוּ:	God notices after the flood, in the times of Noach, there is a lot of violence. Unsure what to do about it, God compromises and allows humans to eat meat, just not the living flesh.
Leviticus 11:3	Whatever [animal] has a parted hoof, and is wholly cloven-footed, and chews its cud, they are among the animals, that you may eat.	כָּל מִפְרֶסֶת פְּרָסָה וְשִׁסְעַת שִׁסְעַת פְּרָסָה מֵעֵלֶת גֵּרָה בְּבִהְמָה אֹתָהּ תֹאכְלוּ:	God lays out which animals can and can't be eaten.
Numbers 11:19-20	You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days [of quail], but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you; because you have rejected YHVH (Hashem) who is among you and have wept before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt."	לֹא יוֹם אֶחָד תֹּאכְלוּן וְלֹא יוֹמִים וְלֹא חֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים וְלֹא עֶשְׂרֵה יָמִים וְלֹא עֶשְׂרִים יוֹם: עַד חֹדֶשׁ יָמִים עַד אֲשֶׁר־יֵצֵא מֵאַפְּכֶם וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְזָרָא יַעַן בִּי־מִאֲסַתֶּם אֶת־ה' אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְתִבְכוּ לְפָנָיו לֵאמֹר לָמָּה זֶה יַצְּאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם:	After leaving Egypt, the Israelites sustain themselves with manna. The Israelites complain that they are not satisfied and miss the meat they ate in Egypt; God sends quail in such large numbers that they become a plague.

SOURCE OF TEXT	ENGLISH TEXT	HEBREW TEXT	SUMMARY OF TEXT
Deuteronomy 12:21	<i>If the place where YHVH (Hashem) your God has chosen to establish his name is too far from you, you may slaughter any of your herd and your flock that Hashem gives you, as I have instructed you; and you may eat to your heart's content in your settlements.</i>	<p>כִּי־יִרְחַק מִמֶּךָ הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹם שְׁמוֹ שָׁם וּבַחַתָּ מִבְּקָרְךָ וּמִצֹּאֲנֶךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן ה' לְךָ בְּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתֶךָ וְאָכַלְתָּ בְּשִׂעְרֶיךָ בְּכָל אֹתוֹת נַפְשֶׁךָ:</p>	<i>God instructs that if the Temple is located too far from where one lives, that one may slaughter animals in their local area, as long as they abide by the rules of slaughter.</i>
Isaiah 11:6-7	<i>The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.</i>	<p>וְגַר זֵאֵב עִם־כֶּבֶשׂ וְנֹמֵר עִם־גְּדֵי יִרְבֵּץ וְעֵגֶל וּכְפִיר וּמְרִיא יִחְדּוּ וְנֹעַר קֹטֵן נְהַג בָּם: וּפְרָה וְדֹב תִרְעִינָה יִחְדּוּ יִרְבְּצוּ יַלְדֵיהֶן וְאַרְיֵה כִבְקָר יֹאכַל־ תִּבְנֶן:</p>	<i>A description of "olam ha-ba" (the world to come) or a vision of a perfected world. In other words, the vision of what comes next.</i>

Questions for Exploring these Texts

Why do you think that the rules around eating or not eating meat changed over the course of the Torah?

Why do you think that God changed the rules after the flood (i.e. when Noah and his children left the ark)? Why would humans suddenly be allowed to eat meat at that particular moment?

As soon as God changed the rules to allow consumption of meat, God also set down guidelines about what kind of meat may be eaten and how. Why would that have happened directly after meat being allowed? What might that order tell us about our responsibilities if we choose to eat meat?

Why do you think that the punishment for the Israelites complaining about missing the meat they used to eat in Egypt was to send so many quail that it would come “out of your nostrils and become loathsome to you”?

*If the vision of a world to come—*olam ha-ba*—is that all animals shall lie down with one another and none shall eat the other, what is the implication for humans? Why might that have been established as the ideal that we should work towards?*

Activity 2:

Which People Should Eat Meat?

There are three places in the Talmud (a recording of the Oral Law created by the ancient rabbis, based on the Torah) where the Rabbis talk about who can/should eat meat. Essentially, the Rabbis suggest that one should only eat meat if one craves it and kills it on one's own, is wealthy, and is educated.

Read the following texts and answer the questions below.

The Torah here teaches a rule of conduct, that a person should not eat meat unless they have a special appetite for it. I might think that this means that a person should buy [meat] in the market and eat it, the text therefore states: "Then you shall kill of your herd and of your flock." (Deuteronomy 12:21)

—Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chullin 84a

למדה תורה דרך ארץ שלא יאכל
אדם בשר אלא לתאבון
יכול יקח אדם מן השוק ויאכל
תלמוד לומר (דברים יב, כא) וְנִבְחַתָּ
מִבְּקָרְךָ וּמִצֹּאֲנֶךָ.

If [a person] has fifty maneh they may buy for his stew a litra of meat... Mar Zutra the son of Rav Nahman said: Discipline your maidens in the way of life; hence the Torah teaches a rule of conduct that a parent should not accustom their child to flesh and wine.

—Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chullin 84a

חמשים מנה יקח לפסו ליטרא בשר...
אמר מר זוטרא בריה דרב נחמן
תן חיים לנערותיך
מיכן למדה תורה דרך ארץ שלא
ילמד אדם את בנו בשר ויין.

“This is the law [Torah] of the beast, and of the fowl;” whoever engages in [the study of] the Torah may eat the flesh of beast and fowl, but he who does not engage in [the study of] the Torah may not eat the flesh of beast and fowl.

*—Babylonian Talmud,
Tractate Pesachim 49b*

זאת תורת הבהמה והעוף כל העוסק
בתורה מותר לאכול בשר בהמה
ועוף וכל שאינו עוסק בתורה אסור
לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף

Questions

Why do you think that the Rabbis set these as the conditions for eating meat? What might they have been trying to accomplish with these particular limitations on meat consumption?

On average, each American today eats the equivalent of 3 hamburgers worth of meat per day and Americans collectively eat over 10 billion animals per year, not including fish and other sea creatures. How many Americans are following the first condition today? What do you think is gained or lost by this?

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The second two conditions suggest that you must be wealthy and educated to eat meat. Given that we know that poverty and lack of access to education today have more to do with policies and structures in our society than individual strengths, weaknesses, or choices, do these last two seem fair to you? Why or why not? What are the implications of only rich, educated people eating meat?

The reality in America today because of factory farming and the number of fast food restaurants is that one can more cheaply and easily acquire meat than fresh vegetables or fruit in many places. How do you reconcile this reality with the conditions that the rabbis set above?

Conclusion

Our tradition has much to offer us about whether we should use animals as food—and if so, how we might best do that. Each of us has an individual obligation to consider this question for ourselves and come to a personal practice that feels right for us, while also taking into consideration the lives of the animals around us, the impact on other human beings, and the impact on the earth.

