

Jews ban beef to save the world?

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Nov. 18, 2007

Most Jews are not vegetarians, but some may consider a dietary shift after seeing *A Sacred Duty: Applying Jewish Values to Help Heal the World*. Sponsored by Jewish Vegetarians of North America (JVNA), the documentary (which premiered at the Orthodox Union's Israel Center in Jerusalem last week) tackles three major themes: the current peril of global warming and other environmental threats; teachings in Judaism that may guide our response to these threats; and how a shift toward vegetarianism can both alleviate environmental problems and help us fulfill our Jewish duty.

"I hope to awaken the world to the fact that we are headed toward an unprecedented global catastrophe," Dr. Richard Schwartz, the film's producer and president of JVNA, told The Jerusalem Post prior to film's premiere. "A shift toward plant-based diets is essential to address global warming and tikkun olam (healing the world)."

The first part of the film presents global environmental concerns specifically as they affect Israel. Air and water pollution are two of Israel's biggest ecological issues and Israeli environmentalists worry not only about the health effects of these problems, but also about the lack of government concern.

"Everyone is so obsessed with national security that the environment gets tossed aside," said Yair Cohen, a leader of Green Course, an Israeli student environmental group that appears in the film.

Leading Israeli environmentalist and founder of the Israel Union for Environmental Defense, Professor Alon Tal (also featured in the documentary), called the film "a curious juxtaposition." Aside from showing natural images, such as the polluted Yarkon River, *A Sacred Duty* presents a series of video clips portraying cruelty to farm animals. It ends on a positive note, however - that we can, in fact, reverse this catastrophic trend - complete with classic "clean earth" scenes of foliage, water sports on Israeli beaches and setting suns.

FOR SCHWARTZ and his supporters, one lifestyle change in particular can have far reaching effects: a shift to plant-based diets. Driven by a 2006 United Nations report which showed that 18% of greenhouse gases come from livestock agriculture, Schwartz concluded that a vegetarian and vegan lifestyle was the answer to staying healthier and healing the planet.

For the Jewish community, this dietary decision has particular significance. Eating an animal-based diet is "no doubt damaging the world and is in violation of the Jewish mandate to protect and care for the earth," said Jerusalem rabbi Adam Frank in the documentary. Schwartz agrees. He even takes it further, insisting that meat-eating is actually in violation of Jewish law, which requires us to "take care of the body, show compassion to animals, conserve resources, help hungry people, and seek and pursue peace."

It taps on environmentalists and rabbinical leaders from multiple strands of Judaism to embrace this cause and preach it. Rabbi Sha'ar Yashuv Cohen, Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Haifa, credits his 80 years of good health to vegetarianism. Rabbi David Rosen, former chief rabbi of Ireland and international director of religious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, calls leading a vegetarian lifestyle one of "the most sublime and noble values."

For Rosen, health and religion are inextricably linked.

"I am vegetarian because I am a religious Jew," Rosen said. "Just because you have been given permission [to eat meat] does not make it ideal. Today's reality should lead any honest religious Jew to see that vegetarianism is a religious imperative."

As much as Schwartz tries to maintain that his documentary is "just trying to start a respectful dialogue" within the Jewish community and "fulfill a mandate of awareness," one cannot help but see the interviewees' hope of influencing the rabbinate with regard to changing the laws of kashrut. Several figures in the film also claim that the current halachic standards of kashrut are not consistent with Judaism's approach to animals.

"Even kosher is cruel," said Roberta Kalechofsky, founder and director of Jews for Animal Rights. She cites violations by two kosher slaughterhouses in Nebraska and Iowa in addition to the farms that do abide by current standards, but still do not minimize pain as much as they could.

Still, while others like Prof. Tal may not discuss the violations of kashrut in the film, it is clear that it is a belief that motivated them to contribute to the project. "It is unthinkable that kashrut would cause more pain," explained Tal. "It should be the safest, cleanest, and most humane way [to slaughter]. Halacha is an evolving issue that should change with technology. We need to be creative and courageous in this."

Schwartz has plans to mass distribute the documentary through screenings in Israel and in the United States, where free DVDs will be given away. Viewers are encouraged to organize screenings with leaders in their own communities to spread the word.

A Sacred Duty will be screened again tonight at 7:30 p.m. at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, free of charge.



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