Parshat Tzav: When Eating Meat was a Sacrifice
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Parshat Tzav is dedicated in memory of Marvin and Jeanne Eder, may their memory be a blessing, by Bob and Barbara Nieder.

And that which is left thereof [from the meal-offering] shall Aaron and his sons eat; it shall be eaten without leaven in a holy place; in the tent of meeting they shall eat it. . . . it is most holy as the sin-offering and the guilt-offering.

When the Jewish people were in the wilderness before they entered the land of Israel, the consumption of meat was associated with holiness. Every piece of meat consumed came from an animal sacrificed in the Mishkan (Sanctuary), an act meant to bring the worshiper closer to G-d. The word korban (sacrifice) is related to le-karev, to come close. Through the sacrifice, worshipers felt that they were giving themselves vicariously to G-d.

If an animal sacrifice was slaughtered in a place other than the altar of the Sanctuary, it was deemed unlawful, and the perpetrator was deserving of Divine punishment. (Once the Jewish people entered the land of Israel, eating meat outside holy spaces was permitted.)

In the times of the Mishkan the consumption of meat was not something taken for granted, as it generally is today. Each sacrifice had a definite purpose: to offer thanksgiving, to atone for a sin, to commemorate a holy day (such as the Korban Pesach, or Paschal Lamb), or to make one feel closer to G-d. Those offering a sacrifice felt that they were giving up something from their prized possessions. People owned animals as sources of labor or food, as well as a form of capital; hence slaughtering them in connection with the Temple rites was a sacrifice of a precious source of income and food. The animal was not considered just a distant commodity as is generally the case in today's world of corporate agriculture; rather, it was a creature that the owner raised and saw on a daily basis, and whose needs were a matter of personal responsibility and even concern. Since a mother animal and its offspring could not be slaughtered on the same day, those who offered sacrifices needed to be aware of familial relationships among animals to be offered as sacrifices.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Chief Rabbi of Efrat, points out that worshipers were very much involved in the sacrificial process. For sin offerings, they were required to lean their hands on the animal, and make a confession prior to the act of slaughter. Rabbi Riskin explains that the emotional result on the one who brought the sacrifice and watched it being killed was to contemplate that because of their sin they deserved to be the ones on the altar. Thus they would experience feelings of teshuvah (repentance) and become transformed, worthy of a renewed lease on life.

The relatively small number of sacrifices performed daily meant that attention was given to the death of each animal. Sanctity was related to physical wholeness and perfection. The Kohanim (Priests) had to be free of bodily imperfections, and the animals to be sacrificed had to be free of blemishes. Hence, the notion of holiness was given physical expression in the concept of holiness of body and limb.

Far different is the eating of meat today. Rather than an infrequent act, many people in modern societies consume meat daily, if not more than once a day. Instead of an individual sacrifice of one person's animal in a special ceremony, animals are currently raised by mass-production procedures on
“factory farms” in huge numbers. In place of slaughter by a Kohen (Priest) focusing his intention in the Mishkan imbued with holiness, today the slaughter is generally done by a shochet (ritual slaughterer) who slaughters hundreds of animals a day in an industrial facility.

Because of these major changes, the large-scale production and widespread consumption of meat today have negative effects that did not occur in the days of the Sanctuary. In some cases, these negative effects violate or compromise Halakhah (Jewish law), and often contravene the ethical sensitivities that the Torah wishes to instill in us.

For example, while the Torah forbids tsa'ar ba'alei chayim, inflicting unnecessary pain on animals, most farm animals -- including those raised for kosher consumers -- are raised on "factory farms" where they live in cramped, confined spaces, and are often drugged, mutilated, and denied fresh air, sunlight, exercise, and any enjoyment of life, before they are slaughtered and eaten.

The Torah mandates that people should be very careful about preserving their health and their lives. Yet, numerous scientific studies have linked animal-based diets directly to heart disease, stroke, many forms of cancer, and other chronic degenerative diseases. In addition, modern methods of raising animals have raised new health threats, including the potential for the human variant of “mad-cow's disease,” bird flu, E-coli contamination, and other negative effects from the use of large amounts of hormones, pesticides, and other chemicals.

Judaism teaches that "the earth is the L-rd's" and that we are meant to be G-d's partners and co-workers in preserving the world. In conflict with this ethic, modern intensive livestock agriculture contributes substantially to global warming, soil erosion and depletion, air and water pollution, overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the destruction of tropical rain forests and other habitats and other environmental damage. As a recent indication of just how significant this is, a November 2006 report from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization indicated that animal-based agriculture emits more greenhouse gases (18 percent, in CO2 equivalents) than the entire transport sector.

While the Torah mandates bal tashchit, that we are not to waste or unnecessarily destroy anything of value, animal agriculture requires the wasteful use of grain, land, water, energy, and other precious resources. As one example, it is estimated that over half of the world's population will live in areas chronically short of water by the middle of this century; yet animal-based diets typically require up to 14 times as much water (to raise the animals) than diets completely free of animal products.

While Judaism stresses that we are to assist the poor and share our bread with hungry people, over 70% of the grain grown in the United States and over 40% of the grain grown worldwide are fed to animals destined for slaughter, while an estimated 20 million people worldwide die because of hunger and its effects each year. It takes up to 16 pounds of grain in a feedlot to produce one pound of meat. While a shift to plant-based diets would not in itself solve the problem of widespread hunger, it would free up grain, land, water, energy and other resources that could make a major difference.

There is a world of difference between the consumption of meat in the time of the sanctuary and today, with holiness replaced by speed, special events replaced by mass production, one sanctuary replaced by many slaughterhouses, and positive effects replaced by many serious negative consequences. Though the consumption of kosher meat is considered entirely ‘mutar’ (permissible) by the vast majority of Jewish authorities, perhaps it is time for the Jewish community to reconsider our diets, in a voluntary way, in efforts to restore holiness, kavannah and other positive Jewish values.
Personal Lifestyle Changes That Reflect This Dvar Torah:

* Consider substituting fruits and vegetables and other plant-foods for some or all of your meat consumption.

* Avoid animal products that involve especially serious violations of tsa'ar ba'alei chaim (causing pain to living creatures), such as white veal and foie gras (produced by force feeding ducks and geese).

* If you eat animal products, try to limit them to those that were raised more humanely, such as free-range, organic chickens and beef. However, since standards for such products are often vague, check that conditions for the animals are actually better.

* Support efforts to improve the treatment of animals in animal agriculture.

1. Leviticus 6:9,10
2. Leviticus 17:3,4
3. Deuteronomy 12:20
4. Leviticus 22:26-28
6. See, for example, the halakhic discourse of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein on not eating veal, in Igrot Moshe, Even Ha-ezer, Vol. IV, no. 92.
7. Psalms 24:1