

A Plant-Based Quandary

Muslims, Jews, and Catholics wrestle with the religious implications of fake meat

BY [MAGGIE PHILLIPS](#) DECEMBER 12, 2023

PLNT Burger is a restaurant that offers plant-based alternatives to all-American favorites like burgers and shakes—all 100% kosher and halal. The first restaurant opened in Silver Spring, Maryland, 2019, and has expanded to 14 locations spanning from northern Virginia to Boston. The overarching philosophy, said co-founder Seth Goldman, is an effort to make food accessible to the widest possible cross section of people, regardless of their dietary choices—whether religious, medical, or ethical in nature. Despite some quibbles and caveats, for people of many faiths, plant-based meat and dairy substitutes complement their practices around food and diet by driving intentionality, to change the world by making what his wife and co-founder, Julie Farkas, calls “little changes, every day.”

Veganism and vegetarianism are increasingly accepted by the American mainstream, whether it's out of concern for the environment and animals, or for their own health, and people of various faith traditions with dietary restrictions are embracing the trend. While plant-based meat substitutes mean Jews, Muslims, and even some Christians might now enjoy a guilt-free cheeseburger or slice of (mushroom) bacon, there are those who see such alternatives as potentially problematic workarounds. Other religions have their sanctioned alternatives to off-limit substances—coffee substitutes for Latter-day Saints, [capybara](#) instead of fish on Fridays for Catholics in Latin America—but plant-based meat can present something of a different challenge for many religious traditions: What if it's *too* close to the real thing?

When Goldman and Farkas sat down with me at one of their New York City restaurants over a chocolate oat milkshake, they told me about the “very Jewish ethos” behind their vegan restaurant, where ethically sourced menu options bring vegans, eco-warriors, and rabbis together. And PLNT Burger definitely feels inclusive. Goldman and Farkas are greeted warmly by the staff when they arrive at the restaurant, but it's almost possible to miss because the staff greets *everyone* warmly. Cheerful young men behind the counter coach me through the byzantine customization options as I place my order on the touch-screen menu (the ability to individualize is part of the founders’

philosophy of being all things to all people). I'm there at the tail end of the lunch rush, but their energy and enthusiasm don't seem to have flagged. "We get people from all over," I hear a server remark over the multilingual conversational din. "Yeah, no meat!" he responds to another customer inquiry. "Tastes just like the real thing!"

The couple converted to vegetarianism the very day of their eldest son Jonah's bar mitzvah. Today, Jonah is director of marketing for PLNT Burger, and his parents tell me his fingerprints are all over the restaurant, from the cheery purple and teal décor to the upbeat music and the bright murals—still a work in progress at this particular location, which opened a year ago. "Eat the change you wish to see in the world," one reads.

The saying is a favorite of Jonah's, his parents tell me proudly. Indeed, it was Jonah's Torah portion and *d'var Torah* at his bar mitzvah nearly 20 years ago that brought his parents around that very day. On the morning in question, he read from Deuteronomy, about the laws surrounding the spilling of blood, and the need to separate life from death by keeping milk and meat apart. But Jonah went back still further, to Genesis, when God gives humanity dominion over the animals—but does not specify that they are for food. "The laws of kashrut only come out later," said Farkas, "when he said it's clear that people are going to eat meat. So if you eat meat, here's the ethical way to eat meat." But she recalled Jonah arguing that if one were to go back to the source, "we wouldn't eat meat at all." Farkas noted: "And so that's when we became vegetarians."

As Farkas, Goldman, and their three sons embarked on their vegetarian journey, they experienced "some culinary disappointments" along the way. So it was in 2012, when Farkas chanced upon an article on plant-based meat substitute Beyond Meat, that she asked her husband to get involved with the company. Goldman, the founder of the Honest Tea beverage company, had experience growing and scaling a business, so Farkas told Goldman that her birthday present would be "to help this company scale and deliver me a burger," she said, "because I really miss burgers."

In February 2013, Goldman joined the board of directors, and today serves as its chair. A soft-spoken man with a ready smile, he good-naturedly tolerated my critiques of a recent trip to the Coca-Cola Museum during our wide-ranging discussion (unbeknownst to me at the time, he sold Honest Tea Inc. to the Coca-Cola Corporation in 2011, and held a position in the company from

2015-19). He explained how Beyond Meat approximated the taste and texture of a genuine beef patty by doing an MRI of the real thing: The fats and the proteins that assemble to make a burger all come from the earth, he said; they simply go through the “effective bio processor” of the cow. The amino acids that form the proteins and the lipids that form the fats all originate in plants, so replicating it is a matter of understanding “the properties and the nutritional profile that give it the taste, give it the properties, and then replicating that,” he said.

