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Interview with Mayim Bialik

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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Following is a transcript of an interview with **MAYIM BIALIK** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 213.

JASMIN: Mayim Bialik is currently seen starring on the CBS hit comedy, *The Big Bang Theory*, where she plays the role of Amy Farrah Fowler, a role for which she received an Emmy nomination in 2012 and 2013. When she was a kid, Mayim played the young Bette Midler in *Beaches*, the quirky Blossom Russo for five years on the NBC television sitcom *Blossom*, and also had guest roles on some of TV's most beloved shows of the '80s and '90s, such as *MacGyver*, *Webster*, *Facts of Life*, and *Murphy Brown*. She also appeared in Woody Allen's *Don't Drink the Water*, HBO's *Fat Actress*, and HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Recent appearances include recurring roles on *Secret Life of the American Teenager* and FOX's *'Til Death*. She has also been a guest on some of TV's biggest talk shows, such as *The View*, *The Tonight Show*, *Conan*, and *The Talk*, among many others. After *Blossom*, Mayim earned a BS from UCLA in neuroscience and Hebrew and Jewish studies, and went onto the PhD program in neuroscience. This coming week, she will release her second book, entitled *Mayim's Vegan Table*, published by Da Capo Press.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Mayim.

MAYIM: Good morning.

JASMIN: It is such a great honor for us to have you. We're such big fans of yours. I've been watching your outstanding career with awe since I was a kid, in fact, since both you and I were kids. And your successes, especially of late, are really incredible. So, when we found out you were vegan, it was like this amazing cruelty-free icing on this already beautiful cake that I totally wanted to eat. But when I found out it was vegan, I was like, "I'm gonna eat that cake."

MARIANN: This is getting very complicated.

JASMIN: Anyway, let's start at the beginning. When and why did you go vegan?

MAYIM: Let's see. Well, the beginning, I guess would be that as a kid I was a huge animal lover, and I always felt weird and guilty eating animals and animal products. But growing up in the '70s and '80s in the kind of family I did, there was no other option. And so I guess when I was 19 or so, I started cutting out meat and it just became a very gradual and slow process. But I started feeling much better, I guess not eating animals, and I was still eating dairy and eggs.

I cut out most dairy in college on the recommendation of a doctor because I had repeated sinus infections my whole life. And I've not had a sinus infection since, so I clearly had a pretty healthy dairy allergy that had gone honestly just unnoticed. So, I was feeling better in general. When my first son was born, he was allergic to any dairy at all that I ingested, through breast milk, so that was kinda the end of dairy. And then I read *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer about five or six years ago, and that was the elimination of all trace eggs or trace dairy, which was really all that I was still eating.

MARIANN: Wow, that's a great story, and I think it's so interesting that you had those impulses as a kid. And I think so many kids do, and yet they kind of let them go, but you kind of held onto them and let them inform your life. And we're so excited about your new book. Can you tell us what motivated you to write *Mayim's Vegan Table*?

MAYIM: Yeah. I mean, obviously there's a ton of celebrity cookbooks, and there are even some celebrity vegan cookbooks, and I own those. But I write for a website called Kveller, and I would often share that I had veganized this recipe or veganized that recipe. And a lot of the recipes that I would share about were ones that were Jewish recipes from my childhood that people had assumed if you can't make them exactly as they are, there's no point in eating them. And I really wanted to sort of preserve those flavors in my life and for my kids, and so I just started veganizing things. And I got a tremendous response from readers who wanted me to share these recipes.

So, that's kind of how it started. It started with really people's interest in hearing actually what I eat and what I feed my kids, and that's precisely what we've done. I didn't want to write a fancy celebrity vegan cookbook with ingredients that you've never heard of or can't get. I wrote the text to try and reflect the gradual changes that a lot of families make and that a lot of people can make even if they're not ready to go 100% vegan. I talk a lot in the written chapters about what it's like to be a vegan in a nonvegan world, and how I specifically manage that with children, 'cause it is an extra set of considerations. But the recipes themselves are the things that I actually most reliably make and that get the most positive response from nonvegans, meaning it's the recipes that I make that people say, "Really? This is vegan? I didn't know you could make this vegan."

