

Shabbat and Vegetarianism

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By Richard Schwartz

There are many connections that can be made between vegetarianism and Shabbat (the Sabbath day):

1. Shabbat is very important in Judaism. The writer Ahad Ha'am stated that "More than the Jews kept Shabbat, Shabbat kept the Jews". Yet, if it could help save a life, one must (not may) violate the Sabbath (Pesachim 25a). One must not say: although this person is very sick and his/her life is threatened, I can't drive him/her to the hospital or call for emergency help until Shabbat is over. Better to violate the commandments on one Shabbat so that a person can live and fulfill many more commandments.

2. Animals, as well as people, must be able to rest on the Sabbath day. The kiddush (sanctification over wine or grape juice) that is recited on Sabbath mornings includes the following verse from the Ten Commandments:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is a sabbath unto the Lord, thy God; in it thou shalt not do any manner of work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor the stranger that is within thy gates. (Exod. 20:8-10)

Similar statements occur in Exodus 23:12 and Deuteronomy 5:12-14. Based on these Torah statements, Rashi states that animals must be free to roam on the Sabbath day and graze freely and enjoy the beauties of nature. This is a far cry from conditions for animals today on factory farms.

3. It is not necessary for Jews to eat meat or fish on Shabbat. In a scholarly article in "The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society" (Fall, 1981), Rabbi Alfred Cohen, the editor, concludes that "If a person is more comfortable not eating meat, there would be no obligation for him to do so on the Sabbath" In a responsa, an answer to a question based on Jewish law, Rabbi Moshe Halevi Steinberg of Kiryat Yam, Israel, states, "One whose soul rebels against eating living things can without any doubt fulfill the commandment of enhancing the Sabbath and rejoicing on festivals by eating vegetarian foods. . . . Each person should delight in the Sabbath according to his own sensibility, enjoyment, and outlook." All of the above is reinforced by the fact that there are Chief Rabbis, including Rabbi Sha'ar Yashuv Cohen, Chief Rabbi of Haifa, and Rabbi David Rosen, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, who are strict vegetarians, including on Shabbat and Yom Tov.

4. Shabbat is a reminder of creation, as it is said, "For in six days the L-rd made the heaven and earth, and on the seventh day, He rested." (Exodus 1:11) When G-d created the world, he was able to say, "It is very good". Everything was in harmony as G-d had planned, the waters were clean, the air was pure. But what must G-d think about the world today? What must God think when the rain he sends to nourish our crops is often acid rain due to the many chemicals poured into the air by our industries? when the ozone layer that He provided to separate the heavens from the earth is being depleted at such a rapid rate? when the abundance of species of plants and animals that He created are becoming extinct in tropical rain forests and other threatened habitats, before we are even able to catalog them? when the fertile soil that He provided is rapidly being depleted and eroded? when the climatic conditions that He designed to meet our needs are threatened by global warming? Modern intensive livestock agriculture is a major factor behind these environmental threats.

5. The observance of Shabbat is an example of the imitation of G-d; since G-d created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day, so we too work for six days and rest on the seventh day. Judaism teaches that we are to emulate G-d's attributes of mercy, for "His tender mercies are over all of His creatures" (Psalm 145.9) A vegetarian diet that does no harm to animals, and does not waste large amounts of grain, land, water, fuel, and other agricultural resources while millions of people die of hunger and its effects every year, is an effective way to mirror the merciful ways of the L-rd, who is our shepherd.

6. Psalm 96 which is recited at the Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat (welcome to the Sabbath service) begins with, "Sing to Hashem (G-d) a new song. Sing to Hashem everyone on earth". According to Rabbi Everett Gendler our purpose is to join with all sentient creatures in singing praises to the Creator for all the wonders of creation. He states, "to respect the life of our fellow choir members by not killing them and eating their corpses would seem an obviously desirable condition for choral collegiality (Rabbis and Vegetarianism: An Evolving Tradition, edited by Roberta Kalechofsky, Micah Publications, 1995, p. 21).

