

By Stuart Kaufman, Nov. 2003

## NOACH DVAR

SOME OF YOU MAY KNOW THAT I HAVE TAKEN AN UNUSUAL SPIRITUAL PATH THAT LED ME TO TEMPLE EMANUEL A FEW YEARS AGO. THE JOURNEY TOOK ME THROUGH REFORM JUDAISM AND A PRACTICE OF ZEN BUDDHISM IN THE 1980'S AND TO AN ORTHODOX JEWISH PRACTICE THROUGHOUT THE 1990'S. AN IMPORTANT INFLUENCE IN MY RETURN TO TRADITIONAL JUDAISM IN THE 1990'S WAS A LUBOVITCHER REBBE, REB M. REB M WAS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT JEWISH RITUAL AND TAUGHT ME MUCH ABOUT THE MEDITATIVE TRADITION IN JUDAISM AS WELL AS IMPORTANCE OF FULFILLING MIZVOT. IT IS PROBABLY BECAUSE OF HIS INFLUENCE THAT I MAINTAIN A KOSHER KITCHEN AND CHANT TORAH AND PUT UP A SUKKAH EACH YEAR. IN SOME WAYS, HE WAS AND REMAINS LARGER THAN LIFE-I'LL SEE IF I CAN PAINT A PICTURE-HE IS A LARGE STRAPPING MAN ALWAYS DRESSED IN A LUBAVITCHER BLACK SUIT WITH A CRUSHING HANDSHAKE AND A BOOMING VOICE AND A THICK BEARD HOLDING REMNANTS OF HIS RECENT MEALS. WHEN GIVING A DVAR, HE WOULD START SLOWLY AND GRADUALLY BUILD IN EMOTION THROUGH A MIX OF ENGLISH, HEBREW, YIDDISH, AND RUSSIAN UNTIL 30 OR 40 MINUTES LATER WE WOULD ALL BE EXHAUSTED. WHILE HE ENCOURAGED MY TORAH READING, HE ALSO WOULD SERVE AS THE UNOFFICIAL GABBAI SITTING IN THE CONGREGATION AND DURING MY TORAH READING WOULD VEHEMENTLY SHOUT OUT CORRECTIONS OF REAL OR IMAGINED MISPRONUNCIATIONS OF ASHKENAZIK VOWELS AS IF HE HAD BEEN CHOSEN BY GOD TO MAKE THE CORRECTION. AND WHEN HE WAS CALLED TO THE TORAH FOR AN ALIYAH WHEN I WAS CHANTING, HE WOULD CONSIDER IT HIS MITZVAH TO SPEAK EACH WORD JUST AFTER I HAD CHANTED THE WORD, CREATING AN ECHO REVERBERATION THAT MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO CONCENTRATE. AND THEN THERE WERE SUNDAY

MORNINGS AS I WOULD BE TRYING TO SLEEP IN, I INEVITABLY RECEIVED A PHONE CALL FROM HIM AT 7:00 AM ASKING ME WHY I WASN'T AT THE SHUL MINYAN AND IMPLORING ME TO ATTEND FOR THE SAKE OF THE OTHERS WHO NEEDED TO FULFILL THEIR MITZVOT AS WELL AS FOR MY OWN SOUL. I CAN STILL REMEMBER MY TRYING TO BALANCE THE MITZVOT OF THE MINYAN WITH SHALOM BAYIT. ON OCCASION, HE WOULD INVITE ME TO HIS HOUSE FOR SHABBAS DINNER AFTER MORNING SERVICES, AND I USUALLY DECLINED, MOSTLY BECAUSE THE DINNER, WITH BRACHOS, SONGS AND DVARIM WOULD LAST UNTIL MINCHA AND I JUST COULDN'T BE AWAY FROM HOME FOR THE ENTIRE DAY. BUT ONE DAY I SURPRISED HIM AND SAID THAT I MIGHT BE ABLE TO JOIN HIM AND HIS FAMILY BUT TO KEEP IN MIND THAT I HAVE BEEN A VEGETARIAN FOR MY ADULT LIFE. HE LOOKED AT ME AND SAID "STUART, HOW CAN YOU SAY SUCH A THING?" REB M THEN LAUNCHED INTO WHAT I CAN ONLY DESCRIBE AS AN EXHORTATION ON THE VIRTUES OF MEAT-EATING AND THE BIBLICAL ORIGINS AND MANDATE OF MEAT-EATING. SOMETHING ALONG THE LINES OF:

