

For the Animals - My Journey to Veganism

Guest post by Gila Golder

It's become second nature - when I am invited for a Shabbat meal to a family I have never been to before, I let them know that I don't eat meat or fish, but quickly add that I'm happy to bring something I know I can eat, and anyway, I'll be fine with whatever salads and sides they make. Sometimes this is accepted at face value; other times, I'm met with incredulity: "No chicken soup? What if I just pick out the chicken for you?" or "You don't miss meat?" or "But where do you get your protein?" Once, I made it through an entire meal without any commentary until the dessert course, when the host offered coffee and tea and I asked for black coffee. "No meat, no creamer, no SUGAR?" Yes, he was joking, but I'm pretty sure on some level he was astonished by what he perceived as willful self-deprivation on my part.

I usually just laugh off these reactions - after all, if you're used to eating meat several times a week and have never had Shabbat without it, it is understandable that the concept of a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle would be foreign. But I do try to push back against the view of vegetarianism and veganism as a form of deprivation. No, I don't miss meat. No, I don't lack protein. No, I don't feel like I'm losing out, and please, please don't ever try to tell me the PETA joke because I've heard it a thousand times and it wasn't funny the first time. (For the uninitiated, it's "I'm a member of PETA - People Eating Tasty Animals, ha ha ha!")

I became a vegetarian at age 11 for animal welfare reasons. As a tween and teen, I may have been slightly militant - I remember referring to meat as "carcasses". I read Richard Schwartz's book *Judaism and Vegetarianism* multiple times and even used the book as the basis for a Dvar Torah I had signed up to give on a school field trip. Unfortunately, no one had informed me in advance that I would be speaking during dinner at a BBQ/grill restaurant, so yes, I did stand up and preach about vegetarianism while everyone else was chowing down on burgers and steaks. I was pretty awkward as a teen, but that is a highlight for sure.

I taught myself how to cook, since my mother didn't know what to feed me ("It's so easy to just throw the chicken in the oven!") and my father passed away when I was 12. This was the early 2000s, when casual household use of the Internet was just taking off. I created an account on Allrecipes.com to browse user-submitted recipes and submit my own. I also signed up for several email newsletters from food sites, including blogs, which were in their infancy. The more I read, the more I wanted to practice creating meals from scratch. I took responsibility for cooking Shabbat meals and struggled to get my family to agree to come together for weekday dinners as well. My mother railed

against the “fancy” cooking that made a mess in her kitchen, while my little brother relentlessly mocked the “food tour” I would give once the meal was ready.

Over the years, I’ve mellowed out somewhat. When I visit home, I understand that my mother values a clean kitchen more than she values gourmet meals. (I’m the opposite - don’t look in my kitchen!) I don’t judge others for eating meat, since I don’t want them to judge me for the opposite. But I haven’t lost sight of my ideals. I remain convinced that minimizing or ideally eliminating the consumption of animals and animal by-products is a valuable goal for many reasons. Yes, it’s healthier; yes, it’s better for the environment; but above all, it’s the most humane choice.

[Warning: slightly graphic content in this paragraph] When engaging in a conversation about animal cruelty, most kosher-keeping meat-eaters will point out that the complex laws of *shechita* are designed to produce a quick, painless slaughter - and that’s true, but as Richard Schwartz points out, we can’t only consider the final moments of an animal’s life. It seems incredibly disingenuous that we can sanction packing chickens shoulder-to-shoulder (err, wing to wing) in tiny crates where they can barely move, where their beaks must be clipped so they don’t peck each other to death in their distress, where they don’t see sunshine until they’re led to slaughter, and then we pat ourselves on the back because the knife was sharpened so their throats could be slit quickly? By the way, this is to say nothing of how newborn male chicks (useless to farms, because they won’t grow up to produce eggs) are thrown alive into grinders without anesthetic - which in addition to being inhumane is a violation of *Baal Tashchit*, the injunction against senseless damage or waste. There are similar uncomfortable realities inherent in the production of kosher beef, lamb, fish, and yes, dairy and eggs.

For a long time, I chose to ignore the dairy and egg industries. I was vegetarian, which meant I was doing more than most people. I did know that dairy and eggs were produced using methods I didn’t approve of, but I felt that I wasn’t capable of giving up eggs and certainly not cheese. Plus, many vegan convenience products on the market do not have a *hechsher*. I could be vegan, I always said, if I weren’t also kosher. This was a nice rhetorical security blanket, since I knew I wasn’t going to give up keeping kosher.

I didn’t change until everything changed. With the arrival of Covid-19, I found myself at first working from home and then in June 2020, just as my kids’ preschool reopened (with temperature checks and other “safety measures” we now take for granted), I was laid off. Like many people, I had a lot of opportunities for self-reflection while I was figuring out my next career move. Ultimately, I decided that it was time to put aside the thought that I “could never be vegan”, since the pandemic had already upended so

many of my core assumptions. Around November of 2020, I decided to start practicing vegan recipes and using up dairy products in my pantry so that I could officially go vegan in January 2021.

One year later, I can't say it hasn't been difficult, or even that I've been a perfect vegan all the time (it's hard to say no to my kids' leftover food which will ultimately go in the garbage if I don't eat it - and dairy/egg products don't gross me out the way meat does). But I remain committed to the ideals of veganism and convinced that it is possible to be both vegan and kosher. Just like I did at 14, I continue to experiment with recipes on my own and with help from the vast network of food and cooking resources available online. And yes, I get plenty of protein! In fact, I find I'm often drawn to healthier options by default, since so many sweets and desserts contain dairy and egg.

If you, like a growing number of Americans and Jewish people around the world, are thinking, "I'm with you, in principle," but not sure that you can actually do it yourself, I'm here to tell you that it is totally doable, and it's getting easier all the time. There is a growing number of vegan and kosher products on the market (if you haven't tried Violife pareve cheese, you're missing out!). Given the current realities of factory farming (yes, even among kosher operations), abstaining from all animal by-products is truly the best way to protect animals from pain and suffering - but for those who don't feel they're able to become vegan at this point (I don't judge, I was in your shoes until very recently!) cutting back on your consumption of animals and animal products is absolutely valuable! It doesn't have to be all or nothing. Meatless Monday is one way to introduce more plant-based meals into your diet, and the ubiquity of plant-based products such as Beyond Meat and Impossible Meat in grocery stores today also means that it's very easy to create vegan versions of your favorite meat meals.

It also doesn't have to be all or nothing in your family. I'm in a "mixed marriage" - my husband is a meat-eater! He knows he's in charge of cooking any meat or fish he wants to eat, and that's worked pretty well for us since we got married 8 years ago. The important thing to remember is not to judge the choices of your partner. Food is so personal and individualized. Start by taking a look at your reasons for making the change and then take one small step at a time; every small change can make a big difference.