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WHAT A JEW SHOULD DO

Roberta Kalechofsky
Jews for Jesus

Editors' Note: This article is a response to an article by Sidney Gendin, "What Should a Jew Do?", published in *Between the Species*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 25-32.

Sidney Gendin's review of Richard Schwartz's book, *Judaism and Vegetarianism* and of Rabbi Bleich's article in *Animal Sacrifices: Religious Perspectives on the Use of Animals in Science* is premised on the mistaken idea that what separates Richard Schwartz's involvement in vegetarianism and animal rights from Rabbi Bleich's apparent indifference to them is that the former represents the Reform position in Judaism while the latter represents the Orthodox posture.

To begin with, Richard Schwartz himself is not a Reform Jew. Though he eschews labels like "Orthodox" or "Conservative" and prefers to call himself simply "committed," the congregation he belongs to is Orthodox, and his practice would be described by others as Orthodox. The second edi-

DISCUSSION

tion of his book (published by Micah Publications in 1988) includes a rabbinic endorsement by Rabbi Shaar Yashuv Cohen, Chief Rabbi and Rosh Bet Din, Haifa, and his book has received praise and support from such Orthodox representatives as Rabbi David Rosen, who has been Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

The rabbi who wrote that "The free movement of the moral impulse to establish justice for animals generally and the claim of their rights from mankind are hidden in a moral psychic sensibility in the deeper layers of the Torah" and who equated the Messianic world with vegetarianism and the establishment of the rights of animals was Rav Kuk, first Chief Rabbi in Palestine, Orthodox and mystic. His small booklet, written decades ago, "The Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace," has achieved the status of a manifesto among Jewish vegetarians of all backgrounds. The rabbi who wrote that "There are probably no creatures who more require the protective Divine Word against the presumption of man than the animals" was the nineteenth century scholar and Orthodox rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch.

Sidney Gendin rightly describes the contemporary sectarianism among Jews, which has its origins in the Enlightenment, when Reform was born and when Conservatism was established to bridge the gap between Reform and Orthodoxy, but he misses the fact that the one doctrinal sphere where Jews of all kinds of practice and non-practice, including atheism and secularism, conjoin is on the issue of vegetarianism and animal rights. Jewish vegetarians and Jewish animal rights activists come from every type of Jewish community. They may come with different arguments and different perspectives, but the impulse that makes them give up eating meat or become animal rights activists transcends or cuts across the kind of scholarly and historical analysis of a Jewish position that Rabbi Bleich gave. Almost every vegetarian Orthodox Jew knows a half dozen other authorities to quote, to qualify Rabbi Bleich's statements and, sad to say, many other Jews don't know any.

Furthermore, Reform Jewry has its roots in and feels spiritually at home with Enlightenment values, the values of science and modern medical practice. But both Reform and Orthodox Jewry

have wandered far from "those deeper layers of the Torah" to which Rav Kuk was attuned. The social historian W.E.H. Lecky could write in his *History of European Morals*, in the 19th century, that "the rabbinical writers have been remarkable for the great emphasis with which they inculcated the duty of kindness to animals," but centuries of enforced urbanization and a desperate attempt to modernize have resulted in the decay of one of Jewry's great traditions. Most Jews, whether Orthodox or Reform, believe that the traditions of *tsa'ar ba'alei chaim* (you may not cause sorrow to any living creature) are still operative. Like the general public everywhere else, they have never been to a modern farm or inside a laboratory. Recently, I met an Orthodox cantor whose father had been a *schochet* (ritual slaughterer) and who himself had been a *schochet* and who was now a vegetarian. He, Orthodox, and I, anything you'd like to call me, agreed that *shechitah* (ritual slaughter) had once been the symbol and guardian of the tradition which Lecky observed. Both of us agreed on its decay in the modern world and under the impact of modern technology. When I formed Jews for Animal Rights, I immediately became aware that I was to be the messenger of bad news.

The question of animal rights and vegetarianism is not a matter that can be compartmentalized into Orthodox or Reform practice. It eludes this distinction among Jews, as the movement eludes distinctions in the general public. Conservatives and liberals, right-wingers and left-wingers, lapsed and practising Catholics, and people of every kind of Christian and lapsed Christian background find themselves in the movement. What brings such heterogeneous groups together is an impulse that may well lie very deep in our psychic layers.

The immediate strategy for Jews, like myself and hopefully like Prof. Gendin, is not to further Jewish sectarianism but to restore the immensity of the great tradition of *tsa'ar ba'alei chaim* which all Jews once claimed. My organization has a message for Prof. Gendin's despair: "For an ecumenical Judaism, go vegetarian."