1. IN BEREISHIT, WE LEARN THAT MAN HAD COMPLETE DOMINION OVER ANIMALS TO DO AS WE SEE FIT.
2. IN NOACH, WE ARE GIVEN EXPRESS PERMISSION TO EAT ANIMALS TO SATISFY OUR NEEDS.
3. IN BEREISHIT, GOD ACCEPTS THE SACRIFICE OFFERING OF MEAT FROM ABEL--INSTEAD OF THE MEAL OFFERING OF HIS OTHER SON-CAIN-, SHOWING THAT GOD FAVORS A MEAT DIET.
4. EVEN IF WE WANT TO ABSTAIN ON THE OTHER SIX DAYS OF THE WEEK, ON SHABBAT, IT IS A MITZVAH TO EAT MEAT TO FULFILL OUR SHABBAT SIMCHA.
5. WE READ THROUGHOUT THE TORAH ABOUT THE MITZVOT AND ACCEPTANCE OF ANIMAL SACRIFICES. ESPECIALLY ON SHABBAT THE SHNAI CHIVASIM READING IN THE AMIDAH FOR SHABBAT.

6. WE USE ANIMALS IN OUR DAILY RITUAL-THE TORAH, THE TEFILLIN, THE SHOFAR, ARE ALL ANIMAL PRODUCTS-THERE IS A NECESSARY ANIMALITY IN OUR PRACTICE AND A KILLING OF ANIMALS.

7. MEAT-EATING IS A COMMON BOND THAT ALL JEWS HAVE-CHICKEN SOUP AND CHICKEN SHABBAS DINNERS HAVE MADE SHABBAS SPECIAL IN ALMOST ALL JEWISH HOUSEHOLDS FOR CENTURIES. HOW CAN YOU TURN YOUR BACK ON THE TRADITION?

8. AND THINK OF THE KOSHER BUTCHERS AND MASHGIACHS WHO WORK SO HARD TO MAKE SURE THAT THE MEAT WE EAT IS KOSHER-ARE YOU GOING TO DEPRIVE THEM OF THEIR LIVELIHOOD?

THIS IS NONSENSE. STUART, GET THESE RIDICULOUS IDEAS OUT OF YOUR HEAD!"

WELL I DIDN'T JOIN HIM FOR DINNER THAT DAY. AND EVEN THOUGH SOME TIME HAS PASSED, I HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT HIS ARGUMENTS BUT ALSO WHY SO MANY JEWS ARE VEGETARIANS AND WHY EVEN SOME FAMOUS ORTHODOX RABBIS SUCH AS RAV KOOK, THE FIRST RABBI IN 20TH CENTURY JERUSALEM, HAVE ABSTAINED FROM EATING MEAT. AND I HAVE BEEN THINKING THAT MAYBE IT IS TIME TO RESPOND TO REB M. IN PART INFLUENCED BY THE TORAH PORTIONS FROM LAST WEEK AND THIS WEEK, I HAVE DECIDED TO WRITE A LETTER TO HIM FIRST ADDRESSING HIS POINTS AND THEN OFFERING A FEW OF MY OWN.THE LETTER IS STILL IN DRAFT FORM, AND COULD EVEN BE RESHAPED A BIT, BUT HERE IS MY RESPONSE:

DEAR REB M

I HOPE THAT YOU AND YOUR FAMILY ARE WELL AND THAT YOU ENJOYED THE RECENT CHAGIM. I HAVE BEEN THINKING FOR A WHILE ABOUT WRITING TO YOU TO FOLLOW UP OUR DISCUSSION ABOUT VEGETARIANISM AND PARTICULARLY TO YOUR STRONG FEELINGS ABOUT IT. BECAUSE THERE ARE MANY JEWS, INCLUDING PROMINENT ORTHODOX RABBIS, WHO OBSERVE A VEGETARIAN DIET, I SUSPECT THAT THERE MUST BE STRONG HALACHIC SUPPORT FOR THAT POSITION. I THEREFORE BEGAN REVIEWING SOME OF THE HALACHIC LITERATURE AND RESPECTFULLY OFFER THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION:

