We Are What We Eat

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Otto Bismark, the 19th Century founder of the German empire once remarked, "There are two things that are better not to see how they are made, laws and sausages." I have been thinking quite a bit about Otto's remark these last few days as I listen to detailed descriptions and watch graphic animations of which parts of cows are entering our food chain and for what purposes. The highly technical and all too graphic explanation of Mad Cow Disease and Downer Cows and Rendering of Animal Feed, a term which is really a euphemism for human engineered cannibalism of one cow by another, have assaulted my senses, my taste buds and most of all my conscience.

Daily we are reminded of the gruesome details of how cattle in our country are raised, processed, slaughtered and then rendered (that term again), to feed our national pallet, our yearning hunger for two all beef patties. It's enough to make even an Atkins dieter become a vegetarian. I should note that I have been the former and think I would fail miserably at the later; I was scared by a cooked vegetable at a young age, and our relationship such that is it is, is still rather tenuous.

A few weeks ago, McDonalds announced that Chicken McNuggets, a dietary staple of my 7 year old nephew's diet, now contain white meat chicken, which of course caused many of us who have seen the white insides of Chicken McNuggets since before the recent news flash to wonder, well what were they made with before?

We recall a number of years ago, the Wendy's commercial, the woman who reminded us all of our grandmothers, and her rallying cry, "Where's the beef?" Were she still alive today her call might be instead, "what's the beef?"

As far back as 1906 Upton Sinclair, published an investigative report on the meatpacking industry in America. His report, read my millions of Americans, including then President Teddy Roosevelt, was a scathing indictment of the meat packing industry in our country and its practices that put at risk the health and well being of every American. So gruesome were his findings, so horrible the practice of bringing meat to market in our nation back then, that better judgment prevents me from speaking of it in a sanctuary, let alone after many of us have just eaten. His report, and the subsequent investigation initiated by President Teddy Roosevelt brought about the Meat Inspection Act of 1906, and it was that act and all subsequent legislation that has governed how food is brought from farm to market to kitchen table in our nation for the past 100 years.

Since the advent of the first legislation to monitor the industry, there has been according to journalist Eric Schlosser, in his New York Times Best Seller, Fast Food Nation, a constant battle between the those concerned for the health and well being of American consumers and the $40 billion a year meat processing industry which has spurned every attempt at further regulation and oversight. It is an industry like many others in America, driven by corporate profit and mass-consumerism, we have seen in recent years what corporate greed has done in the telecom industry, in the stock market, at Wal-Mart, at Microsoft. Is it really any surprise to us that some of those same forces might be at work in the mass production of food in our country? The difference is of course that we don't eat our Levi's or our Long Distance Phone Companies.

Chancellor Bismark was correct, some things are better left to the unknown, I really prefer not to think about how my two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun made there journey from farm to styrophom. At its

best the process of how a hamburger or hotdog is made is not very appetizing, but Otto was not Jewish, he could eat and not know, he could eat and not think. But I don't have that luxury, as a Jew I cannot eat without thinking what am I eating, where did it come from, how was it prepared, how was the animal that gave its life for my meal treated, what was it fed, was it healthy, did it know fear or pain before it was slaughtered so that I might live by eating it. Judaism demands, even of Reform Jews, that we practice *Tzar Balaayi Chayim*, the Respect and Proper Treatment of Animals. This mitzvah manifests itself in many ways, students in our religious school learn that it means that they must feed there pets before they feed themselves. We are reminded that our biblical leaders were chosen for there position of leadership over the community because they first demonstrated there care and compassion for others in there role as Shepards who watched over the flock. Under Jewish law, animals have some of the same rights as humans do. Animals rest on Shabbat, as humans do. We are forbidden to muzzle an ox while it is working in the field, just as we must allow human workers to eat from the produce they are harvesting.

Several commandments demonstrate concern for the physical or psychological suffering of animals. We may not plow a field using animals of different species, because this would be a hardship to the animals. Animals are required to be raised in a Free-Range way, they cannot be raised in warehouses, nor can they be killed for food if they are sick or injured. We are not permitted to kill an animal in the same day as its young, and are specifically commanded to send away a mother bird when taking the eggs, because of the psychological distress this would cause the animal. In fact, the Torah specifically says that a person who sends away the mother bird will be rewarded with

long life, precisely the same reward that is given for honoring mother and father. The greatest manifestation of these laws of *Tzar Baalay Chaym* are the laws of *Kashrut*, the Jewish commandment to Keep Kosher. In the beginning, God tells Adam and Eve that they must be vegetarians, eating only fruits, vegetables, and grains. God's ideal seems to be that we should not kill for food. And yet, God did not create a perfect world. Soon, humans indulged their taste for animals so ravenously that they would tear limbs from living animals. After the flood, God is ready to compromise. God tells Noah that humans may eat meat, but that they must kill the animals first, to avoid cruelty to animals in the process of providing food for people. Later, God makes a more restrictive compromise with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, indicating that, even with proper slaughtering, not just any animals may be eaten. Such is the importance of how we treat animals in the laws of *Kashrut*, that even when the time comes for its slaughter for food the *schochet* or butcher, hides the knife from the sight of the animal so that it does not see its end coming and then must kill it in one instantaneous and pain free motion.

Kashurt is a long way from how our nation treats and processes its animals for food, but we need not be a long way from it. Whether are the end of this sermon your family chooses to keep kosher or not, and I have prepared some information sheets for those who would like to explore the possibility, we can all make and immediate change in our lives, we can all from this moment on, only purchase kosher meat and poultry. We lives in the second largest Jewish community in America, and in one of the largest concentrations of Jewish, the San Fernando Valley in the world, there is quite literally a kosher butcher or food section on every corner. Ralph's, Gelson's, Trader Joes, and Vons and Pavilions when we can shop at them again, all care Empire kosher meats and

poultry, it is easier to keep kosher in our city than it is even to by organic food, which by the way all kosher meat and poultry by definition is. What will this one simple change mean for your family? Quite simply it will mean that you will not be at risk for Mad Cow disease or any of the other diseases that are creeping into our food chain because of the bio-engineering and corporate disregard for human safety that has brought us to this frightening moment. But more over what will it mean for the $40 billion dollar a year meat processing industry, it will mean that some of those heads of cattle and other animals will be raised as kosher animals, treated in accordance with the commandment of *Tzar Baalay Chayim*, with respect and compassion and *kiddusha*, the holiness that's should be afforded an animal that gives its life so that we may life ours.

And imagine for a moment the discussion you will have with your children when the next time you go with them to the market and you are picking your food you explain to them why you have decided that you will only by kosher meat and poultry? We are a religion that takes every opportunity to celebrate life through food, it is the cornerstone of most of our holidays, we are asked to say a blessing before and after we eat and to consider carefully what we eat. We eat all the time, some of us more than others, what better way to teach our children and ourselves not to take the blessing of food for granted then to make our tables a sacred place, our refrigerators a holy ark and our bodies a temple. We are as they say, what we eat, let us therefore eat with respect for God's creation so that we may live in that way as well.