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Interview with Yossi Wolfson

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **YOSSI WOLFSON** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 193.*

JASMIN: Today on our podcast we have Yossi Wolfson.

MARIANN: I just love Yossi Wolfson. He is one of the finest human beings I know.

JASMIN: He really is. And he was actually visiting New York from Israel, where he lives. Oh, and by the way, Yossi is of no relation to David. I just thought I would throw that out there, but David is another phenomenal animal rights activist, and Yossi is as well. Something about this word “Wolfson.”

MARIANN: Well, “wolf son.”

JASMIN: Actually, we went over Marisa and David’s new apartment recently, and they have a little new baby. He’s turning one soon. And they have this new wallpaper in his room that’s wolves because he’s the “wolf son.”

MARIANN: Yeah, well, if you’ve got a name like that you want to do everything you can with it.

JASMIN: Yossi Wolfson does everything he can with his animal activism. He’s actually one of the founders of Anonymous for Animal Rights. And Israel has been really leading the charge as far as changing the world for animals. And we actually got to hang out with Yossi in our living room, which was totally surreal, and Rose loved every second of it almost as much as we did. And I’m so excited to bring to you this amazing interview with Yossi Wolfson.

And I do want to remind you that thanks to Amanda and Helen, our two lovely volunteers, we do offer transcripts of our podcast episodes now. So if you go to [ourhenhouse.org](#), under the About section, you’ll see the podcast transcripts. We don’t have all of them because we just started doing them a few weeks ago. But we are going -- and they’re just of the interview. So, if you want to read the transcription of Yossi’s interview or of any of the ones from the past few weeks, just go over there. They are up within a week or so of the episode, so it might not be up right away because we have to give Amanda and Helen time to actually listen to the episode rather than guessing at what the guests say, though that would be kinda funny. But that would be wrong. And here at Our Hen House, we don’t like to do things wrong, which is why we interviewed Yossi Wolfson.

Yossi Wolfson is an Israeli attorney who has been involved with the animal rights movement since the 1980s. After serving as the spokesperson for the Israeli Society for the Abolition of Vivisection, he cofounded Anonymous for Animal Rights, which remains a very prominent and proactive Israeli animal rights group. It can be found at anonymous.org.il, where you can also find a tab for the site in English. Currently, Yossi, while remaining very active in the work of Anonymous, serves as the coordinator for Animals in Agriculture, and a member of the legal department at Let the Animals Live, and is on the board of the Jewish Vegetarian Society in Jerusalem.

Among the campaigns that he has worked on were the successful efforts to ban animal circuses, animal dissections in schools, force-feeding of geese and ducks, veal crates, and more. According to Yossi, his activism includes important work such as leafleting, lecturing, and washing the floor in the Vegetarian Community Center, as well as more boring stuff such as legal action and lobby work. Yossi was born in Jerusalem, where he still lives, and studied law and philosophy at the Hebrew University there. For an additional glimpse into Israeli animal rights activism, in addition to Anonymous, he also recommends that people visit animal-tv.org.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Yossi.

YOSSI: Thanks for having me here.

JASMIN: I can see that Rose is trying to French -- get to first base with you. Are you okay with this?

YOSSI: Totally, we'll have to see how it goes.

JASMIN: Rose just skips the first date and goes right into tongue. We're so excited to be here with you right now. We follow your work, and of course you're visiting from Israel, and we just had a delicious macrobiotic meal. And now you're here in Our Hen House, live and in-person, and we'd love to talk to you about some of the work you've been doing in Israel as well as the scope of veganism in Israel. We just had a fascinating conversation at dinner, and I'm hoping that we can consolidate that conversation into 20 minutes or less, and bring it to our podcast listeners, who I'm sure -- Rose is trying to seriously get up in your grill -- who I'm sure will be as fascinated as we are.

MARIANN: Yeah, absolutely. I think there's really a lot going on in Israel, and I really relish this opportunity to find out more about it. But first of all, can you tell us a little bit about Anonymous for Animal Rights, an organization that is really a major force in animal rights in Israel, and that I think you were with from the beginning?

