

Interview with an ex-vegan: Tasha

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Tasha is a writer, lecturer, food rights and women's rights activist. She was born and raised in Saudi Arabia, living in Saudi her whole life, except while attending university and graduate school in the USA and the UK. She went vegan in 2007 for animal, environment and world hunger reasons, and for three years ran the vegan recipe site The Voracious Vegan, which VegNews magazine named one of the [Top 10 Vegan Blogs in 2010](#).

In November of 2010 she posted an entry called "[A Vegan No More](#)," about leaving veganism because of health issues arising from a diet of zero animal products. It's no secret that vegans don't like ex-vegans, but the reaction against Tasha's defection was especially fierce. Partially this was because her entry was so widely read and effective; many suffering vegans were inspired by Tasha's entry to question and leave the lifestyle that had previously ensnared them with its claims to moral obligation. Even worse from the vegan standpoint was that Tasha wasn't apologetic about her change. She did not think she had become a worse person by giving up vegan-ordained Compassion™, and in fact saw virtues to her new way of living that went beyond nutrition.

But that was two months ago. Has a combination of soul-searching and vegan death threats brought Tasha back to her senses? Let's find out.



How could you go from being so passionate about veganism to publicly and defiantly leaving it?

Many people mistakenly think my abandonment of veganism was an overnight decision, when in reality it was anything but. I had been feeling very sick and weak for a while, but when I went to the doctor they took blood and told me it was normal. I remember telling myself to ignore my deteriorating physical condition and celebrate the ‘hard proof’ that I was healthy and well. I trumpeted the good news to friends and family and gave all the credit to my ‘healthy vegan diet’.

It wasn’t until a few weeks later, after talking to a nurse friend, that I learned the basic blood panels for expats that I had thought to be comprehensive only check white blood cell count, cholesterol levels and not much else. So, I found another doctor and went through the process of requesting a thorough examination and insisting upon a complete blood panel. When I got the results and saw the deficiencies, I was devastated. I felt like such a failure.

It took me months of visiting doctor after doctor, feeling weak, depressed and miserable, before I finally made a change. I think many vegans underestimate just how life changing it can be to go through such a serious health crisis. I had been robustly healthy for my entire life up until then, so this complete physical deterioration was extremely devastating. Once I finally decided that I deserved to be healthy and embraced an omnivorous diet, my health returned within two months.

During this experience I was inevitably forced to rethink my ethics. After all, if some people need to eat animals and animal products to be healthy, how can it be so wrong? I was working closely with my friends and colleagues in the food rights community, global south advocates, agronomists, farmers and environmentalists as I reexamined and restructured my belief system. I found out that I had been mistaken about many of my previous beliefs, and realized that veganism had not only made me ill, but had also been an ineffective strategy for accomplishing my goals. So, what to the casual observer may appear to have been a dramatic, overnight decision was actually a very long and arduous process of regaining my health and reevaluating my beliefs.

Is there a big difference between you as a vegan and post-vegan?

The biggest difference is my health. I feel strong and energetic again. I cannot adequately convey to people what a night and day difference it is. I am simply well. That might sound basic and mundane, but people who have faced any sort of life-altering illness will understand how radically amazing it is.

If you are asking about my diet specifically, I still focus on whole, organic foods and try to get as much of it as I can locally. I don’t restrict myself to any dietary category; I just eat the foods that make me feel the healthiest and the happiest. The most glaring

changes are of course that I now eat meat, fish and egg regularly and I don't eat nearly as much beans, rice or tofu as I used to. As always, I eat plenty of vegetables, fruits (including lots of fresh veggie juices and green smoothies) and whole grains. And chocolate!

Have you been contacted by a lot of people who quit veganism because of “A Vegan No More”?

Yes! I have been contacted by hundreds, if not thousands, of people who have been overjoyed to see my post because it either describes their situation perfectly or it has given them the courage to abandon veganism and restore their mental and physical health. That has been the greatest thing about this whole experience. When I was going through my journey I had no idea so many people had suffered through the exact same thing. I am grateful that my story was able to touch so many people and that they now know they aren't alone in ‘failing’ at veganism.

