

Factory Farming

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Those who work in education delight in their successes and regret the failures. Very often those one expected to shine burnt out and those one expected to struggle shone. One of my pupils was such a disaster academically at school that I wrote on one of his reports that "he was heading like a lemming to disaster", and indeed at that time he was. But he was such a cute and charming little terror that it was hard to be too tough on him. Besides, anyone who is strong enough to defy peer group opinion to become a vegetarian has got to have guts. Today Jeremy Collier is highly successful in the world of finance. He still defies category, convention, and "normality".

One of the big questions anyone who works hard to make money and succeeds way beyond expectations ought to be asking himself or herself is what then? Not enough do. There is no tradition in Judaism of seeing money as the source of all evil or of disparaging wealth. Neither is there a tradition of thinking that wealth in itself says anything about those who have it. Money is only a means to an end, and if one has it, one has an obligation to use it positively and humanely.

The crucial question that one really needs to ask is what the end is; to what purpose one will put one's wealth? Some of the richest men and women do indeed set up foundations and charities to give away vast sums. The sad fact is, however, that those who do remain a very small minority. Most fritter and waste or pass on their wealth to those unworthy or incapable of looking beyond their own appetites.

My late father often used to say disparagingly, usually when people who could refused to help him with his educational dreams, "You can tell what God thinks of money by the sort of people he gives it to." He once had to apologize to a wealthy property man who refused to help him with Jewish education but gave millions to the Monkey House at London Zoo. At a fundraising dinner for Israel, my father had commented on why someone would want to give money to monkeys rather than humans and had said that obviously he had more in common with monkeys. (But that was my father. Witty, articulate, emotional, and sometimes shooting from the hip and regretting it afterwards. We are a family of mavericks.)

So when Jeremy told me he had set up a foundation and one of its primary aims was to stop factory farming, I was impressed. The url is jeremycolliderfoundation.org, where you will find the heading FAIRR (Farm Animal Investment Risk and Return). If you are interested you can see it for yourself. I deplore factory farming. Altogether I believe that the process of killing animals for food is an industry of cruelty from rearing to transport to slaughter. I also believe that most of those who seek to ban Shechitah (the Jewish method of slaughter) are anti-Semites, because if they REALLY cared for animal welfare they would try to ban ALL animal slaughter.

I also believe that the kosher meat industry is largely complicit in the betrayal of values in regard to cruelty to animals about which the Torah is clearly concerned. Orthodox Jews in general look askance at vegetarianism. Partly because it is seen as coming from a different cultural world, partly because the Torah approved of animal sacrifices as well as vegetable, and partly because of the tradition on Sabbaths and festivals of feasting on meats! On a recent flight my Charedi neighbor noticed I had ordered a kosher vegetarian meal, and he leaned over and asked me how I, as an apparently religious Jew, could eat vegetarian!!!

I look forward to the day when modern techniques of artificially producing substitutes will change and then eradicate the industry altogether. I also identify with those great rabbinic authorities who called it pure paganism to swing chickens over your head as Kapparot, atonement before Yom Kipur. They called it Darkei Emory, Emorite custom. So I am on board 100% with the aims of the foundation.

The only question I have is over the limited aims of eliminating factory farming as opposed to outright banning of all animal slaughter. But I can see that it makes sense to proceed in stages against what is, after all, one of the most popular of human activities and one of the major providers of jobs. Besides, I believe that time, economics, and ecology will bring about the end of the business eventually. Meanwhile, day by day, billions of sentient creatures are being treated inhumanely.

But there are two other issues: the "Hitler loved his dog" argument and the priority argument. Hitler apparently was a vegetarian and so opponents of vegetarianism will often say that this proves that vegetarians love animals more than humans. Anyone familiar with the laws of logic or the limitations of generalizations will realize how facile such an argument is.

A similar faulty argument is the priority argument, which says that one should give to human charities first. Of course there are priorities in life. But prioritizing does not necessarily require to focus on only one area of charity. As the Talmud (Bava Metziah 71a) says, "The poor of your city come first." But that did not stop the Talmud (Gitin 61a) from saying that "one should provide for the poor of the non-Jewish world in addition to one's own poor."

It is true that I have argued previously that there are so many more members of other religions (and of no religion at all) that one ought, as a Jew, to give priority to Jewish charities. But that does not mean one should not give to other causes too. I deplore those Jews who refuse to give to any Jewish charity at all as much as I deplore those Jews who give large sums to organizations that actively try to undermine Judaism or Israel. But that doesn't mean I am in favor of giving ONLY to Jewish charities. However, I do believe in giving only to charities that support the values that I do. It is obvious to me that the Torah is concerned with treating animals humanely. Perhaps that's a subject for another occasion, as is the rabbinic dispute as to whether the laws in the Torah that appear to be motivated by concern for animal welfare may in fact be intended to heighten human sensitivity.

Either way, Jeremy Collier's mission strikes me as fully consonant with Jewish values (although I very much doubt that is why he got involved). Besides, he gives to Israeli and Jewish causes too. I am delighted that he has proved me, and the rest of those who feared disaster, wrong!