

Judaism, Hunger, and Vegetarianism

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World hunger statistics are staggering: Over 1 billion people, nearly a fifth of the world's population, are chronically undernourished. Between 700 and 800 million people lack sufficient income to obtain the basic necessities of life. It has been estimated that twenty million people die annually due to hunger and its effects, including diseases brought on by lowered resistance due to malnutrition.

Children are particularly victimized by malnutrition. Three out of four who die due to hunger are children. In poor countries, over 40 percent of all deaths occur among children under five years old. Almost 6 percent of the world's children die before their first birthday. At least 100,000 children annually go blind due to vitamin A deficiency in their diet. Malnourishment also brings listlessness and reduced capacity for learning and activities, which perpetuates the legacy of poverty.

Prospects for a reduction in hunger are not good. In his recent book, *Tough Choices - Facing the Challenge of Food Scarcity* (W. W. Norton, 1996), Lester R. Brown, President of the Worldwatch Institute, indicates that a combination of rapidly increasing world population and affluence, environmental strains, and climate changes have combined to pull the world's carryover grain stocks to the lowest level ever and to raise wheat and corn prices to record heights. The Worldwatch institute believes that providing enough food for the world's rapidly increasing population will be a critical issue facing the world for many decades.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO INCREASING HUNGER

Lester R. Brown and the Worldwatch Institute believe that prospects for feeding the world's people are worsening for the following reasons:

1. Rapid Population Growth

The world's population is currently increasing by over 80 million people per year. At this rate the world's population increases by an amount equal to the population of the United States almost every three years. While most of the children are born in less developed countries, this rapid growth in population has major impacts on land, water, pollution, and other factors related to the food supply. Another indication of the potential severity of the problem is that, while it took all of the world's history to reach the 1997 population of about 5.84 billion people, this number is projected to double in less than 50 years, with all the implications for increased consumption of food and other resources that this implies.

2. Increasing Affluence

In addition to rapid population growth, increased affluence is a major factor behind potential food scarcities. There has been a sharp increase in affluence in many countries, especially, in Asia, and this has increased the demand for animal products, and thus for grain to feed livestock. China is a significant example: it was a net exporter of 8 million tons of grain in 1994, but became a net importer of 16 million tons of grain in 1995, due to the increased affluence of many of China's 1.2 billion people. While China was basically self sufficient with regard to grain in 1990, it is estimated that it will need to import 215 million tons of grain by 2030. With other countries also requiring increasing amounts of grain due to more affluent lifestyles and diets, the outlook for many countries having enough grain to feed their people is far from bright.

3. Water Scarcity

Depletion of aquifers due to increased demand for water and diversion of irrigation waters to expanding cities are decreasing the water available for irrigation in many countries. Water tables are falling in key food-producing areas, including the southern Great Plains of the United States, much of northern China, and several states in India.

4. Decreasing Arable Land

The world's grainland per person has been decreasing at an increasing rate due to the combined effects of rapid population growth and the paving of land to meet the growing needs of industry and transportation.

5. Climate Changes

There is increasing concern about the effects of global warming, especially of increasingly severe heat waves on agriculture. The 11 warmest years since temperature records were kept in 1866 all occurred since 1979, and the warmest year was 1995. There is an increasing scientific consensus that human activities are having a major effect on

global warming and the insurance industry is lobbying for decreases in fossil fuel emissions because the severe storms related to global warming have led to major payouts that have badly hurt the industry. The droughts and severe storms that may increasingly accompany global warming would be another great threat to future food security.

6. Decreasing Fish Catches

While the seafood catch per person doubled from 1950 to 1989, it has decreased 7 percent from 1989 to 1995, and is projected to continue decreasing as rapid population growth continues. The U. N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) indicated that all 15 oceanic fisheries are being fished at or beyond their capacities, and 13 of them are in a state of decline.

7. Decreasing Land Productivity

As farmers are forced to use less productive land, and as the agricultural benefits of increased fertilization and irrigation decrease, the productivity of cropland is decreasing. While grain yield per hectare more than doubled from 1950 to 1990, it has increased far more slowly since 1990, in spite of increasing agricultural inputs.

The net result of these interacting factors, according to the Worldwatch Institute, is that, while the past was dominated by food surpluses, with competition among exporters for access to markets, the future will be dominated by food scarcity, with increasing competition among importers for access to markets.

POTENTIAL RESULTS OF INCREASING HUNGER

The extensive hunger and malnutrition in so many parts of the world make rebellion and violence more likely. Professor Georg Borgstrom, internationally known expert on food science, fears that "the rich world is on a direct collision course with the poor of the world.... We cannot survive behind our Maginot line of missiles and bombs." Hence the outlook for global stability is very poor, unless the problem of global hunger is soon solved. Professor Robert Heilbroner, the noted economist, predicted that, in times of severe famine, countries like India will be sorely tempted to try nuclear blackmail.