So, yes, there's healthy stuff. Yes, we try and balance out the fun food with healthy stuff. But the emphasis really is on eating actual food that's good that you don't have to give up if you become vegan. And we try not to rely too heavily on meat substitutes or heavily on soy products. There's some of that in there, but a lot of it is just kind of all the common sense stuff that I've veganized, a healthy dose of sweets, and a lot of really good comfort food too.

JASMIN: Yeah. We were lucky enough to see the book already, and it's fantastic. And I totally agree with you that veganism is not about deprivation at all. It's about abundance, and your book is a perfect example of that. And you mentioned kids. I noticed that the dedication to the book is for your kids, Miles and Frederick.

MAYIM: Uh-huh.

JASMIN: Which are great names, by the way. Love those names.

MAYIM: Thank you.

JASMIN: How old are they?

MAYIM: They're five and eight, and totally vegan, and happy.

JASMIN: That's great. Well, so, how do you and they deal with eating and parties and events, and with other kids who aren't vegan?

MAYIM: Right. So, I address this specifically in some of the text chapters. There's a lot of kind of tricks that people with any sort of dietary restrictions learn. I was raised kosher, so that was a whole set of things that I had to learn as a kid. Some people have allergies, so that's something they need to learn. I think one of the greatest gifts we can all give our children no matter how we raise them is to teach them to appreciate simple food, and foods in their normal natural state. In that way, there's always something I can bring along. There almost always is something like that at parties for them to eat. I don't want to have the kid who only eats carrot sticks at a party, but I also -- I'm not willing to sacrifice the fact that we're vegan just because we're at a party and I don't want them to feel left out.

So, there was a stretch of time and there is a stretch of time when it can be rough and they can get upset. But I think one of the ways we handled it was to have something that they could eat, if not at the party then when we got home. I think making sure that vegan children have tons of opportunities to see the things that they can eat that are delicious and fun gives them a general worldview on being vegan that's not one of restriction and deprivation.

So, honestly, I happen to have kind of very reasonable children who I can reason with, and their dad and I both talk through all of these decisions with them about veganism and why we eat this way. And now that they're a little bit older, once we got through that kind of brief rough period, they totally get it. It doesn't mean that they want to watch the birthday cake being cut and devoured by all the nonvegan kids, so sometimes they stand off to the side. But it's totally fine for them. They know that on their birthdays, they get to eat the most awesome vegan cake ever, and cupcakes and truffles and whatever else they want.

JASMIN: Yeah, I have friends who have vegan kids who tell me that they give them vegan cupcakes to bring to these parties and they're frequently -- they look so much better and more magnificent than the other cupcakes. And all the other kids: "I want what they have!" So, that's good advocacy too.

MAYIM: Right, but I think also it's important to realize that especially like those big fancy store-bought, nonvegan, kind of fun cakes, it's true. There rarely are vegan equivalents of that, so I think it's also important to realize there will be times when your kid says, "I want what they're having." And you get to then have a non-emotional conversation, a nonjudgmental one saying, "That's not how we eat. That's how other people eat. And we have plenty of times that we get to eat our fun food, and I'm sorry but this is not one of them." And then he'll move on. And my kids love eating fruit, and they think strawberries are amazing, and that's really helpful for those times.

JASMIN: Mm-hm. You mentioned that you keep kosher. My brother keeps kosher, and they have the two sets of silverware. And every time I go visit them, they're very vegan-friendly, but I keep thinking, "Ugh, you could just have one set of silverware if you went vegan!"

MAYIM: Exactly.

JASMIN: Yeah. How does keeping kosher intersect with being vegan for you?

MAYIM: Well, I guess a lot of things are simpler. One of the reasons is if you're buying kosher products, they always have to be labeled with a kosher symbol, so it's actually really a good way for me to narrow things down. The word "pareve" means that something is not dairy or meat. The only thing I'd have to look for if a product is labeled "pareve" is if it has eggs. But it's actually really helpful. And if you live in a large city, even if you're not kosher, kosher markets are a wonderful place to find vegan food because the distinctions between dairy and meat are so strict that any product that is not labeled dairy isn't. And so, I actually went to a kosher restaurant last night. It was a meat restaurant, meaning they served meat but not dairy. And I could have the ice cream, the whipped cream. There was like a mushroom vegan cream cheese fritter. Like, it was amazing because I knew that if there's meat in a restaurant there can't be real dairy.

