''*Beha'alotcha*: ''Why the Israelites didn't kill their animals for food''

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

My dear friend, Dr Michael Bliss of Netanya, asked me why the Israelites complained to Moses about the lack of meat in their diet when they had huge flocks of their own, and, also, whether the flocks were solely used for sacrifices.

His question is most pertinent, yet difficult to answer. A scholarly, modern edition of the *TaNAKh,* contents itself with the mere observation, 'Why the Israelites do not slaughter animals from their herds (Ex. 12:38; Nu. 32:1) is not explained in the text' (*Jewish Study Bible*, JPS, Adele Berlin & Marc Zvi Brettler, Oxford Univ. Press, 2004: See on Nu. 11:4-5). My approach will thus be no more than speculative, and consist of but a few random thoughts that I hope may add some perspective to the problem.

Let us commence by looking at a piece of concessionary legislation that, although given to the Israelites in the final year of their desert wandering, looks ahead to their future situation in the Promised Land where many communities would be situated far from the central Sanctuary or Temple:

Deut. 12:20:

When the Lord enlarges your territory, as He has promised you, and you say, ''I wish to eat meat,'' for you have the urge to eat meat, you may eat it whenever you wish.

Deut. 12:21:

If the place where the Lord has chosen to establish His name is too far from you, you may slaughter any of the cattle or sheep that the Lord gives you,

as I have instructed you; and you may eat to your heart's content in your settlements.

The implication of verse 20 is that the urge to eat meat would arise as a consequence of the changed social norms and dietary preferences that would accompany a settled existence. 'Enlarged territory' provided rich pasturelands which were a stimulus to a corresponding proliferation of livestock. We should therefore interpret the references to the 'large numbers of cattle' owned by the tribes of Reuben and Gad while still in the desert (See Nu. 32:1), as purely comparative. The implication is that, hitherto, there had been little desire for meat, and that the desert-travelling Israelites had been disinclined to slaughter animals for meat.

Verse 21 refers to the central Sanctuary in Jerusalem – or, before that, to the *bamot*, temporary shrines, primarily that of Shiloh – and suggests that, hitherto, meat could only have been consumed as part of the sacrificial meal eaten there together with the priests. This verse offers the concession of secular meat, given the impracticability of travelling there every time a person or family from a far-flung community wished to eat meat. The reference to slaughtering 'as I have instructed you' – notwithstanding that no practical guidance as to the detailed laws and techniques of shechitah was previously contained in the Torah – suggests that Moses did, in fact, teach its laws orally and provide practical demonstrations of how it was to be performed. For this to have been necessary, we may once again infer that, prior to the giving of the Torah, shechitah was unknown to the Israelites.

The Talmudic sages, Ishma'el and Akivah – basing themselves on the above verses - had variant traditions as to whether shechitah had been required in the desert (see Tal. *Chul*.

17a). R. Akivah held the view that, when the Israelites first came out of Egypt, they were permitted to eat the meat of an animal that had been dispatched in any manner (*besar nechirah*), and that shechitah was only mandatory for the sacrifices brought to the Sanctuary, whose meat was eaten by the donor together with the priest. It was only when they entered Israel that *nechirah* was forbidden and the higher ethic of *shechitah* was demanded even for secular meat.

R. Ishma'el, on the other hand, took the view that, when they came out of Egypt, they were prohibited from eating meat altogether, it having been regarded as *besar ta'avah,* 'a lusting (addictive?) food.' Only later was the concession given of eating secular meat, with the prerequisite that the animal be dispatched in accordance with the laws of shechitah (See *Ohr Same'ach* on RaMbaM: *Hilchot Shechitah* 4:17).

Notwithstanding that God indulged the people with a daily fare of the heavenly and versatile manna, they claimed a craving for a more varied diet and an antipathy toward the manna. The murmuring was instigated by the 'mixed multitude' that had seized the opportunity to flee Egypt together with the Israelites:

> *The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, ''If only we had meat to eat!''* (Nu.11:4).

