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Nachhaltigkeit – eine Hinterfragung

Kosher Pork?

On the Ambiguities of «Sustainable Meat»

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« My father had a *shoykhet*
who slaughtered pigs
especially for Jews ...
He made kosher pork. »¹

Pork, of course, is never kosher. No taboo in Jewish culture has been as pervasive as pork. Its corrupting qualities are considered so gripping that the Hebrew language includes several euphemisms to avoid even uttering the words pig-meat.

Yet «kosher pork» reappears at various moments in Jewish history. Quoted above, it emerged in the memories of several Soviet Jews. The coexistence of «kosher» and «pork» stemmed from the group's desire to adhere to multiple identities within the context of the former Soviet Union.

Today, «kosher pork» resurfaces in conversations about sustainability and the future of meat. As the population of the earth doubled, our meat consumption tripled. Currently, the global meat industry devours our planet's finite resources (such as land and fresh water) and its greenhouse gas emissions accelerate our impending climate crisis. Yet global meat consumption continues to rise. In a bid to produce «sustainable meat», food-tech startups have come up with two main solutions: plant-based imitation meats and real animal flesh artificially produced in a laboratory.

New industrialized foods, especially those labeled «meat», raise the question of kashrut. This issue might seem relevant only to a tiny minority of kashrut-observant Jews. Yet through raising fundamental questions about the nature of such foods, debates over the kosher status of «sustainable meats» are rendered universal.

A case in point is the «impossible pork», produced by the American company Impossible Foods. The ingredients and manufacturing process of this vegetarian product are kosher. Yet the world's largest kosher-certifier, OU Kosher, recently refused to label the product as such. This decision was based on the Jewish principle of *marit ayin* («how it appears»). The product is simply too pork-like to be comfortably labeled kosher. This ruling encapsulates the paradox of fake meat. To be commercially successful, it must convince in its meatiness; it must be at once both distinguishable and indistinguishable from real animal flesh.

If imitation meats challenge the distinction between appearance and veracity, lab-grown meat further problematizes this matter. Lab-grown meat, or «cultured





Quelle: pexels.com

meat», is not a vegetarian substitute. It is real animal muscle and fat tissue produced using cell culture. With this technology, cultured meat startups claim to have cracked the code to revolutionize animal agriculture. Yet despite the hype, it remains unclear whether this technology can scale up to be made viable, and how much energy and resources it would consume. Salvation in the form of «sustainable meat» is still far from sight.

Though not yet available for mass consumption, the question «will cultured meat be kosher?» is already debated. When asking if cultured meat could be kosher, we are essentially asking what is cultured meat, and even, what is meat?

According to the broadest Jewish definition, meat refers to the flesh of an animal that was slaughtered according to kosher law (*shechita*). Famed Rabbi Isaac Kook (1865–1935) argued that the laws of *shechita* are intentionally complicated because vegetarianism and animal welfare are Jewish ideals. In a compilation of Kook's essays titled «A Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace» (excerpts of which first appeared in 1910 in a student paper at the

University of Bern), Kook claimed that in the ideal Jewish world, the desire for meat disappears, and the exploitation of animals ends. Accordingly, the complex laws of *shechita* serve as a reminder that the death of living beings should not be taken lightly.

Within the logic of animal welfare, the laws of *shechita* forbid severing a limb of a living animal simply for consumption. This principle is referred to as *ever min ha'chai* and it dictates that an animal must be slaughtered for its flesh to be considered kosher. Yet having slaughter as a prerequisite for cultured meat defeats the purpose. The revolution of cultured meat is that meat would no longer depend on the death of an animal but can be derived from the cells of a living one. What does this mean for the relationship between cells, bodies, and meat? If scientifically we understand cells as the building blocks of the body (and therefore, meat) can lab-grown meat ever be kosher?

Rabbis who theoretically approve of cultured meat, dismiss the principle of *ever min ha'chai* as irrelevant. Doing so, they reject the idea – inherent to cultured meat –

that cells retain the essence of meat. Instead, they cite another Jewish principle: «a new face» (*panim chadashot*). This principle refers to a material that has been manipulated so dramatically that it no longer retains its former identity. *Panim chadashot* was cited, for example, by rabbis who believed that gelatin should have been certified kosher – even when produced from pig-derived collagen. Similarly, some rabbis argue that cultured meat could be considered a new «thing», entirely divorced from the animal from which it originated. Following this logic, lab-grown meat would be a food category of its own, rendering it not only kosher, but also *parve*, i.e., categorically not meat.

Through various technological advancements, humans have created artificial distance between meat and animal. Meat produced by cell culture expands this gap to the extent that cultured-kosher-pork might become a reality. But should it? Is finding new ways to eat meat, and new species to consume, the solution to our self-devouring meat habit? And if a messianic ideal is a world of vegetarianism and peace, how is meat – let alone kosher pork – the road towards planetary salvation?

¹ Anna Shternshis, «Salo on Challah: Soviet Jew's Experience of Food in the 1920s–1950s», in: Anat Helman (Hg.) *Jews and Their Foodways*, Oxford 2015, 17.