JASMIN: Mm-hm.

MARIANN: And some of those products were actually developed with the kosher market in mind, some of those dairy substitutes.

MAYIM: Absolutely.

MARIANN: And they've been a great boon for vegans.

MAYIM: Absolutely.

MARIANN: How about philosophically? Does the philosophy of keeping kosher inform your veganism?

MAYIM: This is sort of a hard one. There are organizations, large organizations, of Jewish vegans and Jewish vegetarians. Adam and Eve were vegetarian, and so a lot of people feel like that's sort of a pure state, to be vegan or vegetarian, if you're thinking biblically. I will say there's a tremendous amount of difficulty in the kosher industry, with kosher slaughter, I mean, with all sorts of things. But the actual basis of the laws of kosher-ness, of kashrut, were based in attempting to designate levels of respect and humanity for animals. Again, the way that vegans designate that is very, very different from the way kosher meat eaters do. But I will say that the original basis, and not always the way it's enacted, but the original basis for those laws was to give respect for animals. You're always supposed to feed your animals before you feed yourself. There's a lot of respect for animals in Judaism in very prominent places.

JASMIN: Mayim, how do you strike a balance between informing children about what's happening to animals raised for food so that they can understand why it's important to be vegan without actually traumatizing them?

MAYIM: A lot of this is knowing your kid and also having age-appropriate resources. Vegan parents that I know do it differently. Some of them are very graphic very early on. My ex and I found that that probably wasn't the best for our kids. But we never lie, and I think that's really important. You don't have to give all of the truth, but it's important to never lie to children. So, I also don't go to zoos and I don't go to circuses that have animals, so these are all conversations that I have with my kids. And a lot of times what I say is, it makes me really sad to see animals in cages. It makes me really sad to think about how animals have to live so that people can drink their milk and eat that flesh.

A lot of kids who aren't vegan have an age-appropriate reaction too. What do you mean, I'm eating a chicken? What do you mean, this is a fish? And my kids have absolutely had that. And my younger one is extremely sensitive, and gets very upset when he says, they have to kill an animal to eat it! And I said, yup, it makes me really sad too. And for us and him being five, that's very appropriate. And I think as they get older there are ways to introduce, like I said, age-appropriate information that doesn't kind of hurt their perception of how to function in a nonvegan world.

MARIANN: Yeah, parenting has a lot of tough issues and vegan parenting has some special ones, but obviously it's --

MAYIM: But it's also a really special set of opportunities. For me, it gives my kids a real consciousness that they are part of a larger world. The world is not about them and what video game they want to play and what kind of fancy sneakers they're wearing. They're part of a global community of people and animals and an environment, and we are responsible for that. And that's a tremendous ethic also in Judaism, that we are responsible for repairing the world. So, I think veganism is a wonderful opportunity to introduce larger, age-appropriate concepts to children that really do take them out of the kind of bubble that in Western society we're so used to them living in.

MARIANN: Yeah, I love that perspective, and it does mean that veganism does add so much to your life and to your parenting and to your kids' lives. Can you tell us about the -- I'm hoping I'm going to say it right -- Shamayim V'Aretz Institute?

MAYIM: Oh. Yeah, Shamayim V'Aretz, yeah. This was, as I mentioned, there are Jewish organizations that place veganism kind of at the forefront of their philosophy. And Shamayim V'Aretz, which I was kind of part of starting up -- I'm not so much actively a part of it now, just 'cause I do a million other things. But the rabbi in charge of that is Shmuly Yanklowitz and he's a very prominent vegan. It's a huge part of his life. And I think it's important to point out that there really are no rules about how to be vegan. You can be an Orthodox Jewish vegan, you can be a secular vegan, you can be a Christian vegan. There's all kinds of vegans, and it can work into really any worldview.

JASMIN: Mm. That's fantastic. I completely -- I love it. I saw a video you put on the website for that. It was sort of like --

MAYIM: Oh yeah.