I think the vegan community in general is guilty of ‘airbrushing’ veganism, by making it look like a perfect and easy diet for everyone. When I started feeling ill and questioning my vegan diet, it was hard to find any cracks in the vegan façade. We all know the drill – if you feel sick it's because you ‘aren't doing veganism right’. Of course, when you first get into veganism you are told it is the easiest thing in the world and you don't even have to think about it. Well, I did think about it. I took all the right vitamins and supplements, was constantly praised by fellow vegans for my outstanding demonstration of a healthy vegan diet, and I still couldn't make it work. Now I know how many other people experienced the same thing. Most of them stay quiet and never talk about it, but I'm glad I opened up so I could help other people. And I'm very happy to see a growing community of ex-vegans speaking publicly about their experience.

You also received angry comments, emails and death threats from vegans who were not so inspired. The most common death threat that vegans lodge against uppity ex-vegans is to say they should be killed in the same manner that farm animals are killed. Since the ex-vegan now eats meat that comes from animals killed in this manner, some vegans believe this would be a just punishment. Was there a common theme like that in the death threats you received?

It wasn't just death threats. My personal accounts and those of my family were repeatedly hacked, fake twitter and blog accounts were created posing as me and background checks were done on me and my web designer and his family. Someone even tried to contact my doctor to have my medical records released! Other people insisted that I was a fictional creation of the meat industry, fabricated to make veganism look bad, while others asserted I was the alter-ego of Lierre Keith or [Denise Minger](#). The paranoia and total break from reality that I witnessed among the people making these accusations was astounding.

The most frequent theme of the many death threats I received was that my family members and my companion animals should be killed in front of me in the way that factory farmed animals are killed. There were also threats of sexual violence made against me, which is a common silencing tactic used against women. It was also disturbing to see that not one prominent vegan blogger (many of whom I had considered friends) came out to stand against this and call for a reasonable, respectful dialogue. In fact, many of them continued to publicly perpetuate the lies and falsehoods spread by the violence-threatening hatemongers. I think that says something. I was also privately contacted by two very well known and much loved members of the vegan and animal rights community who admitted to me they were not vegan 'behind the scenes' due to health reasons. Unfortunately, neither of them stepped forward to make their admissions public after I made my announcement, which was quite disappointing.

Isn't that irresponsible of these vegan leaders? One of the reasons that vegans who are having trouble with the diet think that something is wrong with them and not wrong with veganism is that they see vegan leaders who have been doing it longer than them and are still thriving. If some of these leaders could not make veganism work for them, but don't admit this out of fear of ruining their careers or public images, doesn't this falsely and harmfully perpetuate the notion that veganism works for everybody?

Absolutely it is irresponsible of them! And it definitely falsely perpetuates the notion that veganism can work for everyone. When I first told people about this they demanded that I publicly out the vegan leaders who admitted this to me, but that is something that I just can't do. These people are my friends and I could never ask them to suffer through what I went through. They reached out to me and shared their stories so I wouldn't feel alone and they trusted me. I don't feel that I could ever break that trust, especially because so much of their professional life revolves around their status as vegans. I do not agree with what they are doing, and they know that I don't agree. But I am not in the practice of destroying people's lives. We all have to make our own choices in life, and I think before too long they will make the right one, too.

Why do you think so many vegans believe you must be a fictional creation?

I'm not sure, but I'm glad that they do because it's good for a laugh! I suppose it is a protection strategy, a way for them to completely 'explain away' my failure to thrive as a vegan so they don't have to consider that someone might have had a legitimate problem with the diet. During my experience it was very shocking to me how many vegans bought into these conspiracy theories and clung to the notion that there is a tiny cabal of vegan hating individuals who devote their lives to infiltrating the vegan community, posing as vegans, creating fraudulent medical studies and environmental reports, all while receiving paychecks from the meat industry. When vegans believe it is just a tiny group of rabid vegan haters creating all this furor it is much easier to ignore our claims and our

experiences. Conspiracy theories like that keep their worldview from feeling threatened.

Why do ex-vegans — people who changed their consumer behavior in the name of “the animals” for so long — receive death threats from vegans when people who have always and will always eat meat are more accepted?

