

There are many reasons people choose to eat little or no meat, including concern for animals, health, environmental issues, ethical concerns about commercial meat production, and many others. Within Jewish sources, there are some very vocal proponents of vegetarianism. And there are also many sources in Jewish tradition that clearly permit, and encourage, meat eating, especially for celebration. It seems clear that we and the planet would be better off if most of us ate less meat, but clearly whether you choose to eat any meat is up to you. Either way, we believe—and Jewish tradition teaches—that meat consumption is something we should do thoughtfully, with full awareness.

Eat Plants

What can we learn from the fact that the Torah includes both of these texts?

Do you find it helpful to look for a basis for eating meat or not eating meat in the Torah?

²⁹ God said, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.

– Genesis 1:29

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נֹתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת כָּל עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ וְאֵת כָּל הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ פְרִי עֵץ זֶרַע זֶרַע לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ:

Eat Meat

³ Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. ⁴ You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it.

– Genesis 9:3–4

כָּל רֶמֶשׂ אֲשֶׁר הוּא חַי לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ בְּיָרֵק עֵשֶׂב נֹתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת כָּל: אֵךְ בְּשֶׂר בְּנֶפֶשׁ דָּמוֹ לֹא תֹאכְלוּ:

To have a good time...

Some people still feel strongly that eating meat on Shabbat is central to celebrating the day. Do you agree or disagree?

Do you think of meat eating as something to be reserved for special occasions? If not, how would your life be different if you did?

It was taught, Rabbi Judah ben B'tayra said: When the Temple was in existence there could be no rejoicing save with meat, as it is said: “And you shall sacrifice peace-offerings, and shall eat there; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God” (Deut. 27). But now that the Temple is no longer in existence, there is no rejoicing save with wine, as it is said, “wine makes glad the heart of man.” (Ps. 104).

– Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Pesachim 109a

תַּנְיָא: רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בֶּן בְּתֵירָא אוֹמֵר: בְּזִמְנֵי שְׁבִית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קָיָים אֵין שְׂמֵחָה אֶלָּא בְּבֶשֶׂר, שְׁנַאֲמַר: “וְיִזְבַּחַת שְׁלָמִים וְאָכַלְתָּ שֶׁם וְשִׂמְחַת לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ” (דְּבָרִים כו). וְעַכְשָׁיו שְׂאִין בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קָיָים, אֵין שְׂמֵחָה אֶלָּא בַּיַּיִן, שְׁנַאֲמַר: “וַיַּיִן יִשְׂמַח לֵבב אָנוּשׁ” (תְּהִלִּים קד).

Only on special occasions

Isaac to Esau: “Hunt me some game, and make a tender morsel that I love and bring it to me and I will eat it in order that my soul bless you before I die.” (Genesis 27:7. See 5.1)

Why did Isaac request a meal of hunted game? Were not there sufficient goats in his flocks, and do they not taste like venison anyway?

A person should only eat meat on rare appointed occasions, and the reason is that a person should not become accustomed to eat meat, as it is written “You shall eat meat with all your desire. Eat it, however, as you eat the gazelle and the deer,” (Deut. 12:21–22). This means that you should eat meat by circumstance [accident] rather than in a set way. For the gazelle and the deer are not easily found around human dwellings for they are wild, and their habitation is not with people, but in the deserts and forests. Consequently, they can only be eaten in small quantities for not everyday does such a miracle occur that a herd of gazelles appears when one is hunting. Consequently, since one eats of them rarely, he will not come to habituate himself to eating ordinary meat since it gives birth to cruelty and other bad qualities in the body of a person. For it is the birds of prey that kill and eat meat, and the lion that kills prey and eats. Therefore it says that in the future “The lion like the ox will eat straw. For there will be peace between all the living creatures” (Isaiah 11:7). Therefore, Isaac said, “Hunt me game,” (Genesis 27:7) for he did not want to eat meat except if it was according to the circumstance [of the hunt].

– Kli Yakar on Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Chulin 84a

In an ideal world...

It is impossible to imagine that the Master of all that transpires, Who has mercy upon all His creatures, would establish an eternal decree such as this in the creation that He pronounced "exceedingly good," that it should be impossible for the human race to exist without violating its own moral instincts by shedding blood, be it even the blood of animals. ...

When humanity reaches its goal of complete happiness and spiritual liberation, when it attains that lofty peak of perfection that is the pure knowledge of God and the full manifestation of the essential holiness of life, then the age of "motivation by virtue of enlightenment" will have arrived. ... Then human beings will recognize their companions in Creation: all the animals. And they will understand how it is fitting from the standpoint of the purest ethical standard not to resort to moral concessions, to compromise the Divine attribute of justice with that of mercy [by permitting mankind's exploitation of animals]. ... Rather they will walk the path of absolute good.

— Rav Kook, *A Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace*

Current methods of commercial beef production

The ever-increasing cattle population is wreaking havoc on the earth's ecosystems, destroying habitats on six continents. Cattle raising is a primary factor in the destruction of the world's remaining tropical rain forests. Millions of acres of ancient forests in Central and South America are being felled and cleared to make room for pastureland to graze cattle. Cattle herding is responsible for much of the spreading desertification in the sub-Sahara of Africa and the western rangeland of the United States and Australia. The overgrazing of semiarid and arid lands has left parched and barren deserts on four continents. Organic runoff from feedlots is now a major source of organic pollution in our nation's ground water. Cattle are also a major cause of global warming. ... The devastating environmental, economic and human toll of maintaining a worldwide cattle complex is little discussed in policy circles. ... Yet, cattle production and beef consumption now rank among the gravest threats to the future well-being of the earth and its human population.

— Jeremy Rifkin, *Beyond Beef*

Looking for transparency

The industrialization—and brutalization—of animals in America is a relatively new, evitable, and local phenomenon. No other country raises and slaughters its food animals quite as intensively or as brutally as we do. No other people in history has lived at quite so great a remove from the animals they eat. Were the walls of our meat industry to become transparent, literally or even figuratively, we would not long continue to raise, kill, and eat animals the way we do. Tail docking and sow crates and beak clipping would disappear overnight, and the days of slaughtering four hundred head of cattle an hour would promptly come to an end—for who could stand the sight? Yes, meat would get more expensive. We'd probably eat a lot less of it, too, but maybe when we did eat animals we'd eat them with the consciousness, ceremony, and respect they deserve.

— Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*

Food for Thought:

- Do you eat meat? How often? Why or why not? How do you feel about it? Do you think that people should eat meat?
- Would you be more or less likely to eat meat if you saw how the animal was raised and slaughtered?

Rav Kook was the chief Rabbi of Israel in the early twentieth century. He believed when the Messiah came, the world would become vegetarian. However, he himself ate meat - but only on Shabbat. What do you make of this paradox?

Do you believe that eating meat is a moral concession? Why or why not?

Eat meat that grew up where you did

Many people believe that it's wrong to eat meat under any circumstances. But if you do eat meat, here are some of the arguments in favor of meat from local, mixed-use farms. In contrast to commercial meat production, local sustainably-raised meat is a healthy, tasty and environmentally-friendly alternative. Frequently, animals play an important role on small, diversified farms, where their manure completes the nutrient cycle by replacing minerals and organic matter in the soil. Meat animals are also the by-product of dairying: female goats and cows must become pregnant to continue their milk flow. If their babies are male, they are usually slaughtered at the end of the season, because there isn't room for them on the farm. Eating a small amount of meat is therefore part of a balanced and sustainable food system.

A number of folks are working to provide sustainably-raised kosher meat by linking small meat farms with shochets. See [Resources](#).

For more on kosher slaughter, see 3.4