On the verse, *Now our gullets are shrivelled. There is nothing at all, except to look at this manna* (v.6)*,* Rashi observes:

> But did they not have access to meat? Does it not state, *And the mixed multitude went up with them, and very much livestock; both flocks and herds* (Ex. 12:38)? Now, should you suggest that they had already consumed them all, then [how do we explain the fact that] when they went into the land, it states, *The Reubenites and the Gadites owned cattle in very great numbers* (Nu. 32:1)?

The only explanation is that they were merely conjuring up some groundless grudge!

So, notwithstanding the difficulty of unravelling the above sources, coupled with the fact that Deut. 12:20 - 21 projects the 'urge to eat meat' into the future, what clearly emerges is that, throughout the period of the sojourn in Egypt and the desert wandering, that urge did not exist and the lack of meat was only expressed in the context of one angry outburst whose thrust was boredom with the manna rather than any real desire for meat.

A simple explanation for the apparent anomaly of the fact that the Torah is replete with sacrificial references yet ambivalent on the matter of eating meat might lie precisely in that association, namely that it wished to preserve the latter – as far as was possible - for the sacred sacrificial context. I believe, however, that there is another approach that should be considered, for, having lived for several centuries as slaves in Egypt, we may assume that the Israelite diet would have been very similar to that of the Egyptians. So, our first line of enquiry would be to determine what the host-country's diet was. Fortunately, science and archaeology can shed light on this.

About nine years ago, a team of French researchers, led by Alexandra Touzeau, Romain Amiot, *et al*., studied the carbon atoms of forty-five mummified bodies of people who had lived in ancient Egypt in the period spanning 3500 BCE to 600 CE. Their bodies had been transported to two museums in Lyon, France, during the 19th century, and, by analysing the carbon atoms in their bodies, their diet could be determined. The team's findings were published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science* (vol. 46, June 2014, pp. 114-124), in a report entitled, ''The diet of ancient Egyptians inferred from stable isotope systematics.''

It explains that, by a process of photosynthesis, carbon atoms are ingested by plants from the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. When humans and animals eat of those plant products they also absorb and leave traces of the carbon. They discovered that the isotope ratios in the hair of the mummies corresponded to that found in hair of modern European vegetarians, confirming that the ancient Egyptians were also mainly vegetarian, subsisting on a diet of wheat- and barley-based foods. Their conclusion was not surprising, however, given that ancient sedentary populations sustained themselves primarily on fruit and vegetables.

All this might explain why the Israelites, in the main, either avoided meat – other than on special occasions such as when instructed to take the Paschal lamb – or kept its consumption to an absolute minimum, such as when participating in a sacrificial ritual. It would also account for the fact that, when God sent the manna from heaven, He did not, at the same time, send down a meat constituent.

The final piece of evidence for our theory comes from the context of the Israelites' first complaint to Moses and Aaron about their lack of food. Their intemperate words serve to betray their indifference to meat:

> *''If only we had died by the by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread!''* (Ex. 16:3).

They were guilty here of what we might call 'a Freudian slip', for, had they regularly partaken of meat, they would surely have said, *when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of* ***meat****!''*

Hopefully, the points we have raised, cumulatively will have answered Dr Bliss's question as to why they didn't slaughter their own animals instead of complaining to God about their

lack of meat. Shepherds who tended and loved their flock were loathe to slay them. And this consideration puts into bold relief the great 'sacrifice' that they made when they offered their animals as a gift to God. This might also explain why God accepted Abel's sacrifice of 'the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest' (Gen 4:3) in preference to Cain's gift of 'some fruits of the ground.' Abel gave something to which he had an emotional bond, and which, for him, was an authentic 'sacrifice.'

The vegetarian diet and attitude to meat that we have postulated as in-grained within those who had been reared in Egypt as well as within their offspring who were born in the desert, clearly, over the next few generations, was replaced by a preference for a carnivore diet.

Shabbat shalom,

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