Jewish authorities in recent years have been grappling with questions about whether to approve plant-based meat substitutes and certify them as kosher. In an [article on kosher imitations](#) of nonkosher meat, contemporary halachic researcher Rabbi Ari Enkin quotes the Talmud: “For everything God has forbidden, there is a permissible substitute.” He gives examples of permissible foods that work around dietary prohibitions, including the brain of the shibuta fish (supposedly porklike in flavor and texture). But Enkin also cautions that Jews are required to avoid situations where they may [give the impression that they are violating Halacha](#), even if they are technically within the bounds of kashrut: Enkin writes that observant Jews have previously been advised to display the packaging of food items like pareve ice cream and nondairy creamer, for instance, to indicate that they were acting within the bounds of Jewish dietary law when consuming these items alongside meat. But he concedes that “since such pareve alternatives have become so widespread, one is no longer required to publicize that the product one is using is pareve, as there is no reason to suspect otherwise.”

But Jews aren’t the only religious group grappling with how—or whether—to sanction plant-based meat.

Like the menu at PLNT Burger, many Beyond Meat products are both kosher and halal. Beyond Burgers were [certified](#) halal by the Islamic Services of America in 2021. While there are specifications for what makes a food or substance halal, “in simpler things like plant-based products,” said ISA Vice President Timothy Hyatt, “we’re not worried about the meat aspect,” due to the fact that in strictly plant-based foods, there are no alcohol or animal-sourced ingredients involved in even the most minute components—including coloring and flavoring, which Hyatt said ISA can and does verify.

In addition to a [rigorous review](#) of their animal product and alcohol content, ISA also reviews foods to ensure that they comply with religious practice.

When it comes to a vegetarian dish, as long as there is no proven harm or meat-based ingredient or alcohol included, the default assumption is that it is halal, provided there is no specific religious ruling or scriptural prohibition against the item in question. “If something is reviewed and determined to be inherently or ‘by default’ halal,” Hyatt said in an email, “it should still be halal-certified for product manufacturers and for the benefit of halal consumers as a means of formal verification.”

“Tastes just like the real thing!” can be a problem. Hyatt said via email that ISA is concerned about encouraging the mimicry of consumption among Muslims, with imitation pork being a bright red line, even if it is halal-compliant, and lacking any trace of nonhalal subingredients. “Even though it may be halal, or permissible for a consumer to do on their own, as a certifying body, we’re not willing to take that step and certify,” said another representative for ISA.

A practical distinction can exist between what a halal-certifying organization is willing to sanction, versus the conscience of the individual consumer. What a practicing Muslim believes is permissible, or a scholar of Islamic law might tell an individual Muslim is permitted, can differ from a trusted authority’s responsibility to millions of consumers when it comes to conferring the weight of its approval to a product.

The decision can come down to naming conventions, especially for products headed for a wider international market that includes countries with more stringent halal standards. A halal-certifying body may not grant its imprimatur to turkey bacon, but will greenlight [turkey strips](#). Alcohol-free wine is [certifiably halal](#) for some certifiers, but others object to the “wine” designation. Pina colada or tequila sunrise flavoring may not actually contain impermissible ingredients, but to get halal certified, producers may be advised to rebrand as “coconut” or “tropical sunrise” to avoid any confusion over sanctioning alcohol. At ISA, a committee will review ethical, business, and religious implications of bringing a product up to its halal standards, to ensure that the result is in the best interest of the faithful, the market, and the company seeking certification in the first place.

I present Hyatt with a hypothetical: hop water, a nonalcoholic, calorie-free, hop-infused seltzer water. The better ones come pretty close to the taste of a crisp IPA. Would it be a bridge too far for a beer company to hope for halal certification for its hop water? “It would take a committee roundtable,” said Hyatt, that would need to take into account religious and cultural factors. “The

tradition is that, when you deal with some of these more complex modern-day issues that come up, where we don't have necessarily a clear-cut text for, the way you approach that from a religious standpoint, is you have a religious committee of scholars, not just one person" making the determination, said an ISA rep.

When the Lubavitcher rebbe spoke at a *farbrengen* the day after the first moon landing in 1968, he used the astronauts' extreme training regimens to make a point about religious dietary restrictions. The men of Apollo 11, he said, "were told exactly what, how much and when to eat, when and in what position to sleep, and what shoes to wear." Should they refuse, they would be reminded that at stake was \$1 billion in taxpayer money. No one disputed that this type of micromanagement of the men's personal lives was a reasonable arrangement, he argued, so when it comes to eating even a bite of nonkosher food, he asked, "what if at stake is not a billion-dollar scientific project, but the divine purpose in creation?" For followers of nearly any religion with dietary laws, this viewpoint represents perhaps the platonic ideal of adherence: uncompromising, but coming from a place of authentic devotion, and an earnest desire to take one's part in the divine ordering of the universe. The reality, however, is often somewhat different, with even some religious authorities yielding to the realities of the lives of the faithful—and to scientific progress.

Goldman and Farkas were eager to hear what I thought of my vegan cheeseburger. The patty is pretty close to an authentic burger, I told them, but the vegan cheese took some getting used to (the rebbe's astronaut analogy comes to mind again—like the freeze-dried ice cream supplied on space shuttles, if you can't have the genuine article, it's an acceptable substitute). Farkas said that one of the two synagogues to which they belong catered a dinner with PLNT Burger, and the rabbis were very excited to have cheeseburgers on the menu "for the first time in their lives," said Farkas.

