

Real Artificial Protein?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

For years there have been artificial substitutes for meat, most often soya based. Some have been edible, especially when mixed with other foodstuffs. But none so far has come near to satisfying passionate meat eaters.

According to a recent report, real progress is being made to generate laboratory grown meat that tastes as good as the real thing without all the cruelty, ghastly side effects, expense, and waste of the present worldwide meat industry. "We could be seeing a future where huge quantities of high-quality meat are grown in vats, incorporating not only muscle fibers but layers of real fat and even synthetic bone. In 25 years real meat will come in a packet labelled, "An animal has suffered in the production of this product," and it will carry a big eco tax. I think in 50-60 years it may be forbidden to grow meat from livestock. An animal does need to be killed to kick off the in-vitro process, but ["in theory, a single specimen could provide the seed material for hundreds of tonnes of meat."](#)

This is perfectly acceptable halachically. After all, the Gemara tells us that R. Hanina and R. Oshaia spent every Sabbath evening studying the Book of Creation, and as a result they were able to create a fat calf and ate it (Sanhedrin 65b). So if you could conjure up a living being from a mystical source, then why not from a lab?

Yet you can bet there will be opposition. Whenever anything threatens the kosher meat trade the rabbis and dayanim who live by it, automatically cry foul because they will lose a major source of income. That also explains why those few rabbis who became vegetarians, like the Kamenitzer Maggid, or supported vegetarianism in principle. Men like Rav Kook, were excoriated and virtually written out of Charedi history (for other reasons as well such as supporting Zionism).

I am not an ideological vegetarian, but I welcome the possibility of scrapping the current meat trade.. But actually on purely economic grounds I find the current situation unacceptable. We spend more money raising one beef animal than would feed an Indian village for a month. Then there is the issue of cruelty. Most processes are offensive: the ghastly way most animals bred for slaughter are treated, the awful sights and smells hidden from consumers, the amounts of chemicals fed into animals reared for human consumption, not to mention the dangers of our modern diets. I am not opposed to eating meat, but I'd be delighted if there some way of doing it without subjecting animals to human cruelty.

This is not an attack on Shechita. I have seen virtually all officially sanctioned methods of slaughter, Jewish and non-Jewish. I don't like any of them. But then I hate the sight of blood in general. Nevertheless I am utterly convinced that of all of them Shechita, when carried out correctly, is the least painful and disturbing. But, as Temple Grandin has shown

emphatically, so much of the awfulness of slaughter has to do with the lead up, the corralling, the forcing of animals towards the fate they can smell and hear, not to mention so much cruelty involved in the rearing, the transportation, and the preparatory processes of meat production. If only we could have the taste without all that.

Let us assume that all the unemployed Shochtim could be trained to work in other areas of the kosher trade. Why do I still envisage opposition? One reason is simply the reluctance to countenance anything new or to allow science or modern values to challenge ancient traditions. A new concept of religious correctness is that "Masorah", the way we have always done things, trumps innovation. My late father-in-law used to say (perhaps tongue in cheek) that there was something called "Jewish food". Anyone who didn't prefer carp gefilte fish or schmaltz herring to smoked salmon was not a proper Jew.

Finally there is in fact another issue. It is the tension that exists between the letter of halacha and the spirit. The Torah commands us to sacrifice animals and the priests to eat meat (although I do pray that when Elijah comes to usher in the Messiah he will tell us that only vegetable sacrifices will be accepted in the Temple). But the Torah is also full of laws concerning animals: not killing a cow and its calf on the day, not taking a fledgling or egg in front of the mother, not ploughing an ox with an ass together, not muzzling an ox while it threshes.

The rabbis are divided in their rationalizations. Some of course refuse to accept the idea of explanations altogether and emphasize only the significance of an act of obedience to a higher power. Some do indeed say it shows Divine mercy to creatures as a sign of greater mercy towards humans. And others do actually argue that the purpose is showing mercy to animals to imitate Divine qualities of caring. Of course I do not need to rehearse the very specific laws against cruelty to animals and the Noachide laws of "Ever Min HaChay" (not taking a limb from a living animal). Yet too often one hears these ideas dismissed as figments of non-Jewish moral relativism.

There is indeed a massive challenge to reconcile caring for animals with the meat trade. This is where meta-halacha plays an important part. Humans do indeed come first. But that does not mean we should not be concerned with animal welfare. Yet somewhere along the march of history we have lost the thread.

Take these narratives about Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi in Bava Metzia 85a:

Why did he suffer in life? A calf was being taken to the slaughter. It broke away, hid his head under Rabbi's skirts, and began to howl. "Go," he said, "because you were created for this." Then they said (on High), "Since he has no pity, let us make him suffer."

And why did his suffering end? One day Rabbi's maidservant was sweeping the house; [seeing] some young weasels lying there, she

was about to kill them. He said to her, "Let them be, for it is written, 'He extends his mercy to all of his creation.'" Then they said, "Since he is compassionate, let us be compassionate to him."

You could not have a more explicit expression of the significance of the issue in Jewish ethical terms.