I think it is because vegans think ex-vegans make veganism look bad. We post-vegans have been there, seen it, done it, rallied for the cause, and given our all for veganism... and still we've turned our backs. Unlike people who have never been vegans, we ex-vegans can't be as easily dismissed when we criticize the vegan diet because we've been there and we've got the scars to prove it.

After I made my A Vegan No More announcement, I was asked to do radio interviews on three continents, write articles for droves of magazines and newspapers, and appear in a documentary. I turned down all offers because I wasn't seeking fame or controversy; I had just wanted to publish my story on my own blog. But what I think vegans need to hear about this is that in every single instance the producers and editors that contacted me were interested in my story not because a vegan had returned to eating meat, but because a vegan had returned to eating meat and then had received death threats from the supposedly compassionate vegan community. My experience would have been unremarkable if it hadn't been for the outpouring of violent words from the vegans themselves.

Veganism is supposed to be about compassion. But is there an angry misanthropy that goes along with loving the animals that the rest of humanity eats?

I think that most vegans are good people with good intentions, just like anyone else. They believe that they are making the most compassionate choice and they mean well. While I think that yes there is an intrinsic anger in veganism, that same angry undercurrent exists in many subcultures, especially ones that feel they oppose the dominant paradigm.

I know that as a vegan I was angry. The world is a brutal hellscape of pain and death and misery when you are a vegan. The problem is it isn't just humanity that is causing it; nature is far more violent and bloody than vegans want to admit. As a vegan, the very cycle of life and death was monstrous to me. And I think it is to many vegans, and it is something they try to hide from. Now that I've accepted the logical fact that things inevitably must die for others to live, it is something I am at peace with.

I think a lot of vegans know, on some level, that what they are doing isn't really a solution. To loosely paraphrase Hemingway, it isn't workable — but it is pretty to think it is. I think many vegans have seen their health slowly decline and can feel that it isn't really a healthy diet. I also believe it is becoming obvious to many people that a vegan lifestyle in many ways relies upon an indefensible industrial infrastructure that is

destroying the world we claim to want to save. People know this, they sense it, they feel it on a very basic level, and that is unsettling. When someone like me stands up and admits it, I become a perfect target for the rage many vegans actually feel towards their own doubts and failings and fears.

Vegans tend to wish ex-vegans would not talk about veganism anymore. If the ex-vegan can keep quiet, they're still a bad person, but they can at least be tolerated. Not so the ex-vegan who discusses their experience and the problems they have with veganism. Why is it worse to change your mind and talk about it than to just change your mind and be silent?

This was the worst! You don't know how many people and vegan friends would say to me 'okay, I get that you were sick and now you are better and you need to eat meat to be healthy, but why'd you have to tell people about it?' It was enraging. It all goes back to the airbrushing of veganism that I talked about earlier. There is a willful blindness in the vegan community, a complete denial that people could ever have legitimate problems with the diet. Any negative experience is explained away with excuses that the ex-vegan obviously wasn't committed enough, or not taking the right supplements, or was only in it to be trendy. We ex-vegans who are vocal about our experience are loathed by the vegan community because we expose many of the unpleasant truths about veganism, which potentially prevents people from being recruited by the cause and makes it easier for current members to 'defect'.

Many vegans wanted me to tuck my tail between my legs and eat meat in private as I cried and loathed myself. Some even suggested that I only eat animal products that I really, really hate! It is this attitude that had hundreds of young women and men on the brink of eating disorders emailing me to thank me because finally someone had told them that they weren't 'wrong' or 'failures' or 'weak' for not succeeding with veganism.

I have always been passionate about food rights and the ethics of food. I was before I was vegan, while I was vegan, and I still am now that I am an ex-vegan. I don't see why that would change.

Can veganism feed into eating disorders?

I think it can become its own kind of eating disorder, yes, just like any severely regimented diet. Some people are predisposed to eating disorders and veganism can provide a socially acceptable way to monitor every piece of food that passes the lips and an easy way to refuse food when eating out with friends or family. In some cases, especially with people who are inclined to obsessive thoughts and actions, I think veganism can create a lot of tension and negativity. I have seen vegans become terrified and ill after finding out that they ate something that contained a trace amount of animal product, which is a very sad example of how veganism can come to be more about personal purity than saving actual animals.