1. WHILE IT IS TRUE THAN MAN IS GIVEN "DOMINION" OVER ANIMALS IN BEREISHIT, THE VERB FOR HAVE DOMINION-RIDU- HAS TO BE INTERPRETED IN THE CONTEXT OF MAN'S RELATION TO ANIMALS IN BEREISHIT. IN GAN EDEN, WE WERE INITIALLY VEGETARIANS AND HAD NO RIGHT TO KILL OR EAT ANIMALS, SO OUR DOMINION WAS A KIND OF STEWARDSHIP OR CARETAKING AND NOT A LICENSE TO KILL OR EAT THE ANIMALS. I WOULD ANALOGIZE TO QUEEN ELIZABETH OF ENGLAND, WHO HAS DOMINION OVER HER SUBJECTS-DOES THIS GIVE HER THE RIGHT TO SLAUGHTER, COOK AND EAT HER SUBJECTS? OF COURSE NOT. I BELIEVE THAT THE MEANING OF RIDU IN BEREISHIT IS A STEWARDSHIP AND THAT THE WORD RIDU DOES NOT CONFER THE RIGHT TO KILL OR EAT ANIMALS IN THE GARDEN OR EDEN.

2. WHILE IT IS TRUE THAT WE WERE GIVEN PERMISSION TO EAT ANIMALS AFTER THE FLOOD, IT WAS ONLY PERMISSION AND NOT A MITZVAH, AND WAS A CONCESSION TO THE IMPERFECTIONS OF HUMAN NATURE. THE PERMISSION WAS ACCOMPANIED BY STRICT LIMITATIONS AND A CURSE. I HAVE FOUND NO HALACHAIC MITZVAH REQUIRING THE EATING OF MEAT WITH.THE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION OF REFERENCES TO THE RETURN OF THE

KARBAN PESACH DURING THE MESSIANIC AGE AND THE RETURN OF THE BEIT MIKDASH. BUT I HAVE READ IN ISAIAH EQUALLY COMPELLING REFERENCES TO A RETURN TO THE HARMONY OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN, SO WHILE WE WAIT FOR THE MESSIANIC AGE, I WILL REMAIN A VEGETARIAN AND FOLLOW THE VISION OF ISAIAH. [AS AN ASIDE, WE HAVE MANY SPECIFIC BRACHOT FOR THE EATING OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES BUT HAVE NO BRACHA FOR EATING OF MEAT, AS IF TO SAY THAT MEAT AND TAKING A LIFE FOR FOOD ARE NOT SOMETHING GOD HAS GIVEN US, BUT RATHER SOMETHING WE HAVE CHOSEN TO TAKE FOR OURSELVES]

3. WHILE IT IS TRUE THAT ABEL'S SACRIFICE OF A FIRST-BORN ANIMAL FOUND MORE FAVOR WITH GOD THAN CAIN'S VEGETARIAN OFFERING, I DO NOT DRAW ANY CONCLUSIONS THAT THIS WAS GOD'S WAY OF ENDORSING MEAT-EATING. THE TORAH IS SILENT ON THE REASON, AND IT MAY HAVE HAD MORE TO DO WITH THE FRAME OF MIND THE KAVANAH THAT EACH HAD WHEN MAKING THE SACRIFICE, RATHER THAN ON WHAT THEY WERE SACRIFICING.

