

✘ Thanksgiving is often thought of as America's unique secular holiday. That's somewhat ironic, because the very name of the day suggests an external power, force, or being to whom we give thanks. But Thanksgiving also carries with it important environmental implications, because we are also celebrating the bounty of the earth.

[In a recent essay, Rabbi Natan Margalit of Organic Torah unifies the two, from within the Jewish tradition.](#) He notes that originally God gave humans only “every seed bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit.” (Gen. 1:29). No animals were to be consumed. It was only after the Flood (and the overwhelming evidence of human moral frailty) that God finally relented and said,

The fear and dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky — everything with which the earth is astir — and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand. Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat...

Gen. 9:1-4. And Judaism itself makes the consumption of animal flesh particularly difficult. In the passage just quoted, God makes it very clear that “you must not eat flesh with its life-blood in it.” So much for eating meat rare. Margalit observes that in ancient Hebrew, the word *nefesh* connoted both “life” and “soul.” The very act of eating meat is a consumption of a soul. Meat-eating is not banned, but it is disfavored.

Even the most cursory look at the kosher laws reinforces this disfavoring. It is easy for a vegetarian to be kosher; it is hard for a meat-eater to be kosher. The vast majority of rules concern meat-eating; if you forego meat, kashrut is a piece of cake (so to speak). The message is clear: try very hard to not kill souls, and at the very least, always acknowledge that they *are* souls. Thus, says Margalit:

the Jewish ethics of eating speaks clearly against the practices we see today in the industrial production of meat. The vast majority of meat produced today in the U.S. comes from huge factory farms in which the animals are crowded together, fed fattening food not their natural diet, and then given antibiotics in order to keep them healthy enough in these

inhumane conditions to reach the slaughterhouse. They are reduced, in other words, to units of meat production, not animate beings with a God-given life.

We are blessed with many gifts, and Thanksgiving is a wonderful time to recognize and enjoy the bounty that reaches our tables. But, especially if we are eating meat, whether or not we are eating kosher, we can still be informed by this three thousand year old wisdom from the Torah: the life of the animal is a sacred gift from God. We are only permitted to eat it on the condition that we recognize that fact. For us today this means looking to the best of our ability at how the animal was raised and treated. Did the farmer who raised this animal treat it with respect? Was its slaughter done in the most humane way possible?

Margalit might also have mentioned that the production of meat requires far, far more energy than the production of plants. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, [meat production constitutes between 14 and 22 percent of the global carbon footprint](#). Destroying the soul of an animal also means injuring the soul of the earth.

So go ahead and eat your Thanksgiving turkey. I will. But recognize it for the special — I might even say sacred — occasion that it is. Know where your bird comes from. Is your consumption honoring the earth? Ask yourself: how will you change your consumption from now until the next Thanksgiving in order to preserve the earth and honor the souls of other creatures? And in the meantime, [make sure to contribute to Reversing Hunger throughout the world](#), for those who don't eat meat because they cannot afford. Their souls matter, too.

Happy Thanksgiving to all.