

GETTING VEGETARIANISM ONTO THE JEWISH AGENDA

Monday, 14 July 2008

GETTING VEGETARIANISM ONTO THE JEWISH AGENDA By Richard H. Schwartz President, Jewish Vegetarians of North America

There is a widely accepted aspect of modern life that contradicts many Jewish teachings and harms people, communities, and the planet -- the mass production and widespread consumption of meat. Yet, this issue is generally ignored by the Jewish community. Here are some reasons why it is very important that this issue be put on the Jewish agenda, and other agendas:

1. The world is rapidly approaching an unprecedented catastrophe from global warming and other environmental threats, and a shift toward plant-based diets is an essential part of the necessary response to avoid disaster.

Several leading experts, including James Hansen of NASA and physicist Stephen Hawking, perhaps the most famous living scientist, as well as Al Gore and others, warn that global climate change may reach a 'tipping point' and spiral out of control, with disastrous consequences, if current conditions continue. A recent 700-page British government report, authored by a former chief economist for the World Bank, projects losses of up to 20% of world gross domestic product by 2050 unless 1% of current world domestic product is devoted to combating global climate change. Other economic studies have projected even worse scenarios. It therefore should not be surprising that the Pentagon states that global warming is a larger threat than even terrorism.

While the world is increasingly threatened by global warming, animal-based agriculture emits more greenhouse gases (in CO2 equivalents) than all the cars and other means of transportation worldwide combined (18 percent vs. 13.5 percent), according to a 2006 UN Food and Agriculture Organization report. Making the situation even worse, that same report indicates that the consumption of animal products is projected to double in 50 years. If this happens, it will make it very difficult, if not impossible, to reduce greenhouse emissions enough to avoid very severe effects from global climate

Israel is especially threatened by global warming. A 2007 report by the Israel Union for Environmental Defense indicated that global warming may cause an average temperature increase of 3 to 10 degrees Fahrenheit, a decrease in rainfall of up to 30 percent, many severe storms and a rising Mediterranean Sea that would cause major flooding and damage ports, power plants and other infrastructure.

2. At a time when food prices are skyrocketing, food riots are occurring in many areas and an estimated 20 million people are dying annually worldwide from hunger and its effects, over 70 percent of the grain produced in the United States and over 40 percent produced worldwide are fed to farmed animals.

3. In an increasingly thirsty and energy-dependent world, animal-based diets require up to 14 times as much water and 10 times as much energy as vegan (all plants) diets.

4. There is an epidemic of heart disease, several types of cancer and other chronic, degenerative diseases afflicting Jews and others, and a shift toward vegetarian diets would sharply reduce these diseases.

5. Meat consumption and the ways in which meat is produced today conflict with Judaism in at least six important areas:

* While Judaism mandates that people should be very careful about preserving their health and their lives, numerous scientific studies have linked animal-based diets directly to the many diseases indicated above

* While Judaism forbids tsa'ar ba'alei chayim, inflicting unnecessary pain on animals, most farm animals -- including those raised for kosher consumers -- are raised on "factory farms" where they live in cramped, confined spaces, and are often drugged, mutilated, and denied fresh air, sunlight, exercise, and any enjoyment of life, before they are slaughtered and eaten.

* While Judaism teaches that "the earth is the Lord's" (Psalm 24:1) and that we are to be God's partners and co-workers in preserving the world, modern intensive livestock agriculture contributes substantially to many environmental threats in addition to global warming, including soil erosion and depletion, air and water pollution, overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the destruction of tropical rain forests and other habitats, and rabi species extinction.

* While Judaism mandates bal tashchit, that we are not to waste or unnecessarily destroy anything of value, and that we are not to use more than is needed to accomplish a purpose, animal agriculture requires the wasteful use of grain, land, water, energy, and other resources.

* While Judaism stresses that we are to assist the poor and share our bread with hungry people, animal-based agriculture, as indicated above, is very wasteful of grain and other resources that could be used to sharply reduce hunger and malnutrition.

* While Judaism stresses that we must seek and pursue peace and that violence results from unjust conditions, animal-

centered diets, by wasting valuable resources, help to perpetuate the widespread hunger and poverty that eventually lead to instability and war.

Since the production and consumption of meat and other animal products contradict these important Jewish mandates to preserve human health, attend to the welfare of animals, protect the environment, conserve resources, help feed hungry people, and pursue peace, it is certainly arguable that committed Jews (and others) should sharply reduce or eliminate their consumption of animal products.

One could say "dayenu" (it would be enough) after any of the arguments above, because each one constitutes by itself a serious conflict between Jewish values and current practice that should impel Jews to seriously consider a plant-based diet. Combined, they make an urgently compelling case for the Jewish community to address these issues.

Having a respectful dialogue/debate on "Should Jews Be Vegetarians" would be a kaddush Hashem (a sanctification of God's name) in helping revitalize Judaism by showing the relevance of Jewish eternal teachings to current crises, improving the health of Jews and helping shift our imperiled planet to a sustainable path.

Further information about these issues can be found at the web site of Jewish Vegetarians of North America (JVNA): JewishVeg.com . Because they believe the issues are extremely urgent, JVNA will provide a complimentary copy of their new documentary **A SACRED DUTY: APPLYING JEWISH VALUES TO HELP HEAL THE WORLD** to people who contact them (president@JewishVeg.com) and indicate that they will consider using it as part of an effort to educate others about the issues. The entire movie can be seen and further information about it can be seen on [ShalomVeg](http://ShalomVeg.com) , and at ASacredDuty.com .