JEWISH TEACHINGS RELATED TO HUNGER

On Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, while fasting and praying for a good year, Jews are told through the words of the Prophet Isaiah that fasting and prayers are not sufficient; they must work to end oppression and provide food for needy people:

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the chains of wickedness, to undo the bonds of oppression, and to let the oppressed go free.... Is it not to share thy bread with the hungry? (Isa. 58:6-7)

Helping the hungry is fundamental in Judaism. The Talmud states, "Providing charity for poor and hungry people weighs as heavily as all the other commandments of the Torah combined." (Baba Batra 9a) The Midrash teaches:

God says to Israel, "My children, whenever you give sustenance to the poor, I impute it to you as though you gave sustenance to Me...." Does then God eat and drink? No, but whenever you give food to the poor, God accounts it to you as if you gave food to Him. (Midrash Tannaim)

On Passover we are reminded not to forget the poor. Besides providing ma'ot chittim (charity for purchasing matzah) for the needy before Passover, at the seders, we reach out to them:

This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need come and celebrate the Passover. (Passover Haggadah)

We are even admonished to feed our enemies, if they are in need:

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat. If your enemy is thirsty, give him water to drink. (Prov. 25:21)

This is consistent with the Jewish teaching that the greatest hero is a person who converts an enemy into a friend (Avot de Rabbi Nathan, chapter 23).

It is a basic Jewish belief that God provides enough for all. In our daily prayers, it is said, "He openeth up his hand and provideth sustenance to all living things" (Ps. 145:16). Jews are obligated to give thanks to God for providing enough food for us and for all of humanity. In the bircat hamazon (grace after meals), we thank God "who feeds the whole world with goodness, grace, loving kindness, and tender mercy." The blessing is correct. God has provided enough for all. The bounties of nature, if properly distributed and properly consumed, would sustain all people. Millions of people are hungry today, not because of insufficient agricultural capacity, but because of unjust social systems and wasteful methods of food production, including the feeding of tremendous amounts of grains to animals to fatten them for slaughter. The

Jewish approach to hunger was eloquently summarized by Rabbi Marc H. Tannenbaum, Former National Interreligious Affairs Director of the American Jewish Committee:

If one takes seriously the moral, spiritual, and humanitarian values of Biblical, Prophetic, and Rabbinic Judaism, the inescapable issue of conscience that must be faced is: How can anyone justify not becoming involved in trying to help save the lives of starving millions of human beings throughout the world--whose plight constitutes the most agonizing moral and humanitarian problem in the latter half of the 20th century.

CAN VEGETARIANISM MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

The Worldwatch Institute point out that tough choices will be necessary to create an environmentally sustainable, food-secure future. Among the suggestions that they make are to invest heavily in family planning, increase education and employment opportunities for women in developing countries, shift from an energy economy based on fossil fuels to one based on renewable resources, investing more in energy efficiency, and pricing water at a level that will reduce inefficiencies in its use. However, the group does not sufficiently emphasize the major effects that dietary changes can have. One important reason why many are starving today is that tremendous amount of grains are used to fatten animals for slaughter. Meat-centered diets are very wasteful of grain, land, water, fuel, and fertilizer.

It takes up to 16 pounds of grain to produce one pound of edible beef in a feedlot. Half of U.S. farm acreage is used to produce feed crops for livestock. A meat-centered diet requires about seventeen times the land area per person than would be required for a purely vegetarian diet. Animal agriculture also requires tremendous inputs of chemical fertilizer and pesticides, irrigation water, and fuel - commodities which are becoming very scarce worldwide.

Not only is much land and many resources used in the United States to raise beef, but the United States is also one of the world's largest importers of beef. We import approximately 1 million head of cattle every year from Mexico, half as much beef as all Mexicans have left for themselves. In spite of widespread poverty and malnutrition in Honduras, they export large amounts of beef to the United States.

Grains are increasingly being fed to livestock in the third world, although the majority of people there can't afford to eat meat. Much of the best land in poorer countries is used to graze livestock, often for export. In Central America, two-thirds of the agriculturally productive land is used for livestock production, for the wealthy or for export.

Here are some additional shocking statistics: (1) Two hundred and sixty million Americans are eating enough food (largely because of the high consumption of grain-fed livestock) to feed well over 1 billion people in the poor countries.

(2) The world's cattle consume an amount of food equivalent to the calorie requirements of 8.7 billion people. Livestock in the U. S. consume ten times the grain that Americans eat directly.

(3) Harvard nutritionist Jean Mayer estimates that if people reduced their meat consumption by just 10 percent, enough grain would be released to feed 60 million people.

(4) The wealthy nations feed more grain to their livestock than the people of India and China (more than one-third of the human race) consume directly.

(5) Contrary to the common belief that our grain exports help feed a hungry world, two-thirds of our agricultural exports go to feed livestock, rather than hungry people.

These facts indicate that the food being fed to animals in the affluent nations could, if properly distributed, end both hunger and malnutrition throughout the world. A switch from animal-centered diets would free land and other resources, which could be used to grow nutritious crops for people. It would then be necessary to promote policies that would enable people in the underdeveloped countries to use their resources and skills to become food self-reliant. Two quotations reinforce these conclusions: Mahatma Gandhi stated: "There is enough for the world's need but not for its greed." Sister Elizabeth Seton asserted that we should "live simply, that others may simply live." With so much hunger, poverty, and injustice in the world, explicit Jewish mandates to feed the hungry, help the poor, share resources, practice charity, show compassion, and pursue justice, and the trials and tribulations of Jewish history point to vegetarianism as the diet most consistent with Jewish values.