7. Shabbat is a day of thankfulness for our blessings. On Friday night it is traditional for fathers to bless their children. So too, vegetarianism can be a blessing for the world, because of its health, ecological, and other benefits.

8. The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law), A Compilation of Jewish Laws and Customs by Rabbi Solomon Ganzfried (translated by Hyman E. Goldin, LL.B., revised edition, Hebrew Publishing Company, New York, 1961, Chapter 80, No. 52) states "It is forbidden to catch any living thing on the Sabbath, even a flea, but if an insect stings a person, it may be removed and thrown off, but one is not allowed to kill it, because it is forbidden to kill on the Sabbath, anything

that possesses life." This mitzvah seems most consistent with vegetarianism, which also does not involve the taking of any life.

9. On Shabbat, we thank G-d for His mercies during the previous week. This is also most consistent with a diet that does not require the cruel treatment of animals.

10. On every Shabbat (and festival) morning, Jews chant "Nishmat kol chai t'varech et shim'chah" ("the soul of all living creatures shall bless thy name"). This would seem to be most consistent with enjoying Shabbat with a sumptuous vegetarian meal that doesn't involve cruel treatment of animals.

11. One of the highlights of the Shabbat morning service is the reading of the Torah. It is the Torah that contains G-d's original vegetarian law: "Behold I have given you every herb yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree in which is the fruit of a tree-yielding seed - to you it should be for food." (Genesis 1:29). The Torah also has much about all the reasons for vegetarianism - taking care of our health, compassion for animals, protecting the environment, helping hungry people, and conserving natural resources.

12. Along with the commandment to observe Shabbat is the commandment of 6 days of labor: "Six days a week you should work and do all your creative labor, and the seventh day is Shabbat to the L-rd, your G-d." Judaism teaches that work enobles and sanctifies life, and that idleness may lead to temptation and sin. However, modern intensive livestock agriculture reduces jobs as farms get bigger and many smaller farms disappear.

13. Jews have sumptuous, joyous meals on Shabbat, and sing z'mirot (songs of praise of G-d and the holiness and beauty of the day). At the end of the meal, bircat hamazon (blessings in appreciation of G-d in mercy providing enough food for everyone) is recited. Yet, today over 70% of the grain grown in the United States is fed to animals destined for slaughter, as 15 to 20 million people worldwide die annually because of hunger and its effects.

14. Shabbat is viewed in the Jewish tradition as a foretaste of the Messianic period - a time of peace, justice, and harmony. According to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, the Messianic period will be vegetarian. He based this view on the prophecy of Isaiah, "The wolf will dwell with the lamb . . . the lion will eat straw like the ox . . . and no one shall hurt nor destroy in all of God's holy mountain" (Isaiah 11: 6-9).

15. In addition to being a day of oneg (joy), Shabbat is also a day of learning - learning that people often don't have time for during a hectic week filled with work and other responsibilities. Vegetarians believe that if people learned about the incredible realities related to the mass production and widespread consumption of meat, many would change their diets so as to avoid continuing current errors.

16. Shabbat is a time of renewal. We can help personal renewal occur by returning to the original human diet, the vegetarian diet of Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden), a diet that can help us feel renewed because of the many health benefits of plant-based diets.

17. Shabbat is a time of joyful rest. A person can be truly joyful when healthy, and this is best accomplished through a vegetarian diet.

18. The manna, vegetarian food provided to the Israelites in the desert after their exodus from Egypt, taught the Children of Israel several lessons, one of which is that they should refrain from labor on Shabbat. While only enough manna was provided on other days to meet that day's needs for nourishment, a double portion was provided on Friday morning so that there was no need to gather manna on the Sabbath, when none was provided. Hence, the Israelites learned that they were to rest on the seventh day. (see Exodus 16:5, 22-30.)

In view of these and other connections, I hope that Jews will enhance their celebration of the spiritually meaningful Shabbat by making it a time to begin striving even harder to live up to Judaism's highest moral values and teachings, and one important way to do this is by moving toward a vegetarian diet.