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## **The Earth on Your Fork: An Ecology of *Kashrut***

by David Seidenberg

### **I.**

How we eat is a huge piece of how we relate to the earth itself. *Kashrut*, along with all Jewish mores and customs about eating, not only reflects the ecology of ancient Israel, it also impacts our sense of place and purpose in the greater world. In this brief essay, I want to ask you to imagine that there is some deeper ecological meaning to *kashrut*, and to explore what that meaning might be. By the end of this essay, I hope to propose a convincing theory for which animals we eat, and don't eat, according to Jewish law.

### **II.**

Our humanity emerges from our relationship with all life — not just with other human beings — and from our connection to the earth. This connection is one of the bases for all religion. One can experience this connection in the way we eat our food and how we respect the species and locales that our food comes from.

More broadly, one can experience the human connection to the earth in the inspiration we feel from other animals, and in our love (our *biophilia*, as E.O. Wilson calls it<sup>1</sup>) for the diverse beauty of all living things. Each of these sensibilities becomes part of our rituals, part of our sense of identity, and even part of our relationship with the divine.

We also can find wonder and awe in the extraordinary human capacity to live in almost every ecosystem existing on this planet. We are called *adam* (human) because the first human was created from the *adamah* (earth or soil). As the *midrash* teaches, God made the first human out of soils from all over the earth so that we would feel at home anywhere there is earth, soil. One teaching inherent in this idea is that who we are arises from the earth itself. "Fill the earth and connect with her," one might say.

Human diversity arises from this capacity we have to live in any ecosystem. How we live is influenced by and influences the earth; what we become after we die is once again the earth. The uniqueness of the ecology and biological diversity in each place leads to a unique way of relating to the earth. Each place therefore demands the creation of unique human cultures and religions.

### **III.**

Judaism, too, arose in a particular place with a particular ecosystem. While Jews live everywhere, our rituals are keyed to the seasons and rhythms of Israel.

Hence, for the Jews living in ancient Israel, the *lulav* (palm branch) was taken and the *sukkah* (temporary hut) was entered on the fall full moon, as a prelude to and preparation for praying for fertility and rain, as is reflected in the *Hoshanah* prayers we still say. Ultimately, all of this work (including *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, which purified us to make these prayers) was a very elaborate cycle of prayer and ritual for the well-being of both the ecosystem and the food crops that people depended on.

*Kashrut* is an essential part of how most Jews express being Jewish. Looking at *kashrut* from an ecological perspective, one can see that keeping kosher is not just a way of creating Jewish identity, but also of shaping a person to be more deeply connected to the lives we take for food and the animals we use.

This is not just true of Judaism. The ecosystem in which each culture evolved shapes not only its diet and cuisine, but also its fertility and rain rituals, its own pantheons or ways of worship. The reason why there are different religions is not primarily political or theological; it's that each society must find a way to teach its generations how to live in harmony with a particular place and a particular ecosystem. One of the ways this happens is through religion -- through its rituals, rules, and stories.

Conversely, religious practices are shaped by the ecosystem where they evolve. For example, even though Buddhism as a religion historically demanded vegetarianism, Tibetan Buddhism found a way to allow its adherents (even its priests) to eat meat, creating rituals and rules that would make meat-eating to fit into Buddhist religious practice. Ecologically, the Tibetans lived in a high-altitude ecosystem which did not allow sufficient protein-rich food production through farming alone, so in order to survive they had to eat some meat.

If every ritual has an ecological significance, then it remains up to us to discover what that significance is.

#### IV.

Before we talk more about ecology, however, it may help to explore a related dimension of *kashrut* and eating, taught to us by anthropology. We know from anthropologists that one of the primary ways that a culture expresses its values and its sense of the human place in the world is through eating. (Levi-Strauss' *The Raw and the Cooked* was one of the most important works that established this point.<sup>2</sup>) In fact, one of the primary ways of "civilizing" ourselves is to separate killing from eating.

By doing this, we make the relationship we have with our food different from the relationship other animals have with their prey. For a lion must kill and eat with one and the same mouth, while only a few species (i.e., primates with hands and mouths) can even theoretically make any kind of physical separation between killing and eating. Humans, in fact, are the only predators that can consistently separate killing (or capturing) and eating. This truth is embodied within Judaism by the Noachide law, considered binding on all human cultures, to not eat "a limb from a living animal" (*'ever min hachai*).

