

Shemini

Leviticus 9:1-11:47

The Vegetarian Ideal in the Bible*

GARY A. RENDSBURG

Parashat Shemini, especially chapter 11, includes the most prominent treatment of permitted and forbidden animals in the Torah (the parallel text in Deuteronomy 14 is less detailed). Even after millennia of discussion, however, there is still no consensus as to why certain animals are permitted and why others are forbidden. The view I am presenting here builds on the work of other scholars before me.

We begin by recalling that the world was created with both humans and animals commanded to eat only vegetation (Gen 1:29-30, 2:9, 2:16 emphasized more in the first creation account, but present in the second one as well). Accordingly, we posit a vegetarian ideal, in line with a harmonious world established at creation. The humans could not live up to these standards established by God, and the Genesis narrative quickly moves on to disobedience (Gen 3:6), violence (Gen 4:8; 23), and improper sexual relations (Gen 6:1-4).

The result is the great flood, after which God lowers the bar for humanity, allowing for the eating of meat (Gen 9:3), though with

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the one important proviso: no consumption of blood (9:4). It is this latter point, I believe, which allows us to understand the Torah's rationale in permitting certain species, while prohibiting others. In general, the permitted animals are all herbivores, as we may see from analyzing the various sub-divisions.

The permitted land animals are the three domesticated cloven-hoofed ruminants (sheep, goats, cattle), to which may be added one wild animal, the deer, including the many individual species subsumed in that category, such as the gazelle and the antelope (listed in Deut 14:5) – all of them herbivores.

Fish must have fins and scales in order to be eaten, and this description therefore excludes the various scavengers on the river bed or the ocean bed, such as crabs, lobsters, shrimp, and crayfish.

The Torah does not provide traits for the permitted birds, but from the list of the 20 forbidden species, including eagles, vultures, owls, and so on, we may conclude, as does the Mishnah (Hullin 3:6), that birds of prey are forbidden, while other birds, such as doves, pigeons, and quail are permitted.

Finally, we may note that four species of locusts are kosher, even though most Jewish communities no longer eat these creatures – and that these locusts are the plant-eaters par excellence!

Now, to be sure, there are some problems with this approach. For example, other mammalian herbivores are not allowed, such as horse, donkey, rabbit, hyrax, etc. Moreover, certain water fowl, such as ducks, eat fish in addition to their grazing on plants at the water's edge. We also know that some larger fish eat smaller fish, in addition to plankton and so on. So the explanation proffered here is not perfect, yet I believe that it underscores a major theological point.

The permission granted to humanity to eat meat is a compromise of the vegetarian ideal, for it requires the taking of life. But in so doing, man is not allowed to eat blood, which is the symbol of life (again, see Gen 9:4, and especially Lev 17:11; Deut 12:23). Hence, the omnivores (pigs, etc.) and carnivores (cats, eagles, etc.) of the world are not to be eaten – lest we ingest blood through the backdoor, as it were, by eating an animal which itself has eaten an animal.

To put this in other terms: humankind is unable to live up to the vegetarian ideal set forth at creation, but Israel wishes to adhere to

that ideal, even in compromised fashion. Hence, Israel consumes only those animals which themselves have not killed other animals or consumed the flesh thereof.

The vegetarian ideal which inspired ancient Israel is not limited to texts of Torah (creation, dietary laws, etc.), however. It appears again, in all its splendor, in the description of the end of days, as envisioned by the prophet Isaiah (ch. 11). In Isaiah 2, the prophet describes the anticipated world peace as the harmony among nations: "nation shall not take up sword against nation" (2:4) (amongst other well-known passages). In chapter 11 the visionary thinker paints more or less the same picture, but he does so by projecting the faunal world onto his canvas. The natural enemies, the animals that prey and the animals that are preyed upon, are paired off, as an exemplar of what the world will be like in this period of perfect harmony. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together, with a little boy to herd them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw" (Isa 11:6-7).

