

**RABBIS**

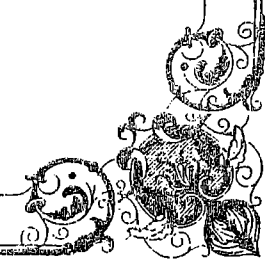
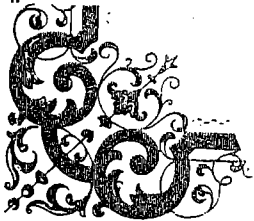
**AND**

**VEGETARIANISM:**

**AN**

**EVOLVING**

**TRADITION**



**The Universal Chorus**

**Rabbi Everett Gendler**

In recent decades many authors have presented many good reasons for adopting and following a vegetarian diet. Some of the reasons concern health: we'll be healthier if we avoid eating animal flesh and its derivatives. Other reasons stem from other ethical considerations: to reduce the total suffering on our planet by reducing the suffering of animals; to increase the availability of food for all humans by eating lower on the food chain; to help to assure the future of the earth by consuming fewer resources to sustain ourselves. These are compelling considerations, and they have persuaded many to adopt such a diet.

There is an additional consideration that I'd like to share, this one deriving from one possible answer to the basic question of our ultimate purpose in this life on this planet. Let me state very simply this sense of purpose, support it with some traditional Jewish sources, and suggest how a vegetarian diet makes it possible for us to fulfill this purpose with greater ease and enthusiasm.

Why are we here? To exult in Creation! To sing God's praises! To enjoy the gifts of our life here on earth with full awareness, and to give voice to this enjoyment with words of poetry, songs of praise, and sounds of joyous appreciation.

On first reading, this may seem a bit odd. Is God, then, the Cosmic Music Lover par excellence? Before dismissing such a notion, consider how ancient and basic to human expression are rhythm and melody. If our creation in the Divine image means that there are at least some significant

resemblances between the Divine and the human, then such a notion is, upon reflection, not at all far fetched.

Eric Gill, a visionary modern craftsman, communitarian, and creative Catholic thinker whose outlook was profoundly influenced by the Hebrew as well as the Christian Bible, put it vividly and even more radically:

"The Lord is a singer; the work of creation is a song--the morning stars sang together.

And in a song all things must sing...  
(God) is a singer. The created universe is a little song of his---a little song, but big enough and loud enough for us---we are notes in it. There is no other explanation of the universe or of us."

Gill's daring formulation strikes me as a wonderful summary-in-image of what many a verse from Psalms proclaims. To cite just a few verses from four psalms which are part of every Sabbath morning service (and three of the four are recited also in the daily morning service):

Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,  
Praise befits the upright.

Praise the Lord with the lyre;  
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.  
Sing to him a new song;  
play skillfully amid shouts of joy (33:1-3)

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;  
make melody to our God on the lyre. (147:7)

Praise the Lord!  
How good it is to sing praises to our God...  
Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;  
make melody to our God on the lyre. (149:1,7)

Praise God with trumpet sound,  
praise him with lute and harp!  
Praise him with tambourine and dance;  
praise him with strings and pipe!  
Praise him with clanging cymbals;  
praise him with loud clashing cymbals (150:3-5)

Especially pertinent to this essay, however, is one additional psalm that is also part of every traditional morning service, weekdays, Sabbaths, and Festivals. Psalm 148 begins:

Praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord from the heavens;  
Praise the Lord in the heights!

Sun, moon, and stars of light are summoned to praise the Divine along with angels and hosts of heaven. It continues:

Praise the Lord from the earth

and summon to the praise of God sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, vapor and stormy wind, mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, beasts and cattle, creeping things and winged fowl, along with women and men both young and old, and persons from all stations of life. (See Psalm 148). Clearly we are not the only singers in this chorus of praise to the Creator, but are to join in a universal chorus of praise whose members include all of creation, including all our fellow creatures with whom we share this earth: beasts and cattle, creeping things and winged fowl.

This tradition is not confined to the Psalms, nor does it end with the Bible. The Song of the Three Jews, found in the Apocrypha as an addition to the Book of Daniel, and probably a Hebrew composition, also summons all the works of the Lord to sing God's praise with exaltation.

Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord,  
Sing God's praise and exalt God forever...

Bless the Lord...whales and all that  
swim in the waters...  
all birds of the air...all beasts and cattle...  
all people on earth...

Once again we find our fellow animals included with us in this summons to praise the Source of all Creation.

Even more striking is the portrayal of all living creatures singing their individual songs in praise of the Creator. In Perek Shira, A Chapter of Song, a mystical hymn (dating from the 5th-7th century) that even today is found in all complete traditional Hebrew prayer books, worded songs are ascribed specifically to land animals, winged creatures, insects, and residents of the waters. Cows, camels, horses, mules; roosters, chickens, doves, eagles; butterflies, locusts, spiders, flies; sea monsters, fish, frogs: all of these and many more offer Biblical words of praise in song to their Creator, filling the universe with hymns and songs.

If, indeed, our purpose is to join with all of sentient creation in songs of praise to the Creator; if, in fact, the universe resounds with sounds of singing from all its living creatures; if, in truth, we are members of a chorus, not isolated soloists, then harmony among the choristers is evidently desirable. The better the terms of our relations with our fellow chorus members, the more natural the singing and the more beautiful the blending of voices and sounds. To respect the life of our fellow choir members by not killing them and eating their corpses would seem an obviously desirable condition for choral collegiality. To see other animals as fellow celebrants of life rather than primarily as potential corpses awaiting our consumption would surely affect not only their singing, but ours as well.

To say this is not to sentimentalize our relations with other animals. Messianic visions of the peaceable kingdom are precisely that, Messianic visions whose fulfillment awaits a radical transformation of life conditions on this earth. Until that time (or end of time), rivalries and competition between

humans and other species seem destined to persist. Yet to recognize that we inhabit a planet where much of life is companionable as well as competitive, and could become more companionable, would surely have significant effects on how we feel and how we live. Indeed, to apply the famous verse of Psalm 137 to this rather different context:

How shall we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land? (137:4)

in a land where we feel isolated and alien from the creatures who surround us? To discover (or perhaps recover) some sense of kinship with our fellow creatures might, over time, have effects on our lives quite beyond our imagining in the mere articulation of this notion.

But is this idea of singing our way through life with life really Jewish, one might ask? By way of a suggestive supplement to the verses earlier cited, let me conclude by transmitting a verse from Talmud that I learned from that remarkable and inspired ethicist, mystic, and music lover, the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose memory is truly a blessing:

Rabbi Akiba said:  
A song every day!  
Chant every day!

---Sanhedrin 99b

May that become our philosophy and our practice as well.

Full Moon of Tammuz 5755  
12 July 1995