This civilizing process sounds like something that separates us from Nature. Yet by emphasizing our humanity in a particular way, such rules also restrain human power and strengthen our empathy with other animals

## V.

In Judaism, this drive to elevate our human uniqueness is embodied in powerful rules about how we slaughter animals and prepare their flesh, which has become the central focus of *kashrut*. Separating the blood from the flesh is described in the *Torah* as the way we respect the animal's soul and life (*ki hadam hu hanefesh*<sup>3</sup>), even when we eat it. The imperative to not eat the blood, combined with the imperative to not cause an animal suffering, allows for only one way of kosher slaughtering, what we know as *shechitah*. *Shechitah* accomplishes both goals (if done properly) by using an extraordinarily sharp knife to cut the jugular veins and trachea of an animal in one single stroke, thus allowing the blood to flow out and the heart to continue pumping while instantly rendering the animal unconscious.

Salting meat to draw out any remaining blood, examining the lungs, and, most importantly, not cooking the flesh produced by an animal's death with the milk that nurtured its life (*basar b'chalav*, which, according to tradition, prohibits not only the actually cooking of an animal in its biological mother's milk, but also includes any mixing of *milchig* and *fleishig*<sup>4</sup>) are more ways of creating separations between the life of an animal, the death of an animal, and the act of eating, of incorporating an animal into our own life and body. This means not only separating killing from eating, but also, in the case of kosher meat, separating the preparation and the cooking from the eating.<sup>5</sup>

Just as rules about how we kill and prepare meat distinguish human beings from other animals, rules about the way people harvest plants, which underline the difference between farming and foraging (or between human agriculture and the way other animals forage), are also found in most cultures. In Judaism, laws about *pe'ah* (not harvesting the corners), *leket* (not harvesting the gleanings), and *kilayim* (not interspersing species in a single field), not only underline our humanity, but also add a dimension of holiness and restraint to the act of taking from the earth.

These rituals also create a separation between Jewish culture and other cultures, along with a sense felt by many Jews that Jewish culture is somehow more civilized. That sense of election, so to speak, is a strictly anthropological dimension, without any direct ecological significance. But the anthropological meanings discussed above, to the extent that they create a heightened sensitivity to the lives and species that we use and eat, and an awareness of death and life itself, are also ecologically important.

## VI.

Returning to our main point: every religion arises or is shaped by a place and teaches how to live in that place. Though every ritual has many levels interpretation -- e.g., historical, theological, and personal -- the ecological meaning may be the soil in which all else grows. The depth of this meaning is not in generalities, but in the details.

In the case of *kashrut*, for example, the rule about not eating blood makes it almost impossible to eat hunted game. In an ecosystem where humans depended on large herds of wild animals such as buffalo, as we find in the North American plains, this rule would be almost impossible to follow. But in an ecosystem where wild herds and habitats are less productive, a hunting culture is unsustainable. A culture where humans can carefully control the size of domesticated herds to fit the limits of the ecosystem and the needs of the population is what is called for. That was the ecosystem that shaped the religion of our ancestors.

This brings us to that most puzzling of categorical rules: which animals we can and cannot eat. We all know the rule: mammals that chew their cud and have split hooves are kosher; all other land animals are not. What do these two characteristics of hoof and mouth mean? Anthropologically, there are many interpretations, some of which can be found in Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*<sup>6</sup>. But ecologically, there is a specific meaning, which goes far beyond any hygienic or other rationalistic or symbolic interpretation.

That meaning is practically straightforward: any animal that chews its cud can eat grasses and plants that are inedible to human beings, while any animal that has split hooves can walk (and graze) on land that is too rocky to farm with a plow. These characteristics together mean one very clear thing: the only land animals that we can eat according to the laws of *kashrut* are animals that do not compete with human beings for food. In an ecosystem that is in some ways marginal, that is, an ecosystem that depends on intensive human input (agriculture and herding), as well as upon intensive "divine" input (i.e., rain, as it was understood by our ancestors), there is no room for devoting agricultural land to livestock.