Thus, in Isaiah's portrayal of the future world, the animals will return to their vegetarian state. Wolves, leopards, and lions no longer will prey upon their traditional foes, sheep, goats, and cattle. The lion will have to learn to eat straw like the ox. We will return to the paradise of creation. Isaiah understood the matter well, and when he sought to highlight what the end of days would be like, he settled upon vegetarianism, just as the text of Genesis 1-2 focused on this point in the two versions of creation.

Even more remarkable perhaps is my final point. Isaiah's words were reused about 160 years later by the prophet Second Isaiah, living in exile in Babylon around 540 BCE, as the culminating verse in one of most glorious passages in the entire Bible. In chapter 65 the prophet presents his view of a new heaven and a new earth (v. 17), a world in which all troubles would be forgotten (v. 16). In this new world order, Jerusalem will be a joy, there will be no more weeping and wailing, a man who fails to reach one hundred years of age will be reckoned as one accursed, people will plant vineyards and enjoy the fruit, and they shall be blessed by the LORD (vv. 18-24). And then the final lines: "the wolf and the lamb shall graze together, and

the lion shall eat straw like the ox . . . In all my sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done – said the LORD” (v. 25). This crucial passage, as cited both in Isaiah 11 and in Isaiah 65, speaks volumes. It epitomizes the vegetarian ideal which permeates the spirit of the Bible and the life of ancient Israel.

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And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. (Lev 10:8–9)

With the exception of the nazirite vow (Num 6:1–8), which puts wine and intoxicants off-limits for that special category of men and women dedicated, even sometimes from the womb (e.g., the birth of Samson in Judges 13), to the service of God, the Bible does not generally problematize alcohol – though it is sometimes associated with drunken foreigners, as in Esther 1. Why, then, are Aaron and his sons prohibited from drinking alcohol when they enter the Tent of Meeting? One answer concerns context; alcohol belongs at a feast, but not in a space dedicated to the service of God. Another concerns correct procedure; alcohol makes it difficult to execute instructions precisely. Yet another concerns personal safety. It has just been established quite graphically through the deaths of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1–7) that God will exact the death penalty for a priest who does not follow the correct procedure. Allowing a drunken priest in the Tent of Meeting, then, would be, to say the least, to put a stumbling block before the blind.

Moses spoke to Aaron and to his remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar: Take the meal offering that is left over from the LORD’s offering by fire

and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy. You shall eat it in the sacred precinct, inasmuch as it is your due, and that of your children . . . But the breast of elevation offering and the thigh of gift offering you, and your sons and daughters with you, may eat in any clean place, for they have been assigned as a due to you and your children from the Israelites' sacrifices of well-being. (Lev 10:12-14)

A sharp distinction is made between two different kinds of offerings, where they may be eaten and by whom. The meal offering is of an order of holiness that allowed for eating, but only in a sacred space. That constraint effectively ruled out some eaters: the daughters of the priests, who were not permitted to enter the designated space. Perhaps that's why, with reference to the breast of elevation offering (10:14), the daughters are explicitly mentioned. Since the "sacred space" rule does not apply here, and since priests and their families depended on the sacrificial cult for sustenance, it was crucial to make it clear that females were included.

Then Moses inquired about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and said, "Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and He has given it to you to remove the guilt of the community and to make expiation for them before the LORD. Since its blood was not brought inside the sanctuary, you should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded." (Lev 10:16-18)

This narrative stands out. Instead of eating something they shouldn't have eaten, Aaron's surviving sons *don't* eat something they *should* have eaten. This reversal of the norm underscores the complexity of attitudes towards food in the context of the sacrificial cult. Sometimes the priests and their families eat specified parts of a sacrificial animal as a source of food, as in verse 14 above. On other occasions, sustenance has nothing to do with it. Moses is not angry with Eleazar and Ithamar because they missed their dinner, but because they failed to observe the proper protocol with regard to sin offerings.

DIANA LIPTON

FROM
FORBIDDEN
FRUIT
TO
MILK AND
HONEY

A Commentary
on Food in the Torah

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*Translated from the Hebrew by Sara Tova Brody

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