I told Goldman and Farkas that as a Catholic, I've fed my family plant-based meat substitutes on church-prescribed days of abstinence from meat. In the U.S., church authorities have given the faithful pretty wide latitude when it comes to abstaining from meat since the 1960s. Noting that Friday, traditionally considered by Christians the day on which Jesus was crucified, had long been a day of penitential mourning within the church, the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops also observed that due to changing times, giving

up meat was no longer the personal ascetic practice it had been in leaner times when animal flesh was harder to come by. In a way, it was a concession similar to a contradiction Farkas identified between vegetarianism and the cultural mindset with which her grandmother grew up in a shtetl. “Meat once a week was a luxury,” she said. “And so this idea that you would somehow cut back on what’s a luxury, that goes against some of the culture” of the time.

The faithful were still required to view Fridays as mini-Lents, the U.S. bishops determined, and they would prefer that the faithful would continue to willingly forgo meat as a form of solidarity with both Jesus and Christian martyrs up and down the ages, and as “an outward sign of inward spiritual values that we cherish.” But the next best thing, they acknowledged, could be swapping out meatless meals for some other act that fulfilled the same intention behind the original meat prohibition.

“It would bring great glory to God,” the 1966 Pastoral [Statement](#) on Penance and Abstinence said, “and good to souls if Fridays found our people doing volunteer work in hospitals, visiting the sick, serving the needs of the aged and the lonely, instructing the young in the Faith, participating as Christians in community affairs, and meeting our obligations to our families, our friends, our neighbors, and our community.”

Nearly six decades later, a quick informal Instagram poll showed that, while some question whether plant-based meat that is so similar to the genuine article really counts as a penance (and acknowledging that they sometimes use meatless days as an excuse to go to Red Lobster), most Catholics I know see no issue with plant-based meat on Fridays.

“In terms of the meatless, Impossible Whopper: Whatever, I mean, you know it’s all imitation stuff, but I don’t think that’s in the same spirit of what fasting or abstaining from meat is all about,” said Chicago priest Tom Hurley in [a 2021 article](#) on eating plant-based meat during Lent. But even a statement from his own archdiocese elsewhere in the article admitted that “losing the spirit of sacrifice does not equate to plant-based meat being impermissible.” Indeed, Catholic vegetarians and vegans are not required to undertake any additional penance on days of abstinence from meat under [canon law](#).

Nor are Catholics the only non-Jews or non-Muslims who have dietary workarounds for restricted items. Some Latter-day Saints responded to my Instagram question about religious restrictions with some creative

alternatives. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prohibits its faithful from “hot drinks” (understood to mean coffee and nonherbal teas) as well as alcohol, if they wish to partake in temple worship or baptism. (Despite a popular perception, Latter-day Saints are permitted caffeine in other forms; Brigham Young University even started selling caffeinated soda on campus in [2017](#).) They told me about Perk Energy, which offers caffeine-free chai tea and cocoa alternatives, and low-caffeine coffee alternatives—prominent LDS influencers are included in their curated Instagram follows—while coffee alternatives [Postum](#) and [Pero](#) are more traditional favorites. All three companies tout their natural ingredients in their marketing. Like mocktails, another popular [alternative](#) for teetotaling Latter-day Saints, natural ingredients are something that are enjoying wider purchase beyond their religious community—“sober” drinks, alcohol-free drinks that approximate the taste (and sometimes the buzz) of alcoholic beverages, are increasingly [popular](#).

If more people are making the same lifestyle choices as the religiously observant, are we approaching a point of clean-living convergence?

The straight-edge singularity may be a long way off.

As we spoke during what media reports call the hottest summer on record, Goldman discussed the ecological benefits of plant-based meat, which [purports](#) to use fewer resources and emit fewer greenhouse gases than livestock. But even as the seas appreciably warm off their coasts, Americans [do not rate climate change as highly on their list of concerns](#) as kitchen-sink issues like health care and the economy. Amid inflation and threats of a recession, imitation plant-based meat sales have [slowed](#) in recent months. Beyond Meat posted a 30.5% year-over-year decrease in net revenues in its most recent financial results [report](#).

In an uncertain economy, in the 21st century U.S., forgoing meat can be seen as the luxury—a status signifier for elites.

But as fair-weather vegans abandon plant-based meat over concern for their wallet, the Jewish, Muslim, and Catholic PLNT Burger customers paying a little bit more for vegan cheeseburgers on a Friday continue on as a people set apart from the virtue signalers and the merely well-intentioned, by engaging with food as a practice that orients them and reminds them of the role they play in the divine purpose in creation.

Of course, Goldman wants PLNT Burger to be financially successful. “But,” he said, “we also always want to remind people that when they are eating, they’re making choices.” For Goldman and Farkas, giving up meat after Jonah’s bar mitzvah didn’t feel like a sacrifice, said Farkas. It’s more about a “mindset,” she said, calling it “a bigger commitment” that permeates your world view. “When you think about it,” she said, “you’re eating three times a day.”

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