## VII.

The rules we still follow in Judaism would have allowed a civilization in the ancient Mideast to thrive without destroying the ecosystem it depended upon. Embedded in this wisdom about locale is another truth: any culture that allows domesticated herds to compete with humans for food pits farmers against herders. More importantly, it pits the poor who have no land against owners who control both land and herds. We can even see this dynamics of this problem in the modern world too, where rising world food prices endanger the poor in many countries. Those prices are driven in part by the industrial practice of feeding cattle grain instead of their natural diet of diverse grasses and other pasture plants.<sup>7</sup>

In order to have justice, which may be the most important value within Judaism's culture, there needs to be a way for farming and animal husbandry to produce enough for all people, poor and rich. The way to achieve this value in different ecosystems might be different, but any culture founded on justice will always find a way to bring this value into alignment with its ecosystem.<sup>8</sup>

Turning from animal husbandry back to agricultural rituals, it is obvious how the farmers took care of the poor: enough was always left over for people to glean, and in every seventh year, when the land lay fallow and was treated as ownerless and the produce grew without being planted and tended, everyone (including every animal) had the right to take from any of the produce of the land. In the fiftieth year, the land was redistributed according to a plan that gave each family an equal share.

With respect to animal herds, the way that wealth was recalibrated was more subtle: the products of the sacrificial system, which combined offerings and tithes of animals (including all first-born and most male animals) with produce (first-fruits and tithes of produce and grain), went to the priest and Levite, and to the poor and disenfranchised. The Priestly class, those that didn't need land because they were entitled by their higher class, had exclusive rights to parts of the sacrifices, but they also received a significant portion alongside the lowest class, those who didn't own and who were entitled by need.

This system had the potential to eliminate any stigma associated with receiving charity and to minimize class differences. In combination with all the agricultural rituals and rules mentioned above, we can see the plan for a society that was socially and ecologically sustainable for many generations.

Ecologically, the sacrificial system also had a very specific lesson: the life and soul of the animal, found in the blood, remained holy, even after the animal was slaughtered, and the only suitable use for this lifeblood was as an offering to God. The kind of industrial meat-production we see in our time would have been impossible, because it would fly in the face of every ecological, humane, and health consideration that underlies *kashrut*. The sacrificial system also fit into a broader pattern of rituals and rules related to animals and to the land, a pattern that gives us a unique model for how to create a sustainable civilization.

## VIII.

The theory we've presented for why animals must have cloven hoofs and chew their cud is just that: a theory and nothing more. It fits into a broader understanding of how the Jewish relationship to food is structured by the *Torah*, with its emphasis on equity and the sanctity of both human life and all life. If this theory should prove wrong (or be unprovable), *kashrut* would still have its other meanings. But in a time when all of the world's religions need to help us steer towards sustainability, it is worth something to know that Judaism from its earliest time has an ecological underpinning that we can all listen to and search for.

We need to hear this call to sustainability, if Judaism is going to be relevant in humanity's next century.<sup>9</sup> If the ecologists are right, this search is also a way to become fully human.

1. Wilson, E. O. *Biophilia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
2. Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
3. *Deuteronomy* 12:23.
4. *Exodus* 23:17-19 and *Deuteronomy* 14:21
5. This essay is not focused on the rules for kosher sea animals. However, the prohibition against eating shellfish may also be a way of not eating animals in cases where it would be hard to separate killing and cooking, e.g., lobsters, or killing and eating, e.g., oysters.
6. Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: 2002.
7. A similar dynamic caused by the growing use of corn to produce ethanol for fuel has driven prices sky-high. We are entering a time in the U.S. when our society may have to choose between having enough fuel for cars or feed for cattle, and exporting enough food for human beings in other countries.
8. As societies change, our mores and rules also need to evolve if we are to guard technologies and economies from destroying long-term sustainability. The other consequence of overdrive in meat production is that the total amount of the greenhouse gas methane emitted by cow digestion is more dangerous to the climate than the total emissions from car exhausts. While the *kashrut* rules that required us to only eat animals that don't compete with us for food embody a worthy goal, they are not sufficient in an age of industrial meat production, in which even the "right" kind of animal can use up or destroy ecosystems.
9. Jewish law has not kept up with the ethical dilemmas created by modern agriculture, as is evident in the crisis over Agriprocessors. Judaism has the potential and richness to meet this challenge, but it can only happen if the value of sustainability becomes deeply integrated into every aspect of ethics and *halakhah*.

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