JASMIN: Can you -- what was it called? It was kind of like the "Shit Vegans Say," but it was --

MAYIM: That's right. It was, "What Kosher Meat Eaters Say to Vegans." And it was -- yeah we took all of -- And that was literally compiled from a list by vegan Jewish friends of mine of the stupid things that people say to us, like --

JASMIN: It was amazing.

MAYIM: Yeah, it was really funny. We had a great time doing that.

JASMIN: Your role on *Big Bang Theory* has been an enormous success. In what ways are you and Amy similar, and in what ways are you different? And do you think that she will ever be vegan?

MAYIM: It's funny because in all of the scenes where we eat, I'm always eating vegan food. You can even go ahead and look. The head of our props department knows to only give me plain salad, and if he doesn't have a nondairy dressing just to leave it dry. So yeah, my character -- I never eat pizza or anything like that, it's never even on my plate in scenes. So, my character and I are similar in that we're both scientists and we approach the world scientifically. I'm socially awkward in different ways than Amy is. She's kind of an exaggerated caricature I guess.

JASMIN: Well, she's great. I love Amy, too. And I guess as our final question, Mayim, so many people feel that they don't have time to be vegan. And a lot of our listeners are already vegan, so they're working on how to deal with it when they're told that by their family and friends. Your life must be insanely busy. Can you speak to that a little, and let us in on how, given your busy schedule, you find the time to cook?

MAYIM: Yeah. I mean, honestly, I don't get to cook as much as I like to, so I often eat simply. The recipes in the book are things that I often make once a week or twice a week, or if I'm hosting people or if I have kids. But -- and I talk about this in the book -- a lot of the way that many vegans eat, whether we're working moms or single people, many of us choose to eat simply for a lot of the day and a lot of the week. It's inexpensive, it's healthy, it makes sense. I do like smoothies. I like enjoying raw fruit and raw vegetables with dip, things that are easy to sort of take with me to work and when I'm around. But yeah, it's true, some of the more complicated things, I'm not making on a daily basis. One of the great things about a lot of the recipes I present in the book is that they are freezable, and they're freezable in portions.

I don't have a chef, I don't have a nanny, I don't have a housekeeper. I don't order food from some fancy food service. I literally feed myself and I feed my kids -- obviously I share custody of them, but my ex and I both feed them as well as we can. But it often does mean that we have bean and rice burritos with veggies. And to me there's nothing wrong with that. And I remember a couple weeks ago, I didn't really have much in the house and we had eaten a late lunch and it was kind of like my boys weren't really hungry for dinner. I literally - they had like a rice cake with nut butter and like two different fruits cut up and a pomegranate. And I looked at this dinner and I thought like, this is not a good mom dinner. And they devoured it, and they loved it. And I was thinking, you know what? When you're vegan, sometimes breakfast meals look like dinner meals. You have to be open-minded. You have to look at nutrition by the week and not by the day.

MARIANN: And that was a much healthier meal than a lot of kids are eating for dinner.

MAYIM: Seriously! And like, I kind of felt bad. But I'm thinking, it's true. If I took my kids to any restaurant and ordered from the kids' menu, it would either be a hot dog, right, mac and cheese, or pizza. And they were eating healthy stuff that they enjoyed. So, big deal, it looked like breakfast, you know?

JASMIN: Right. Well, that kind of makes it fun in a way. It's like some kind of game.

MAYIM: And like I said, it was my judgment on like, is this a proper meal? Like, yeah, that's a proper vegan meal. It's okay.

JASMIN: Yeah. Well, you might not find the recipe for rice cakes and nut butter in *Mayim's Vegan Table*, but you'll find a whole lot of amazing, amazing ones, and this is my new favorite.

MAYIM: And it is in the snacks section.

JASMIN: Yeah, exactly.

MAYIM: I do mention it in the snacks section.

JASMIN: Yeah. We love you and your new book. And I know that this is gonna become a staple for so many people who care about parenting and care about making the world a better place, as you do, Mayim. So, thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House.

MAYIM: Thank you.

JASMIN: That was Mayim Bialik, and her book is called *Mayim's Vegan Table: More than 100 Great-Tasting and Healthy Recipes from My Family to Yours*. And it will be available this week, starting on February 11, 2014.