SHEMINI: Should Jews Be Vegan?

In this week's Parasha, the Tora introduces us to the diet of the Jewish people, Kashrut. This diet does not necessarily have to do with physical wellness, like a low-carb diet or other diets we follow today. Kashrut has to do explicitly with a "special" behavior", or Qedusha (holiness) that HaShem demands from us. As the Tora itself tells us in Vayqra (11:44): "For I am HaShem, your God. You must purify yourselves and be Holy, because I am Holy. Do not impurify yourself with [impure = Non Kosher] animals …. But how is holiness related to a diet or to a specific kind of animal? Regardless of the reason why certain animals are permitted and others are not allowed (which should be the subject of a different conversation) the fact that certain foods are permitted, and other food are forbidden to train us to reach Qedusha.

In the Tora, holiness, or in Hebrew Qedusha, has to do with self-control and discipline. Especially in those areas of human behavior related to the satisfaction of primary instincts. Particularly with regard to what we consume and with the area of □□sexuality. When we exercise our free will, we develop this "power" to control our impulses, which sets us apart from animals. Living beings, except for humans, cannot attain any Qedusha because they are "natural" beings. And as part of their nature, they cannot control, and "say NO", to their primary impulses. Thanks to the fact that we think with words –and we grasp reality linguistically– we humans "have room for possible responses when we are driven by an instinct". We possess freedom of choice or "response" - "ability". Qedusha is reached when we practice a behavior that positions us on a level above nature, and closer to HaShem. On this subject, the Gemara in Pesachim (49b) says

something very interesting. Not all people have the right to eat meat. There is a category of individuals who, according to Ribbi Yehuda haNasi, should not consume meat. □□ :□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□. *“An uneducated person cannot consume meat.”* In this context, “Uneducated” refers to a person with no discipline or self-control. A person incapable of saying NO to his or her impulses. These individuals are not granted the right to eat meat, because they are not on a level above the animals.

We, Jews, train ourselves to self-control from a very young age. I remember once, at a Bar Mitzva party, a non-Jewish gentleman approached me and congratulated me for one of my children. This is more or less what he told me: “Rabbi, how do you do it? What did you do to educate a 5-year-old child to have self-discipline? I have 3 children, one of that age. And the truth is that I cannot deal with their appetites. Children today are voracious consumers, trained by modern society to consume everything that presents itself before their insatiable eyes … Your child, however, is different. I just offered him some candy. He took it and thanked me. But, to my surprise, before putting the candy in his mouth, he went to ask his older brother if he could eat it… So tell me: What is your secret? What gift did you promise your children if they do not eat candy? Did you threaten them with some harsh punishment? ” I replied that there were no rewards or threats. And that my son is not the only child with this level of self-discipline. Actually, any Jewish child whose family observes the laws of Kashrut, has that same level of self-control. I also confessed (and as I said it, I surprised myself to hear it) that I never had to explain to my children the laws of Kashrut. They learned from imitating what they saw from their parents and siblings.

The Tora which teaches us to reach a level of discipline that elevates us over nature and over our instincts.