

What's on your Plate? / Meat Minimalism

There were two deaths this year that brought me to tears- one very small, and one very large.

The first came on New Year's Day, George, a 14-year old Hawaiian land snail died in a laboratory in Oahu. His caretaker said, (David Sischo, a wildlife biologist with Hawaii's dept of land and natural resources said) "He was a little bit of a hermit. I very rarely saw him outside of his shell." No wonder he never came out of his shell- what was there to crawl with, interact with? George was the last of his species.

The second death was larger, so much so that it was marked with a memorial plaque, like you or I would place at the grave of a loved one. The death was for a glacier named Okjokull- OK for short- which was about 700 years old. Smaller glaciers have died, but Ok was a glacier of significant land mass that topped a volcano outside of Iceland's capital Reykjavik. A glacier dies when its ice is no longer thick enough for it to

move; OK is now a small patch of ice. Mourners, including Iceland's Prime Minister, placed a plaque that read: "Ok is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as glacier. In the next 200 years all our main glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it." The memorial plaque is engraved August 2019 and records the current concentration of carbon dioxide in the air globally - 415 parts per million (ppm).

I suspect that many of you are like me, in feeling overwhelmed at the losses and changes we see around us daily, whether it is loss of environmental protections and species, loss of functional government, loss of civility and tolerance of others, loss of life from violence and racism, loss of democratic institutions, national values, and more. How often do we throw up our hands and say, what can I do? What issue can I impact? Where will my voice be heard? As Jews we are called to bring a legacy of social engagement into the world, to care for humanity, as well as George the snail and Ok the glacier. How can I make an impact?

Try as I might, I may not be able to control what my elected officials do. I may not be able to impact what corporations do. I may not be able to influence other countries. But I am not without power. I can control where I spend my money, I can control what I do, or do not, say, or do. I can vote. And I can control what I eat. Indeed, my dinner plate may be one of the most powerful resources I have.

Two thousand years ago, when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the rabbis re-branded the dining table in every Jewish home a *Mikdash me'at*- a small sanctuary. What they meant is that by the food we eat, its preparation, its content, we made an offering of who we are to God. Our dining table made us accountable before God, and elevated us. That is a basis for kashrut- for mindfully considering what food we eat and don't eat, how we prepare that food, and even how we slaughter the animals that we eat- all while giving blessing before and giving thanks afterwards. In our day that is the basis for eco-kashrut, for mindfully eating or abstaining from food whose production we find crosses ethical boundaries. Those bounds may have to do with the proper treatment of animals, the wages and respect provided to meat

factory workers, the impact on the environment. What I eat is an extension of my people's values: we Jews have been charged to eat responsibly.

Take for example my foray into eating beets. A few years ago, at a farm stand in Somis, the farmer went out back and brought me 4 huge beets that he had just plucked from the earth. The dirt was still clinging to the roots. They were delicious. The next week, at Trader Joes I eagerly picked up a box of 4 cooked and prepared beets. As I ate them that night, I noticed that they were from France. At that moment it felt unconscionable to imagine the amount of energy, the oil and gas that had been used in trucks, ships and international delivery of 4 measly beets that could just as well have been grown in Somis. This was not responsible eating. Our tradition teaches us who we are and what we stand for begins on the plate in front of us. So, to paraphrase a familiar commercial, What's on your plate?

The uncomfortable truth is that the production of the food we eat is coming to us at enormous and dire, environmental costs. In August, the U.N. released a report authored by 107 scientists in 52 countries, that

concluded that we must change how we use our land for food production, or we will spew forth far more carbon dioxide than we can possibly absorb. We have seen this impact in vivid terms this summer, as more than 40,000 fires have spread across Brazil's Amazon rainforest, which I remember as a kid being taught were the lungs of the world. Experts attributed the wildfires to slash-and-burn approaches to clear land for logging and farming to support Brazil's exports such as beef. The clearcutting of forests for land to graze cows and sheep and goats has been a one-two punch in that the deforestation removes trees which absorb carbon dioxide, while the increase of animal grazing increases carbon dioxide in the methane gas the cows emit. The U.N. Report warns us that current practices of deforestation, logging, agriculture, and animal food production is emitting 25% of human-induced greenhouse gas emissions. In comparison- animal agriculture emits more greenhouse gases than exhaust from all forms of transportation, world-wide. So the food on our plate is every bit, or every bite, as important, as the car we drive, in its impact on greenhouse gases, which drive up carbon dioxide.

There's a midrash that tells of two men who are disputing over who owns a piece of land. They go to the rabbi for a decision. The rabbi hears their argument, and then he bends down and places his ear on the earth. As he stands he says, "gentlemen you have it all wrong. You do not own the land. The land owns us." (Baba Batra 37 a-b)

If this feels dire, it is. But we are not helpless. The answer is on the plate in front of us. It's what we eat. What we choose to eat impacts the market of what food producers will produce. And this is the case for a more plant-based diet. Beyond the very-real health benefits that decreasing our red-meat consumption decreases our risk for heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and stroke, decreasing our meat consumption has very real positive implications for changing our land use and for significantly reversing greenhouse gas emissions.

