RISE OF THE VEGAN JEW

Why an increasing number of Jewish people are turning to a plant-based diet

MICHAEL FRAIMAN
mfraiman@thejc.ca

In October 2018, Robyn Karmazyn got married. It was, in many ways, a wonderful event, held at Beth Torah, a popular Conservative synagogue in north Toronto. She and her husband stood under the huppah and smashed a glass to seal their commitment; they laughed as guests boosted them on chairs for the hora. But the night wasn’t perfect. After the ceremony, one guest quietly informed Karmazyn of a snide comment she’d overheard an older woman make about the menu: “What is my husband gonna eat?”

The menu, as per Karmazyn’s insistence, was vegan – just like the alcohol, the challah, her shoes, the cake and the bridesmaids’ shawls. Moroccan cigars and shish kebab were swapped out for soup shooters and pizza flatbread appetizers; fish and chicken were nixed for gnocchi, fried egg-plant and a Middle Eastern salad.

Presumably, the carnivorous husband found something to eat.

“To me, it seems a little crazy that you have to have meat at every meal,” Karmazyn says. She stopped eating meat at age 14 for ethical reasons. Today, over two decades later, she’s devoted to the vegan cause. She worried she’d have to break her family’s tradition of being married in a synagogue, presuming Beth Torah couldn’t accommodate her plant-based requests. She was relieved to be proven wrong: the catering company’s chef, it turned out, was excited to cook something different.

“On such a happy day, I wouldn’t have felt right about serving our guests meat and dairy and eggs,” she says. “As much as I identify as Jewish, and that’s important to me – I grew up going to Hebrew school and everything – ultimately, to me, it’s literally a life-and-death situation when it comes to veganism.”

Karmazyn is one of a rapidly growing number of Jewish (and gentile) vegans around the world. According to a recent food industry report, the four million vegans in the United States in 2014 nearly quintupled to 19.6 million in 2017. According to a 2018 study from Dalhousie University, 850,000 Canadians have joined the movement. All these numbers exclude vegetarians, who also eat dairy, eggs and honey. Vegans strictly eat food derived from plants.

While the trend transcends Judaism, it certainly doesn’t avoid it. After all, separating milk and meat is a whole lot easier when one simply avoids both.

Emily Karlovitz Perry moved from Pitts- burgh to Oklahoma before settling in Hamilton, Ont., where she felt drawn to the city’s burgeoning restaurant scene. She and her husband, both Jewish vegan chefs, opened Planted in Hamilton in January 2018. When their rabbi at Beth Jacob Synagogue caught wind of their enterprise, he suggested they certify it kosher.

“There really wasn’t a lot to do to make it a place that’s comfortable to people,” Karlovitz Perry says. Their rabbi surveyed the kitchen and required them to swap out a few ingredients, such as their balsamic vinegar and barbecue sauce. Planted in Hamilton was certified kosher in August; since then, the spot has sprouted into a gathering place for the Jewish community, as it’s one of the only kosher restaurants in the city.

“We got a lot of people, especially older people, who say, ‘Oh, I ate jackfruit!’ It was kind of a fun thing for them,” Karlovitz Perry says. There are no statistics that track Jewish vegans worldwide, but there are for Israel: as of 2016, five per cent of Israelis identified as vegan, one of the highest percentages in the world. That number doubled from 2010, when 2.6 per cent said they were vegetarian or vegan.

In recent years, hundreds of Israeli restaurants have begun offering vegan options or substitutes, including Domino’s, whose Israeli franchise made international headlines as the first to sell a soy-cheese pizza. The 837 residents of Amirim, a moshav near the Golan Heights, won’t let people in with meat – the entire place is 100 per cent vegetarian.

Down in the Negev Desert, a community of 3,000 Hebrew Israelites, a group of Africans who believe they’re the descendants of Israelites, likewise maintain what they call a “Garden of Eden” diet: plant-based, low sugar, no booze and no tobacco. They believe it’s the secret to a fulfilling, possibly never-ending life.

“Our parents, who were not born to veganism, but took it upon themselves in midlife, ruined their bodies with meat and therefore can’t expect to live forever,” Yair Israel, a Hebrew Israelite in the vegan food business, told Haaretz in 2016. “I believe that members of my generation and I will live forever.”

The reasons for going vegan are myriad. Animal welfare has traditionally been the leading rationale, as was the case with Karmazyn and Karlovitz Perry. But environmental concerns are gaining traction.