4. THERE IS TO MY KNOWLEDGE NO MITZVAH TO EAT MEAT ON SHABBAT. IT MAY VERY WELL HAVE BEEN A CUSTOM TO EAT MEAT AS PART OF MAKING THE SHABBAT A JOYOUS DAY BY EATING SPECIAL FOODS, OR A CHASIDIC CUSTOM AS A WAY TO FEED THE POOR, BUT IT IS NOT A MITZVAH. THE SOURCES THAT I HAVE FOUND RECOGNIZE THAT MEAT EATING IS NOT MANDATORY FOR RELIGIOUS CELEBRATION, AND THAT ABSTINENCE FROM MEAT EATING IS APPROPRIATE. IT IS TRUE THAT MAIMONIDES ADVOCATED MEAT EATING, BUT THAT WAS ONLY BECAUSE HE BELIEVED THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE ADEQUATE NUTRITION WITHOUT MEAT. IF HE HAD THE SCIENTIFIC AND DIETARY KNOWLEDGE THAT WE HAVE NOW, HE LIKELY WOULD HAVE REACHED A DIFFERENT CONCLUSION.

5. WHILE IT IS TRUE THAT THE TORAH IS REplete WITH DESCRIPTIONS OF ANIMAL SACRIFICES, THE SACRIFICES ARE NOT MITZVOT, BUT RATHER THE VOLUNTARY ACTION OF PEOPLE WHO SEEK GOD'S FORGIVENESS OR WISH FOR SOME SPECIAL ACTION. THE ONLY SACRIFICIAL MITZVOT THAT I COULD FIND WERE FOR THE MEAL OFFERINGS. MOREOVER, ONCE THE 2ND TEMPLE WAS DESTROYED AND WE SUBSTITUTED PERSONAL PRAYER AND PRACTICE, THE NEED FOR ANIMAL SACRIFICES BECAME OBSOLETE.

6. I AGREE THAT THERE IS AN ANIMALITY IN OUR RELIGIOUS PRACTICE- BUT USING ANIMAL PRODUCTS IS NOT THE SAME AS EATING ANIMALS. AND I SUSPECT THAT THE RELIGIOUS USES MAKE UP A TINY FRACTION OF ANIMALS THAT ARE SLAUGHTERED. WE SHOULD NOT FORGET THAT FOR RITUAL USES, THE TALMUD ENCOURAGES THE USE OF SKINS OF ANIMALS THAT HAVE DIED A NATURAL DEATH, RATHER THAN THOSE THAT HAVE BEEN SLAUGHTERED.

7. WHILE THE MEMORIES OF CHICKEN SOUP AND OTHER CULINARY TRADITIONS MAY BE STRONG, TO ME IT DOESN'T JUSTIFY THE KILLING OF ANIMALS. JUST BECAUSE OUR ANCESTORS WERE ALLOWED TO HAVE MULTIPLE WIVES AND SLAVES, IT DOESN'T MEAN THAT THOSE TRADITIONS NEED TO BE MAINTAINED IN LIGHT OF MODERN SENSITIVITIES. [ASIDE-WHEN I LOOK AT PICTURES FROM PARENT WEDDINGS AND BNAI MITZVOT RECEPTIONS FROM THE 40S AND 50S, WHAT IS COMMON TO EVERY PICTURE ARE THE ASHTRAYS AND CIGARS AND CIGARETTES- THERE IS NO MITZVAH PROHIBITING SMOKING, BUT MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE HAS PROVIDED US SOUND REASONS TO CHOOSE NOT TO CARRY ON A FAMILY TRADITION OF SMOKING]

8. AND THIS LONG PRELUDE LEADS ME TO MY MAIN POINT, NAMELY, THAT VEGETARIANISM IS NOT ONLY A PERMISSIBLE OPTION, BUT ONE

THAT ALLOWS US TO BE MORE HALACHICALLY OBSERVANT. THERE ARE THREE PRINCIPLES THAT ARE WORTH REVIEWING:

9. PIKUACH NEFESH IS THE ETHICAL MITZVAH FOR US TO HAVE REGARD FOR HUMAN LIFE. THE MEAT-BASED DIET THAT WE EAT PUTS US IN DANGER. IT IS BY NOW WELL-ESTABLISHED THAT THE INCIDENCE OF HEART DISEASE, STROKES AND CANCER IS SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER IN MEAT-EATERS THAN IN VEGETARIANS. BESIDES SATURATED FATS AND CHOLESTEROL, WE ABSORB LARGE AMOUNTS OF CHEMICALS, TRANQUILIZERS, HORMONES, AND ANTIBIOTICS THAT ARE INJECTED BY THE KOSHER ANIMALS THAT WE EAT. ON THE OTHER HAND, WE CANNOT SERIOUSLY DOUBT THE COMPELLING SCIENTIFIC AND NUTRITIONAL RESEARCH SHOWING THAT A BALANCED VEGETARIAN DIET IS BETTER FOR OUR HEALTH.