I have also seen vegans who believe that veganism is what allowed them to escape their disordered eating. They say that because veganism is so naturally healthy and low-fat they can finally eat without restrictions and fear, and yet their blogs are chronicles of meticulously weighed out portions, right down to counting out how many pumpkin seeds they consume in one sitting. In these circumstances, sometimes it appears that veganism hasn't provided freedom from an eating disorder, just a slightly larger prison cell.

The Vegan RD Virginia Messina wrote a scathing entry that questioned your rationale for quitting veganism. One of the more unprofessional aspects of the entry, I thought, was that she went through your old tweets, saw that you were tweeting about bacon, eggs and dairy, and used this to imply that you couldn't have improved your iron levels through quitting veganism because these are all low in iron (even though you never said that these were the only animal products you ate). What did you make of her entry?

I wasn't aware of who she was, so I only skimmed her post and then just lumped it in with all the other silly posts being written about me at the time. I was quite amused by the fact that someone would search through thousands of my old tweets to find something 'incriminating', though! When I found out Ms. Messina is actually a respected member of the vegan community, it cracked me up!

I ate and tweeted about bacon a handful of times, and yet it is still all that any vegan can talk about! I live in a country where pork products like bacon are illegal, so when we do get to eat it, even longtime omnivores get excited. So, bacon has always been a rare treat in my life, and it was of course delicious when I got to eat it again. But, I tweeted and blogged far more extensively about eating fish, for example, and yet no one paid that any attention. I don't think it is we ex-vegans who are obsessed with bacon; I think it might be the vegans!

Messina didn't like how much you were enjoying animal products, and plenty of other vegans seem to find animal product consumption especially galling when done with enthusiasm. Does veganism encourage an anti-pleasure prudishness?

I don't believe the stereotype that vegans survive on soggy lettuce and dry crackers, after all I was a vegan for many years and I ate tasty food during that time. Most vegans have no problem with pleasure or delicious food; in fact, if they are anything like I was, they become obsessed with it because it can be more difficult to find in a plant-based diet.

However, I do think vegans don't want to hear about or admit how delicious animal products can be because that may weaken their moral resolve, or it may detract from their goal of making vegan foods look just as good as omnivorous foods.

Do vegans develop lower culinary standards?

I'm sure there are lots of vegans who truly prefer the taste of their vegan food to omnivorous food. However, being a vegan definitely lowered my culinary standards, in certain regards. Of course, vegans will say that is because I'm not a good cook, but the truth is I am a very good cook and my vegan food blog was loved and celebrated by the vegan community for its delicious recipes. But now, instead of trying to mimic or imitate certain foods or meals, I can just eat exactly what I'm craving. Whole new culinary vistas have opened themselves to me now that entire categories of food are no longer off limits.

Some vegan food is still as good as it ever was. My green smoothies are still delicious, just like salads, roasted vegetables, lentil soup, etc. But most meals and foods have drastically improved now that I'm an omnivore again. One glaring example that springs quickly to mind is butter. After eating vegan margarine for nearly four years, eating and cooking with organic pastured butter is one of the most sublime culinary experiences I can imagine. The food I eat now tastes better and it makes me feel better.

Do you think most vegans will eventually become ex-vegans?

Yes. I think for most people long-term veganism is a very hard diet on which to maintain optimum health. Is it possible for some people? Sure. Is it possible for most people? I doubt it.

Another reason I don't think most people will remain vegan is because I don't think that veganism provides adequate solutions to eliminating the innate problems that exist in our current industrialized food system, a system which is simply untenable, vegan or not. I no longer believe veganism can be practiced in a truly local and environmentally healthy way in most parts of the world because it would necessitate reliance on the same unsustainable pillars that support our current system. To live as locally and sustainably as possible while also maintaining our health will in most circumstances, in my opinion, require the inclusion of animal products in our diets.

Trying to foist a vegan diet onto every person and every ecological niche in the world is catastrophically ignorant. I don't think that in a society of humans that truly respected the complexities of a healthy planet, that large-scale global veganism would even be considered an option. It is unsettling how many vegans make claims about farming and the environment without any first-hand knowledge of the subject. The only reason so many people can advocate veganism is because most of those people live in highly industrialized communities and have no notion of what it takes to grow food and no experience living in equilibrium within their local foodways.

