

Richard H. Schwartz, *Judaism and Vegetarianism*,
Exposition Press: Smithtown, New York, 1982

In *Judaism and Vegetarianism* Richard H. Schwartz mentions the correct principles which support Jewish vegetarianism. Unfortunately the analyses which are used to bring the reader from each principle, *qua* premise, to its vegetarian conclusion are consistently weak. Along with his discussion of Jewish teaching and vegetarianism Schwartz presents recipes,

biographical notes on Jewish vegetarians, and resources for Jewish vegetarians. This review will only address the first seven chapters in which Schwartz argues that Judaism mandates a vegetarian life style.

The first chapter, "A Vegetarian View of the Bible," sets the tone for the book. Rather than a serious

effort to explicate Biblical values and apply them in some systematic fashion to the modern world, Schwartz decided what he wanted the Scripture to prove and then proceeded to extract Biblical verses to support his position. He claims the Bible asserts the following: A) God not only wants all human beings to be vegetarians, but the Holy One wants all animals to be vegetarian. B) The reduction in life spans recorded in the Bible is a consequence of the change of diet from vegetarian to meat consuming. C) A carnivorous diet led humans to such corrupt practices as eating limbs torn from living animals. D) It is the eating of meat which led to strife between human beings and other animals. E) The shorter life span of humans is a penalty for eating meat. Consequently meat-centered diets are a form of suicide. F) Vegetarian eating would provide food for everybody on earth.

From the beginning Schwartz makes a serious error. He reads the Biblical text through the eyes of later rabbinic commentators without distinguishing the authority of the text itself from the lesser authority of its rabbinic interpreters. For example, in the opening paragraph of the chapter he quotes from Genesis 1:29 and Rashi. He quotes Rashi in order to substantiate the conclusion which he claims is self-evident in the Biblical text. If the text is truly self-evident, then there is no need to invoke rabbinic authority to substantiate the point. The crux of the matter is that the Scriptural quote does not substantiate Schwartz's claim. Genesis 1:29 reads:

And God said: "Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed—to you it shall be for food."

Schwartz asserts that this verse

"clearly and explicitly" indicates that God wanted humans to be vegetarians. He further states that this verse is a law. All this verse says is that herbs and fruit will be available to humans for food. It in no way indicates that this will be our exclusive source of food. Rashi is quoted as claiming that based on this verse Adam and Eve were forbidden "to kill a creature and eat its flesh." Certainly we find no prohibition of any sort contained in Genesis 1:29. Schwartz does not offer any line of reasoning to show us how he, Rashi, or any other commentator arrives at this conclusion.

This technique of simply invoking the comments of one authority or another is frequent throughout the book. This is no substitute for a clear analysis and well reasoned argument.

In a number of areas Schwartz does not apply critical evaluation. He does not read the Biblical text in a scientifically or literary critical fashion. At times he will simply accept the text at face value in order to support his claims. For example, he assumes the ages of people in Genesis are truly recorded by a uniform method of marking time which is the same as that which we use today. He asserts that the change in diet decreased the human life span from over 900 years to those spans we know today. Even if the medical evidence indicates that a vegetarian diet would increase our longevity, it is unfounded to assume that the human life span would increase by 800 years or more.

On the other hand Schwartz is willing to ignore questions raised by the text if they do not suit his purpose. He tells the story from Numbers 11 of the Israelites' lust for meat in the wilderness. He relates that the people cried to Moses for meat instead of mana. God responded to the pleas

of Moses on behalf of the people and provided meat. God was angry and struck the people with a plague as they feasted on the meat. Schwartz neglects to tell us that the people lusted after other foods as well as meat e.g. garlic, cucumbers, and leeks. Perhaps they simply desired variety and not specifically flesh. Schwartz does not draw the conclusion that God wants us to refrain from eating cucumbers or garlic. Perhaps the theological issue is the matter of trust in God as an adequate provider of food and does not relate to the eating of meat at all. These possibilities are not considered by Schwartz.

His lack of analysis expands beyond his treatment of Scripture. In chapter two Schwartz presents the important Jewish principle of compassion for animals. He juxtaposes this discussion with a description of the treatment of animals today. He focuses upon the inhumane excesses of the industrial farming of animals for food. Would it be sufficient to stop the inhumane excesses and thereby show compassion for animals? Why is it necessary to refrain from eating meat in order to eliminate the objectionable practices? Schwartz does not consider the possibility that, from a meat eater's point of view, this less egregious solution to the problem could be adopted.