10. THE SECOND HALACHIC PRINCIPAL IS TSAR BAALEI CHAIM-OUR MITZVAH TO NOT CAUSE HARM TO ANIMALS. NOW IT MAY BE TRUE THAT THE ACT OF THE SHOCHET RESULTS IN A PAINLESS MOMENT OF DEATH FOR THE ANIMAL, BUT IT IS A MISTAKE TO CONCLUDE THAT WE HAVE THEREFORE BEEN KIND TO THE ANIMALS. MOST ANIMALS THAT ARE SLAUGHTERED, WHETHER RITUALLY OR OTHERWISE, LIVE MISERABLE LIVES. WE MAY LIKE TO THINK THAT KOSHER ANIMALS HAVE BEEN WELL-TREATED, BUT IT IS AN ILLUSION. WE SHOULD KEEP IN MIND THE WORDS OF THE WRITER ANTON CHECKHOV, "THE ILLUSION THAT ELATES US IS DEARER THAN A THOUSAND SOBER TRUTHS." THE TRUTHS ARE ALL TOO PLAIN: THE ABUSES IN THE RAISING OF VEAL AND CHICKEN ALONE, IF BROADCAST, COULD CREATE A WHOLE NEW GENERATION OF VEGETARIANS. EVEN LAST MONTH, AN ISRAELI COURT ISSUED AN INJUNCTION PROHIBITING THE RAISING OF GEESE FOR FOIS GRAS BECAUSE OF THE UNIMAGINABLE ABUSES ENDURED BY GEESE. [AS AN ASIDE, BECAUSE IT IS SHABBAT, I WONT GO INTO HORRIBLE DETAILS, BUT

THE ABUSIVE TREATMENT OF ANIMALS, INCLUDING COWS, IS WELL DOCUMENTED]. THE SAME CAN BE SAID OF ANIMALS THAT ARE RAISED TO CREATE DAIRY PRODUCTS. ANIMALS ARE TREATED NOT AS LIVING BEINGS CREATED BY GOD, BUT RATHER SEEM TO BE TREATED AS INANIMATE OBJECTS WITHOUT A SOUL AND WHOSE ONLY PURPOSE IN LIVING IS TO SATISFY THE ECONOMIC NEEDS OF A FACTORY FARMING INDUSTRY. [AS AN ASIDE, FISH DO NOT MAKE OUT ANY BETTER. FISH DIE A PAINFUL DEATH AND GIVE US BACK THE CHEMICALS AND TOXINS THEY HAVE INJECTED]

11. THE THIRD ETHICAL MITZVAH IS BAL TASHCHIT-NOT TO WASTE THE INHERITANCE OF THE EARTH AND ENVIRONMENT. ITS ORIGINS ARE FROM MISUSING THE BOUNTY OF WAR, BUT ARE UNIVERSAL. THE GROWING AND FEEDING OF ANIMALS FOR FOOD RAISES TWO SERIOUS PROBLEMS: THE MISALLOCATION OF GRAIN AND THE DAMAGE TO THE ENVIRONMENT. WHERE SO MUCH OF THE WORLD LACKS ADEQUATE AMOUNTS OF FOOD AND GRAIN, WHERE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE DIE EACH YEAR FROM STARVATION, THE GROWING OF 16 POUNDS OF EDIBLE GRAIN TO PRODUCE ONE POUND OF BEEF CANNOT BE CONSISTENT WITH BAL TASCHIT. IT IS A CAUSE FOR CONCERN THAT HALF OF THE WATER WE USE GOES TO GRAINS TO FEED LIVESTOCK, AND THAT 80% OF THE CORN AND OATS WE GROW IS USED TO FEED LIVESTOCK, NOT PEOPLE. WE ARE WASTING THE INHERITANCE OF THE EARTH WITH ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION CAUSED BY ANIMAL WASTE RUNOFF INTO OUR DRINKING WATER SOURCES AND THE DESTRUCTION OF RAIN FORESTS FOR THE SAKE OF CREATING MORE CATTLE GRAZING LAND. THE LOSS OF FORESTS MAY ALSO CONTRIBUTES TO THE GRADUAL GLOBAL WARMING AND TROUBLESOME WEATHER PATTERNS.

