

## Burgers and B'reisheet

I know my wife's habits - or at least some of them. She loves her coffee in the morning and if she has time, she likes to read the paper. Often, she will circle something or leave me an article she thinks I should read. On Wednesdays, she is most excited to look at the NY Times Food section.

So after a month of non-stop holidays, I stumbled out of bed on Wednesday morning to find the Food section open across the kitchen counter.

This picture of this mouth-watering double cheeseburger greeted me.

The image grabbed me, even though I have never eaten a cheeseburger.

And then the title: "[Fake Meat!](#)" While I do fear the term "fake news," especially as it is falsely hurled at legitimate news by the embattled president and others these days, "fake meat" is another story.

[Fake Meat may be the savior of the planet.](#)



As we have all become more and more aware, the challenges that humanity faces in the coming years are daunting; the need to reduce our dependence on animal agriculture is becoming more clear and the development of fake meat made of plants may be one of the key solutions to this crisis.

For years, we have eaten veggie burgers that were – how shall I say this – not that good. But in recent years, especially with the advent of [Beyond Meat](#)



and the [Impossible Burger](#) all that has changed. And companies on the cusp of bringing cultured or cultivated meat – [meat grown in a lab](#) – to the market. Scientists have discovered how to make these plant-based foods taste and feel in your mouth more like real burgers, even though they utilize less than one-tenth of the energy and resources than a meat burger.

I remember the night two years ago that we went to try our first [Impossible Burger](#) in Cambridge. I had been following its production and received an email that they were coming to [Clover in Harvard Square](#).

There was great anticipation as we headed out on that Saturday night expedition. The meat tasted pretty realistic. In fact, I remember that my

daughter could not even eat it, as it was made into fake meatballs. For her, the combination of meat and cheese in them was too realistic – it tasted too much like meat and milk together – a strong no-no in the tradition.



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[When I spoke about climate change and changing our diet away from animal agriculture last month](#), I received numerous responses including questions about what our tradition has to say about food. Not surprisingly, the Torah opens with a good number of thoughts about eating. As animals who need to consume thousands of calories each day, we humans are fairly preoccupied with what we eat.



The Torah relates the temptation to eat of the tree that is forbidden in the Garden of Eden and we can see the differences in the animal offering brought by Abel versus the vegetarian offering that is Cain's.

The original orders for human beings in the Torah is to eat the fruit of the trees – vegetarianism is the way to go. In the second chapter of the Torah, the text explains that the first human beings are alone and God creates helpers for the *adam* – at first, those helpers are animals, implying that animals are not to be used for food, but for companionship.

Each animal is given a name. There is no mention of eating them. It is only after the Flood that the Torah even imagines a scenario where humans will consume animal flesh (Gen. 9:3). That is where we are given some of the guidelines – if you must eat meat, then you can, but do not eat the blood of the animal.

The Torah then further limits this by forbidding the consumption of certain animals and not cooking a young animal in its mother's milk. Over time, Judaism expands this by banning cooking, consumption, even profiting from, the mixture of an animal that was once alive with any milk, reinforcing the notion of the absolute sanctity of life. And we are given strict laws about how to take the life of an animal to prevent its suffering.

We are instructed even how to respect its life after it has been killed, conferring on the process a deep sense of morality.

The tradition could not have imagined [the current state of affairs where there are massive industrial chicken farms that torture animals for the sake of efficiency and profit.](#)

Bred to grow too big, too fast, these chicken can barely walk under the weight of their oversized bodies. Many birds live in conditions so cramped they have a space only the size of a sheet of paper. Their legs burn from the toxic fumes of their own waste. Tragically, I could go on and on....

While traditional Judaism accepted the consumption of meat with regulations, it never could have imagined the modern animal agriculture that exists today. Not only are we forbidden from harming an animal in these cruel ways, but we are actually told to do the opposite. We are commanded to go above and beyond to help animals. The Torah states that if we see an animal suffering under its load, we have to go out of our way to help relieve its suffering.



If we were walking down the road and saw a donkey carrying too much weight – even if it was not our donkey, we must go and take some of the load off the donkey and carry it ourselves. Even if we do not like the animal's owner, the animal takes precedence. (Ex 23:5; Dt 22:4)

That's pretty demanding – not just for the ancient world, but even for today. This would demand that not only do we not eat animals that are tortured, but we must expend extra effort to stop their suffering – working to end practices around the globe that allow for this abuse.

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This shift in how we relate to animals and the world around us can be traced back to two key verbs in this morning's reading. In the first chapter of the Torah, human beings are told we are to master and rule over the fish and the birds and the living things. (Gen. 1:28)

But, commenting on this verse, [Rav Kook](#), the first chief rabbi of Israel, wrote everyone should realize that the Torah “does not mean the domination of a harsh ruler, who afflicts his people and servants merely to fulfill his personal whim and desire, according to the crookedness of his heart?” Would such a wondrous world be created so humans can simply degrade it and abuse its animals??

But in chapter two, that is tempered. We are supposed to till and to tend the earth – *l'ovdah v'l'shomrah*. (Gen 2:15) Those verbs are key: we must serve the earth and guard it and all its creatures.

*L'ovdah* – for the root: *eved* – we are to be servants to the earth – meaning that we do not own it!

*L'shomrah* – to guard – means to care for something that does not belong to us. The Torah is teaching us that we should not be so egotistical, seeing everything as belonging to us. We are the guardians of this treasure that is the planet and its creatures.

It's time to bring that into how we eat. [Twenty-five years ago Masorti/Conservative Judaism changed our \*kashrut\* laws to ban veal since these calves were being treated so poorly](#) and now, it is time to have a serious conversation about banning the eating of animals that have been produced in an abusive manner. Similar discussions may be needed for the dairy and egg industries as well.

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One thing is certain: the Torah seems to begin with a preference for vegetarian practice. And now, thousands of years later, we can see that the planet would prefer that as well.



Given that we can now eat [Impossible Burgers](#), the change might be not just helpful, but pretty tasty.