The discussion in the third chapter focuses upon the Jewish principle *pikuach nefesh*, the saving of a life, including one's own. Schwartz argues that the eating of meat is harmful to the consumer's health. He uses the principle of *pikuach nefesh* in an absolute fashion. There are occasions when the principle is to be applied absolutely. Nevertheless when the danger to life is not immediate or direct the principle is not absolute. In these instances the value of *pikuach nefesh* is weighed against other values that pertain to the

circumstances and situation. It may be the case that a reduction in the eating of meat or perhaps the elimination of red meat from one's diet would be sufficient for removing the threat to one's health for which Schwartz invokes *pikuach nefesh*.

The claim is also made in chapter three that eating flesh is unhealthy because it is unnatural. At no point does Schwartz define "natural." He tells us that humans are not biologically designed for eating flesh. For example, he claims that our hands are fashioned for picking fruits and vegetables and not for tearing flesh. He does not address the apparently natural human facility for developing and using tools which aid in preparing meat to eat. Nor does he discuss the human ability to domesticate certain animals which are raised for consumption.

In the fourth chapter Schwartz concentrates upon the Jewish obligation to feed the poor and hungry. He explains that if people, especially in affluent countries, gave up eating meat, the land which is now used for growing feed grain could be planted with products for human consumption. This would make available for human consumption nineteen additional pounds of protein per pound of meat not eaten. (It takes twenty pounds of grain protein for the production of each pound of beef protein.) The problem which Schwartz neglects is the issue of distribution. Is hunger in the world a problem of the availability of food or of its distribution and delivery? The vegetarian approach might make sense in the few third world nations which export meat at the expense of their own poor. Even in these countries the problem may be more significantly related to the distribution of wealth and the ownership of the beef industry, than to the meat production itself.

The argument in chapter five concerning ecology suffers from the same narrow approach as the discussion of feeding the poor in the previous chapter. Schwartz invokes the Jewish principles of *bal taschit*—the prohibition against wastefulness—and human stewardship responsibilities over God's creation, the world. He then asserts both that more resources are exhausted in beef production and that more waste materials are created than would be the case if the same quantity of vegetarian food was produced. Schwartz does not consider the possibilities of employing more efficient and less wasteful methods of raising and slaughtering cattle. He does not consider the effects of reduced meat consumption as opposed to strict vegetarianism. A combination of these less severe alternatives might yield adequate ecological solutions for the problems posed.

With respect to the Jewish value of *bal taschit* Schwartz does not distinguish between degrees of efficiency and outright waste. The principle prohibits the destruction of anything without a useful purpose (p.56). The production of food is certainly a useful purpose, even though the resources may not be used to their highest efficiency. It is not clear that *bal taschit* applies; if it does apply it is certainly not in an absolute fashion.

In the sixth chapter Schwartz argues that vegetarianism is important to the Jewish pursuit of peace and the Jewish vision of the Messianic Era. If his previous arguments were unques-

tionably sound, namely that more people would be able to enjoy the earth's resources if everyone ate a vegetarian diet, then it might be the case that the human population would enjoy more satisfaction and less strife as vegetarians. As discussed above these same ends might be achieved without widespread and complete vegetarianism.

He asserts that people who eat meat are more aggressive and that vegetarians are more peaceful. He quotes I. B. Singer stating that if one can kill an animal, that person can also kill a human being (p.64). Yet Judaism clearly distinguishes between human beings and other animals. Schwartz avoids analysis; he simply invokes a variety of authorities, Jewish and non-Jewish, who speculate in this area. If vegetarianism helps people to be more peaceful, compassionate, and humane, he must account for the ruthless vegetarian Adolf Hitler.

In chapter seven Schwartz addresses questions frequently asked Jewish vegetarians. Unfortunately he does not discuss the questions raised in this review.

This long time Jewish vegetarian is disappointed with the analysis and argumentation of *Judaism and Vegetarianism*. The applicable Jewish principles are mentioned. Unfortunately Schwartz's analysis and explanation do not bring a critical reader to the desired conclusions. At best this treatment is a poorly reasoned polemic discussion.

Marc Alan Gruber
Rabbi, Beth Hillel Temple
Kenosha, Wisconsin