FOR THESE REASONS, I SEE MY CHOICE TO REMAIN A VEGETARIAN AS A FULFILLMENT OF THE ETHICAL MITZVOT. I LIKE TO THINK THAT THE DIET

IS IN SOME WAY A RETURN TO THE SPIRIT OF GAN EDEN TO WHICH WE ALL ASPIRE.

RESPECTFULLY,

STUART

NOW WHAT DO YOU SUPPOSE REB M'S RESPONSE WILL BE? I IMAGINE I WILL GET A CALL AT 7:00AM ON SUNDAY TO ATTEND SERVICES AND THEN STUDY SOME TALMUDIC DISCUSSIONS AND MAYBE EVEN A DINNER INVITATION. I WILL LET YOU KNOW.

NOW YOU MAY WELL BE THINKING WHY IS HE READING US THIS LETTER TO HIS LUBAVITCHER RABBI? WHAT DOES ANY OF THIS HAVE TO DO WITH US? I BELIEVE THAT IT HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH US.

ONE OF THE FOUNDATIONS OF OUR TRADITION IS OUR UNIQUE APPROACH TO PREPARING AND EATING FOOD. WE TAKE A PURELY INSTINCTIVE ACT-EATING-AND ELEVATE IT WITH KAVANAH AND HOLINESS THROUGH BRACHOT AND KASHRUT. EVERY STEP WE CAN MAKE TOWARDS A VEGETARIAN DIET CAN TAKE US EVEN FURTHER AND SATISFY THREE MITZVOT IN THE PROCESS-TAKING CARE OF OUR OWN BODIES, PREVENTING HARM AND SUFFERING TO ANIMALS AND PROVIDING A STEWARDSHIP TO OUR ENVIRONMENT.

NOW WE HAVE ADMITTEDLY COVERED A LOT OF TERRITORY THIS MORNING, AND EACH OF THE POINTS COULD STAND ON ITS OWN AS A DISCUSSION TOPIC. IF THERE IS ENOUGH INTEREST, WE COULD EVEN BEGIN A STUDY GROUP TO REVIEW TEXTS EXAMINING OUR

RELATIONSHIP TO ANIMALS. THERE IS ALSO AN ENOROUS AMOUNT OF INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET ON JEWISH VEGETARIANISM AND SEVERAL BOOKS WRITTEN BY RICHARD SCHWARTZ AND ROBERTA KALECHOVSKY.

THIS MORNING, AS IN EVERY SHABBAT, WE PREPARE OURSELVES SPIRITUALLY FOR THE SHACHARIT SERVICE BY READING THE PSALMS OF THE PSUKEI DZIMRAH. AND EVERY SHABBAT, AS PART OF THAT PREPARATION, WE JOIN A CHOIR OF ALL LIVING BEINGS, INCLUDING EVERY ANIMAL, IN PRAISING GOD IN PSALM 148. AS WE BEGIN A NEW YEAR, WITH ALL OF THE POSSIBILITIES FOR GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION, WE ALSO PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO PSALM 145 AND ARE REMINDED THAT GOD DID NOT LIMIT HIS COMPASSION JUST TO US.

TOV ADONAI LAKOL. VIRACHAMUV AL KOL MAASAV.

GOD IS GOOD TO ALL. GOD'S TENDER MERCIES ARE OVER ALL OF HIS CREATURES.

SHABBAT SHALOM