Is buying humane animal products better for animals than veganism?

I think the best thing we can do to confront the problems we, the animals and our planet face is to take part in organized political action. Consumer solutions are not the answer to this crisis. I try to remember that what I buy or don't buy isn't enough to fix anything. We need to come together to transform the entire system. If we don't, no matter how

many cartons of soymilk or veggie burgers we buy, we are still headed for catastrophe.

I believe we should grow and produce as much of our own food as possible. It is important to get control over our own food, locally, so we can grow what is right for us and for our land base. We must [confront the forces](#) that keep our land and our food in the hands of multinational corporations that threaten our right to feed ourselves and our families. When we do have to buy something, I would aim for it to be local, organic, humane and fair-trade, but to always keep in mind that shopping can't solve any of our problems.

It sounds very strange and is something that might only be understood by us ex-vegans, but I feel in a way that I'm more than ever living the principles of veganism now that I am no longer vegan. As a vegan I would get so caught up in the label that I would repeatedly make decisions that were not actually the best thing for animals. Buying a carton of soymilk that was produced partly in Europe and partly in South America and then flown to me here in the Middle East most likely killed far more animals and devastated a lot more environment than if I were to purchase a jug of locally and sustainably produced organic goat's milk.

When we make the choices that are best for our local ecosystem and our planet as a whole, we are doing the best thing for the animals. For animals and for the planet it is better if I eat locally, humanely and sustainably raised chicken eggs than if I buy imported and industrially produced egg replacer. For animals and for the planet it is better if I wear a locally and sustainably created wool jacket than if I buy an imported and industrially produced fossil-fuel-based synthetic coat. For animals and for the planet it is better if I eat locally and sustainably caught fish from plentiful shoals, than if I buy an imported and industrially produced vegan DHA supplement. Now that I've moved away from arbitrary dogma and embraced a more holistic and realistic viewpoint, I feel that I am able to live far more sustainably, which is ultimately the best thing I can hope to do.

What is the worst thing about veganism?

The moral arbitrariness of the whole endeavor. For example, take the issue of caloric asceticism. Vegans say that killing animals for food is absolutely wrong, yet they admit animals die in the production of their vegan food. Vegans consider these animal deaths unintended 'collateral damage' that are unfortunate but necessary because, after all, they must eat to survive and they have chosen what they believe to be the path of least violence.

In response I ask: why in the interest of causing the absolute least amount of animal deaths possible are vegans not caloric ascetics? If they know that animals die in the production of their vegan foods, then why do they not limit themselves to only as much food as they need to survive? 2,000 calories a day or so should be sufficient. And of

course, no splurges or indulgences allowed, because that would mean the knowing support of unnecessary animal death. After all, every time a vegan eats something that they do not need to eat to survive they have decided that their gustatory pleasure is more important than an animal's right to live. So, why isn't vegan caloric asceticism the 'moral baseline'?

No vegan has adequately addressed this issue. They tell me that we all need some indulgence in our life, to which I say in that case they aren't that much different than the vegetarians they love to hate for being unable to give up their unnecessary indulgence of cheese. They then say it is their intentions that matter. They don't intentionally want those animals dead, after all. To that I say that their intentions don't matter to the animal that is killed. And besides, I don't eat meat because I want that particular animal to die. That animal's death is not my goal; it is only something that has to occur in order for me to eat their meat, collateral damage if you will. So, again, not too different. Vegans then usually say that someday in the future perhaps they will have perfected veganic farming and no animal will ever have to die in the production of their food so the current deaths are excusable. To that I say that maybe in the future scientists will have perfected in-vitro meat so no animal will have to die for my meal, so are the current deaths I cause excusable?

Such moral gymnastics! And the more convoluted the vegan defense gets the clearer it is how much of it only exists to appease their own anxieties. A lot of vegans go as far as veganism and then declare that 'moral baseline' far enough. Any further restriction is deemed unnecessary, but of course, not going precisely as far as veganism is morally corrupt and monstrous. It is fairly absurd.

Is there something religion-like about veganism?

As with many subcultures I think there definitely can be, yes. What veganism has in common with religion that other subcultures often do not have, is an overwhelming obsession with personal purity.

