

# Myself Surprised— at becoming a

## JEWISH VEGETARIAN

by Roberta Kalechofsky

Like most Eastern European Jews, my Jewish roots were intertwined with Jewish culinary traditions. *Shabbos* meant challah baked by

Bubbie, chicken soup, and meat *cholent*. On summer Friday nights, when windows were open, the entire neighborhood smelled of *Shabbos* cooking. Every Jewish holiday had its own particular smells and tastes. The Jewish calendar is a calendar of the senses—not only of historical moments. Like most others in my wider culture, Jew or non-Jew, I regarded vegetarians with bemused tolerance and wondered what you fed them. The break with my culinary heritage occurred when I began to learn about meat containing DES, the sex hormone that causes vaginal cancer in women and breast development in young boys. I had two pubescent sons at the time.

My first cautious change was to announce that our family would “cut down on meat.” My concern was the health of my children, not of the planet. At that point I didn’t know of the relationship between meat and environmental decay (cattle-grazing leads to soil erosion and desert-like conditions); of the possible public health danger caused by meat production (half of all antibiotics made in the U.S. are used to promote growth in cattle, thus unnecessarily increasing the possibility that

resistant strains of bacteria will develop); or of the dreadful modern cruelty of turning a cow into a hamburger—kosher or not. Like most of my friends, I vaguely believed that if you didn’t eat meat your bones and brains weakened and your husband courted impotence. I started to make a distinction between “modern meat” (the title of an influential book by Orville Schell), which was bad for you, and “good meat”—the kind without hormones or chemicals. I blindly trusted that kosher meat—which I used exclusively—was good meat, not only free of additives but also of cruelty.

Then I happened upon *Judaism and Vegetarianism* by Richard Schwartz (Micah Publications, 1988) with its dreadful descriptions of “factory farming,” including exactly how veal calves are confined and how chickens are kept in cages the size of shoe boxes. When I soon thereafter asked my butcher where my meat came from, he understood the rising ethical and health import of my question. “Mrs. K.,” he said sympathetically, “all meat for the commercial market is raised the same way. We just kill the animal differently.” Suddenly, *shekhita*, [kosher slaughter], which I had always viewed as having distinct respect for animal life, took on a different cast. If a baby cow is tormented by being confined to a crate nearly the size of its own body, made to live in darkness and lie in its own excrement, then its entire life becomes a slow dying. So much for the humanitarian, quick, and painless death of *shekhita*.

I slowly gave up meat-eating, though I still held to the “meat myth.” I remember looking at a large poster with the caption, “Meat Builds Strength,” in a butcher shop. Years of socialization had me believing that

canard still, though a vegetarian friend of mine consistently reminded me that the strongest animals, such as the bull, ox, elephant, and horse, are herbivores. I began to understand vegetarianism as a truth struggling throughout history—against a profound propaganda pitch—to be told. I began to feel that Jewish vegetarianism recaptured the spirit of the first law of *kashrut* in *Genesis*: “See I give you every herb, seed, and green thing to eat. These shall be yours for food.” Decidedly not Bubbie’s chicken.

People frequently ask me, “Why Jewish vegetarianism? Vegetarian is vegetarian!” The answer is that Judaism traditionally and historically has been steeped in dietary ethics, and not just in the celebration of eating. There is a dietary tradition in Judaism which is far older than chicken soup or meat *cholent*. For example, our messianic tradition rests upon our becoming vegetarians again (as we were in Eden); there is no blessing for the eating of meat, and “meat is never included among the staple diet of the children of Israel” (*Encyclopedia Judaica*). The traditional biblical era diet consists of wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and honey, according to Deuteronomy 8:8.

When I realized that I could no longer celebrate Pesach with a shankbone on the table, I believed that what was true for me must be true for other Jews as well. Hence, I published the *Haggadah for the Liberated Lamb*. Two years ago, a woman called me from a small town about a hundred and fifty miles from Tokyo to order a copy of the haggadah. “My goodness,” I gasped, “how many Jews can there be where you live?” She responded across ten thousand miles,

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"I'm the only Jew out here, but I happen to be a vegetarian."

During Talmudic times, the rabbis discouraged Jews from becoming vegetarians, despite the earlier, strong vegetarian undercurrents in Judaism. They did so because vegetarianism, at that time,

#### JEWISH VEGETARIAN RESOURCES

##### ORGANIZATIONS:

###### *Jewish Vegetarians of North America:*

Established in 1983 as a support group for Jewish vegetarians, with chapters throughout the U.S. and Canada; \$24 membership (\$26 for families) includes a quarterly newsletter as well as membership in the *International Jewish Vegetarian and Ecological Society*, based in London. You will also receive the society's quarterly international magazine, *The Jewish Vegetarian*. Contact: Jewish Vegetarians, 6938 Reliance Rd., Federalsburg, MD, 21203.