Last September, the Center for Sustainable Systems at the University of Michigan conducted a cradle-to-distribution assessment of the environmental impact of two ¼ pound burgers: one a beef burger, and the other a plant-based burger, produced by Beyond Meat, the company that makes Beyond Burgers. They used data from the 2017

National Cattlemen's Association environmental impact study. They found that the plant-based burger has 93% less impact on land use, 99% less impact on water usage, uses 46% less energy. The reduction in Greenhouse gas emissions, burger for burger? 90% less for the plant-based. (Impossible Burger's claims are 87% water/96% land/89%Ghge)

That should give us pause.

While the vegetarian and vegan markets have grown exponentially in the 21st century, creating entire new, welcomed aisles in our grocery stores, this recognition that we love meat, we want to eat meat, and that our red-meat production is unarguably perilous for our planet, has led to new innovations in plant-based food, namely, creating meat that looks like, and tastes like meat but is not meat. And if you are tempted to try a grilled Beyond Burger, or meaty Impossible Burger- it is not impossible- but good luck finding one at Luna Grill, TGIFridays, Burger King, Carl's Jr, Del Taco, and other national chains that are featuring them on their menus and are often sold out. Look for them at Kroger's and Whole Foods chains. When KFC introduced Beyond Fried Chicken for vegan consumers this August in Atlanta, they sold out in 5

hours, selling as much meatless chicken in those 5 hours as they do popcorn chicken in a week. It is not just your dinner plate, but dinner plates across the country that are making choices about what we consume- and as always, industry responds to the consumer.

Now about now, many of you, including my husband, is thinking, but I like my brisket at yuntif dinner. Eating corned beef and pastrami is my cultural heritage- it would be anti-Semitic to insist I give that up! It might be equally Jewish to resort to Jewish guilt and say, you have a chance to do something essential for the environment, that is healthy for you, that won't cost you more money, ask you to give up taste, and express your values through your consumerism, i.e., actually through what you consume. I might do that, but what I'd like to do is ask you to...

Consider that option. Meat minimalism sounds too much like a movement, so let me put it in different terms. Could you think about Meatless Mondays- taking a night of the week where you might be eating meat and making a different choice? Could Taco Tuesdays in your home be made with meatless crumbles? Perhaps, like other Jewish

ethical omnivores, you might want to become MOOSHY, Meat only on Shabbat, Happy Occasions, and Yuntif? And this is a very Jewish option. Our tradition recognizes that we crave meat, and rather than say, don't eat it, it says, harness your impulse. Eat this but not this. Do not mix milk and meat. Separate out the blood from the flesh. Wait between eating. Don't deny your impulses but control them.

In short, I'm asking you to consider getting uncomfortable, for the sake of the planet. We have pushed ourselves into the uncomfortable zone before- by giving up our plastic grocery bags and drinking straws, being diligent in our recycling, opting for cars with better gas mileage and electric engines, planting drought tolerant lawns, choosing solar panels. What I know for myself is that I have gotten comfortable with my environmental practices- and that is not good. It is time to get uncomfortable again and push for a new normal. It's time to conscientiously think about what Eating Responsibly looks like. Plant-based burgers are not the solution to everything. Nutritionists caution against eating too many processed foods, including the soy and potato and pea proteins used in meat substitutes. My foray into beets reminded

me that eating locally grown foods, and fresh foods, may be the best thing I can do for myself and the environment.

To help you continue thinking about our habits and our choices, when you leave the sanctuary today, Women of TBT will be in the lobby, with brand new recyclable grocery bags for you to take and use regularly. You will find information inside from VCTRY about our teens recycling initiative and how you can partner with them.

Jewish texts often end with a nechemta, an ending that brings consolation or comfort. So let me share two nechemtas- one Jewish, one secular. The Jewish story? In wrestling with kashrut, treatment of animals, and environmental degradation, Tel Aviv has become a burgeoning center of vegan eating, and Israel, in fact, is more than 5% vegan, a number that has doubled in the last decade, making it one of the leading vegan countries in the world. The secular story? There may be good news ahead for meat eaters. While the entire enterprise of raising cattle has a dire effect on CO2 emissions, it is possible to create a less gassy cow. Two Australian scientists, (Rocky deNys, Robert Kinley,) have discovered that adding *Asparagopsis taxiformis*, a pink underwater

seaweed to 2% of cows feed, cuts the cow's methane emission to undetectable levels. Sheep that were fed this seaweed produced 85 % less methane. Ranchers in California fed their cows 1% seaweed and found they immediately produced 50% less methane. And there was no taste difference in their milk! In short, while the poor choices we make may have dire consequences, don't for a minute think that the good choices we make don't help create new solutions. For me, controlling what I consume re-empowers me – if I can tackle this, I can tackle the other dire issues of the day. The world is the foundation on which our lives are built. If we don't ensure its future, the other issues all are moot.

Gut Yuntif.