The strict rules and the us-against-them mentality that veganism fosters can definitely provide those who are seeking it with the rigid guidelines and unwavering moral boundaries of a religion. This black and white simplistic thinking isn't really beneficial or applicable in most real world scenarios, but it is immensely appealing to many people. For some vegans it seems like animals become trivial factors overshadowed by the lure of endless philosophical proselytizing. In a clear mirroring of many superficially religious people, for these vegans, following the dogma behind the vegan label becomes more important than actually living the ideals of veganism.

For example, I remember several conversations I have had regarding friends of mine who live in a situation where they buy almost no food from the store because they grow almost all of their own produce and supplement that with a small amount of wild

animals they hunt themselves. A vegan diet that consists of industrially grown produce and processed vitamin supplements surely causes far more environmental degradation and therefore animal suffering and death than my friends who live wholly in equilibrium within their landbase. And yet, according to many vegans, my friends are still violent and wrong and abhorrent.

What does veganism accomplish?

I think a great thing that veganism can do is encourage many people to move away from the Standard American Diet and include more fruits and vegetables in their diet. I was always a healthy eater before I became vegan, but as a vegan I discovered many delicious fruit and vegetable dishes I might not have otherwise eaten, and I now include them regularly in my diet.

But as an ex-vegan I have to say that I think one thing it accomplishes very well is to have us focus our time, energy, and money on consumer solutions that only rearrange the deckchairs on the Titanic. Mainstream veganism advocates ‘solutions’ that are at best band-aids over the current crisis, and ultimately reinforce our ecocidal industrialized food system. Arguing over trace amounts of egg whites in a loaf of commercially produced GMO-laden bread while our planet continues to self-destruct is not really an accomplishment to boast about. To heal the planet we need nuanced and adaptable strategies that recognize and respect real world complexities, not arbitrary and myopic moral guidelines that ultimately reinforce the system.

Do you see a connection between feminism and your new diet?

As a feminist activist, many vegans were shocked that I would go back to eating meat, because it is (in privileged Western societies, anyway) seen as obvious that veganism and feminism go hand in hand. I used to agree, and I saw my veganism as inextricably linked with my feminism. I now believe it is not inherently bad or misogynistic or patriarchal to eat meat. It is simply a fact of life that many of us need to eat meat to be healthy. You can't force ethics onto biological necessity.

I also now view veganism as something that can weaken and destroy the power of women. In many radical and indigenous feminist communities it is widely acknowledged that veganism has been quite an effective tool at weakening and silencing women, and provided women with an ethical justification for the disordered eating frequently inflicted upon them. Women and girls are always taught to deny our needs and our hungers at the expense of our health, and veganism allows us to do that while believing we are ‘saving the world’. We begin to silence each other and police ourselves and turn our potentially revolutionary power inwards until we are completely immobile, sick and ineffective.

If eating the food that keeps many of us healthy means we are all violent, patriarchal murderers, then we live in a truly messed up world. Just like so many things that are

natural and quite often beneficial, the act of eating meat has been tainted and damaged by the patriarchy, but that doesn't mean it is inherently evil. It isn't anti-feminist to eat meat, it isn't anti-feminist to nourish your body, it isn't anti-feminist to value your own health and do whatever it takes to protect it.

You temporarily took your blog down. What will be different when you put it back up?

After I made my A Vegan No More post, I kept the blog running for several weeks and made a handful of posts in that time. I took the blog down over Christmas so we could complete the url transfer and so I could focus on enjoying the holidays with my friends and family instead of moderating death threats.

I only intended to take it down for a short time, but once it was gone I found that I didn't miss it at all. After having an audience for three years, I realized I had grown weary of entertaining them. I loved blogging when I was doing it, but I think I might have reached a point where I'm ready to walk away. I also find that now that I am properly nourished and eating a healthy diet, I'm not as 'obsessed' with food as I was before and therefore not as interested in the world of food blogging. I'm not sure what I'll do yet, so I will leave my blog up in low-maintenance mode with the recipe index available and think it over for a while.

If I do start blogging again regularly it will have the same focus it always did – delicious food! But once I made my announcement and saw what a huge need there was for ex-vegans to talk openly and candidly about regaining their health, I might lean my focus a bit in that direction. I'd like to show people that it is possible to be healthy and happy after veganism.