

Summer Reading: The connection between food and Jewish ethics

By Dena Abramowitz
Special to The Chronicle

July 24th, 2008

"**The Omnivore's Dilemma**" by **Michael Pollan** will never turn up on a list of Jewish books. The author is about as secular as one can get, and the topic doesn't really have Jewish content.

Yet Pollan has written an entertaining, well-researched, and culturally significant book that speaks directly to Jews intent on living a life both "Jewish" and ethical.



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Pollan describes four meals, each one the culmination of a particular type of agriculture. The first, bought at McDonald's and eaten while driving in a car with his wife and son, is an outgrowth of the corn-based culture that modern industrial agriculture has become.

The second, what he calls "industrial organic," is prepared with items purchased at Whole Foods Market. Everything is certified organic but has traveled a long distance to get to his plate.

The third is a different type of organic meal, with foods that were all locally grown on sustainable farms, which Pollan personally visited.

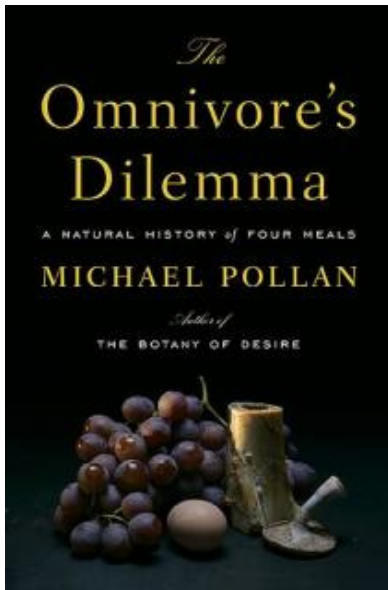
The fourth meal Pollan prepares entirely on his own – he grows, collects, or hunts and slaughters virtually everything in this meal, and then cooks and serves it to his family and friends.

(His decision to hunt a wild pig shows the weakness of his connection to Jewish traditions, but he did have good ecological reasons for that choice.)

The fast food meal was the most frightening, as it depended on monoculture agriculture — 80 million acres of American farmland are devoted to growing corn.

Cows in factory farms are fed corn instead of grass so they'll reach slaughter weight faster and use up the vast subsidy-driven corn surplus.

Routine use of antibiotics is required to prevent disease resulting from a diet that cows aren't designed to digest and from being crammed in feedlots, standing in pools of waste.



Our diets suffer from an overabundance of cheap, heavily marbled meat in which antibiotic-resistant organisms proliferate. The land, too, suffers from chemical fertilizer use, insects and disease.

The two organic meals were more sustainable and healthier, in different ways. Pollan's description of the organic farm's open-air chicken abattoir and the philosophy behind it was fascinating (and the USDA inspectors' attempts to find something illegal about it were hilarious.)

Pollan's description of the hunt for "his" pig was not my favorite part of the book, and I surely didn't share his exhilaration of the kill. (Full disclosure: I gave up eating meat many years ago.)

But it is a testament to his powers of writing and analysis that I finished the book convinced that eating meat can be an acceptable, not necessarily cruel, and perhaps even crucial part of human ecology.

“Not necessarily cruel” is the key term here. Pollan cogently contrasts the cruelty of industrial agriculture (his first meal) with other, more humane methods of food production.

Since a high-profile immigration raid catapulted problems at an Iowa kosher meat processing plant into the news, many in the Jewish community have begun to discuss the meaning of *kashrut*.

Even the non-meat processed foods that carry a kosher certification often are full of unhealthy and non-sustainable additives, like high-density corn syrup.

It’s obvious that the vast quantities of meat we buy for our weddings, b’nai mitzvah celebrations, and Shabbat tables require slaughterhouses that are too huge and industrial to be humane, even if they’re technically kosher.

We’re no longer in the *shtetl* where the local *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) kills a cow for the community to eat for Shabbat.

It is my opinion that animal welfare, land use, human health, and sustainability are no less important than the details of kosher slaughtering.

The Jewish community has to change its eating habits to support a different, sustainable kind of agriculture, even seeking out small local farms that process meat and asking if they would consider becoming kosher. We shouldn’t be eating a kosher version of Pollan’s first meal.

The phrase “omnivore’s dilemma” was coined by University of Pennsylvania professor Paul Rozin to refer to the decisions humans constantly have to make about what to eat, since we can digest many things.

Pollan’s position is that we must think clearly about where our food comes from so we can solve the “omnivore’s dilemma” ethically and thoughtfully. His book provides the tools to do that.

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