###### *Jews for Animal Rights / Micah Publications:*

Dedicated to promoting Jewish ethics as they relate to the treatment of animals. Contact: 255 Humphrey St., Marblehead, MA, 01945.

##### BOOKS:

Richard Schwartz, *Judaism and*

*Vegetarianism*, Micah Publications, 1988.

Louis Berman, *Vegetarianism and the Jewish Tradition*, Ktav, 1982.

Roberta Kalechofsky, *Haggadah for the*

*Liberated Lamb* (a vegetarian and egalitarian Haggadah), Micah Publications, 1988.

Rose Friedman, *Jewish Vegetarian Cooking*, Thorsons Press, England, 1985. (Available in U.S. through Micah Publications or Harper/Collins.)

##### AND BEYOND:

###### *CHAI-Concerned for Helping Animals in*

*Israel*: Established in 1984 to help the Israeli animal welfare community improve the conditions and treatment of domestic animals (those not protected by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel) in Israel. Contact: Nina Natelson, Box 3341, Alexandria, VA, 22003.

*The ECO-Kosher Project*: Created to "encourage institutions and individuals to make purchases and investments and use resources in accord with a Jewishly rooted and defined ethic of social responsibility—in particular, responsibility for the environment." Contact: Institute for Jewish Renewal, 7318 Germantown Ave., Philadelphia, PA, 19119.

*Shomrey Adamah*: A Jewish environmentalist group at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Contact: Ellen Bernstein, Church Road and Greenwood Ave., Wyncote, PA, 19095.

*Feminists for Animal Rights*: Works to raise the consciousness of the feminist community, the animal rights community, and the public at large about the links between the objectification, exploitation, and abuse of women and of animals in patriarchal society. Membership costs from \$12-20/yr. (based on a sliding scale) and includes a twice-yearly newsletter. For more information send SASE to: PO Box 694, Cathedral Station, NY, NY, 10025-0694.

was associated with asceticism and celibacy. However, modern Jewish vegetarianism has nothing to do with ancient ascetic cults; it remains true to the Jewish tradition of celebrating of life, health, food, and festivity. We celebrate our holidays with some vegetarian foods that are distinctly Jewish. Below is Rose Friedman's recipe (from *Jewish Vegetarian Cooking*) for a *cholent* with *knaidels* that rivals my Bubbie's meat *cholent*.

With the *cholent* and soup, serve challah, wine, nuts, dates, candles and song. You have a vegetarian *Shabbos* that tastes as good as the *Shabbos* of your childhood. The Jewish tradition enjoins us to make *Shabbos* a joyful occasion; therefore we should have foods we love and wines we enjoy, both of which are amply possible with a vegetarian meal based on the original biblical diet of "the grain, the wine, and the oil." □

### *Cholent with Knaidels*

1 large onion, finely chopped

Vegetable oil

1 1/2 cups lima beans soaked overnight and rinsed

1 cup barley, rinsed

2 tablespoons whole wheat flour

1 teaspoon paprika

Sea salt, freshly ground pepper, garlic salt

2 large potatoes, peeled, thickly sliced

Hot vegetable stock to cover (use bouillon cubes)

1. Fry onion in a little oil until light brown.
2. Place onions, beans, and barley in the bottom of an ovenproof casserole with a tight fitting lid.
3. Mix together the flour and seasonings and add to the casserole, covering the beans, barley, and onions. Mix well.
4. Cover with potatoes, season with salt and pepper.
5. Pour vegetable stock into casserole to cover everything.
6. Cover with lid and cook in oven at 350 for about 45 minutes.
7. In meantime, make *knaidels*:

1 cup whole wheat flour

1/2 cup whole wheat semolina

Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1/3 cup polyunsaturated margarine

2 tablespoons grated onion, lightly sauteed in oil

1 finely grated potato

1 teaspoon chopped parsley

1 egg (optional)

1 teaspoon yeast extract

4 tablespoons cold water

1. Combine the flour, semolina, and seasonings and rub in margarine.
2. Add sauteed onion, grated potato, parsley, egg (if using), yeast extract, and enough cold water to make a soft mixture.
3. Form into dumplings about the size of golf balls.
4. Remove casserole from oven and place dumplings on top of the mixture.
5. Add more vegetable stock up to the level of the dumplings, and replace lid.
6. Leave in a slow oven (250) overnight, or all day until required.
7. If you prefer not to make dumplings, remember to cook the rest of the *cholent* slowly, anyway. I myself have an alternative to chicken soup (called "better-than-chicken-soup") which is incredibly easy to make:

### *Better-than-Chicken-Soup Soup*

1 pound of yellow split peas

1 cup grated carrots

1 cup grated parsnips

2 fresh bay leaves

Salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Rinse split peas and bring to a boil in 8 cups of water.
2. Simmer one half hour and add rest of ingredients.
3. Season to taste and cook for an additional half hour.