LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Dear Editors:

It is good that articles such as Sidney Gendin's "What Should a Jew Do?" (Winter 1989 issue) explore the current controversies in Judaism related to animal rights and vegetarianism. However, while I'm glad that Gendin prefers my approach in *Judaism and Vegetarianism* to Rabbi David Bleich's views in "Judaism and Animal Experimentation," his review contains many wrong assumptions, fact, and conclusions.

Gendin's statement that my book was written from the perspective of Reform Judaism is preposterous. It was written based on a wide variety of Jewish sources, with efforts to make it acceptable to Jews (and other people) of all beliefs; its favorable review in a wide variety of Jewish and secular publications indicates some degree of success in this. The book includes a warm statement of support by Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, Chief Rabbi of Haifa, and has been strongly endorsed by Rabbi David Rosen, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, and by other Orthodox rabbis and scholars.

Contrary to Gendin's assertion, Orthodox Jews today do tear a garment at the funeral of a close relative, as a sign of their great grief. More important, Gendin's mocking of Jewish sages and their views shows a lack of understanding and respect for Jewish scholarship that detracts greatly from his review.

Gendin is also not up to date on the literature in the area he is writing about. He reviews the 1982 edition of *Judaism and Vegetarianism*, while a revised and expanded edition was published by Micah Publications in 1988. Also, Rabbi Bleich has recently written another article very relevant to the topic being considered: "Vegetarianism and Judaism" (*Tradition*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Summer, 1987).

I join Gendin in wishing that Rabbi Bleich shared our views on vegetarianism and animal rights. But Rabbi Bleich's scholarship and writing gives us much valuable ammunition in terms of what the Jewish tradition teaches about *tza'ar ba'alei chayim* (the mandate not to treat animals with cruelty). He carefully documents the many biblical laws and talmudic teachings related to

kindness to animals. In his more recent article on vegetarianism, Bleich acknowledges that "Jewish tradition does not command carnivorous behavior," and thus that a vegetarian Jew is not violating Jewish law. The problem is that Bleich is not aware of (or chooses to ignore) the brutal ways in which animals are treated today, as well as the severe negative effects of flesh-centered diets on human health, ecosystems, the use of resources, and our ability to feed the world's people. Rather than writing off Bleich and Orthodox Jews, in general, as Gendin does, I believe that we must make them aware of these negative effects.

With regard to Bleich's belief that the Torah's teachings about proper treatment of animals is for the moral welfare of people (rather than the benefit of animals) — a view shared by some, but not the majority, of Torah scholars — rather than mocking Bleich, as Gendin does, this can be turned to our advantage as still one more reason to be vegetarian and to treat animals with kindness. Is not the end result more important than the reason for it? Hence, we should use Bleich's argument (along with the other powerful arguments against eating meat) in making people aware that cruelty to animals has often been associated with a depreciation of human morality.

Gendin never addresses the question, "What Should a Jew Do?" He is too busy criticizing Orthodox and Reform Jews and Jewish tradition. His concluding assertion that Orthodox Jews won't go near my book with a ten foot pole is just one more indication of his narrow and biased thinking.

Well then, what *should* a Jew do? Certainly not write articles with the negative assumptions and implications of Gendin. Rather we should challenge Jews to live up to the highest teachings and values of our tradition. We should respectfully raise questions such as: In view of the strong Jewish mandates to be compassionate to animals, preserve health, help feed hungry people, protect the environment, pursue peace, and the very negative effects flesh-centered diets have in each of these areas, how do you justify not becoming a vegetarian?

Richard H. Schwartz, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
The College of Staten Island