YOSSI: Yeah. Well, Anonymous started actually without me in the end of the eighties as a group of teenagers. But it was reformed and registered as a society in 1994, and I think one of the best things about it was that it was always very much a grassroots group. It was -- the idea was to be a platform for people to do their own stuff about protecting animals, and getting veganism. And well, in the first years there was a lot of anti-fur, anti-vivisection, all that stuff. And many of the groups that are working in Israel today, like of course Anonymous for Animal Rights, which is like the biggest one, but also, 269, that many people might know, and a new group called Vegan-Friendly, and few other groups and just individuals, Animal TV. But many of them have roots in this nineties grassroots work.

JASMIN: Yeah, it sounds like in so many ways Israel is really at the vanguard of the animal rights movement these days. What is Anonymous working on these days?

YOSSI: Well, of course, I'm not sure that we are a vanguard. We learn a lot from America, for good and bad. But it is fascinating what's going on, like we're sometimes overwhelmed.

So, Anonymous for Animal Rights, what do they do now? There is of course the main issue, which is promoting plant-based diets and helping people who became vegan recently to continue in being vegan, give them tools, show them the availability, give them ideas of how to make it sustainable and not fight with all the society around them. We go to schools for education, humane education. I think last year about 50,000 students participated in these lectures, and these are the lectures that Anonymous gave directly and not through distributing stuff for teachers.

And there are the lobby work against battery cages, against gestation and farrowing crates, for sows in the pig meat industry, and now we have this bill to ban the sales of fatty liver. And force-feeding of geese and ducks is already banned in Israel. We don't have it since 2006. But we found out that we do import fatty liver, especially from Hungary, so we thought that if you cannot do it, you should not be able also to trade in it and to consume it. And this is an interesting issue.

MARIANN: Yeah, foie gras is a really interesting issue. It is here, and we're really keeping an eye on what's going on in Israel regarding foie gras, and the attempt to have it banned from being sold as well as the ban against producing it. And one of the things I'm most fascinated about is the recent protest that you have participated in, which we've seen these kind of protests around the world. But your story of the part you played in it is particularly fascinating, and the reaction of people to it. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

YOSSI: Yeah. You refer to an idea that really started in Spain of a large group of people standing very silent and everyone with a shirt saying, "All animals are equal in their suffering," and holding corpses of dead animals from institutional exploitation. We did it with -- we had dogs and we had cats, we had fishes, we had rats and a rabbit, and of course a lot of chickens and turkeys. And I saw that in Spain, they also had lambs, but we didn't get to have these corpses. And it was a very, very strong experience, I think, both for the people who went through the street and saw it, and the people who were holding these animals in a very, very respectful way. The idea was really to say we're surrounded with dead animals all the time, like there are dead animals like that all around us in shops, but giving them this respect and mourning that they deserve.

I didn't hold an animal, a dead animal, but my role as a lawyer was to make them appear decent because we collected the corpses over a period of time and they were held in freezers. So, when they come out, they don't look very appealing, and you want people to feel empathy to them. You want them to look, not beautiful, but something that you can see that it is a dead animal and not just junk. So, it was a very, very -- something one remembers, you know working with a fan on the feathers of frozen chicken and make it start to look not like frozen meat but like dead chicken again. And yeah, it's an experience.

JASMIN: So, I know a lot of people would be wondering where the corpses were obtained. Where did you get them for this protest?

YOSSI: Well, if you go to any farm, you always find piles of dead animals. And you just collect the ones that smell less.

JASMIN: Did you think that there was an art component to this, I would say, this installation of people? I feel like there's a really strong arts sort of, almost like found art. Do you know what I mean?

MARIANN: Yeah, there's something that crosses between performance art and protest in this and some of the other protests we've seen coming out of Israel, which I find really, really effective.

JASMIN: Did you have that connection as well or am I extrapolating?

YOSSI: Yes and no. Like, when you talk about art, the force of art is that it doesn't go only through the mind or the brain or the ration but goes into the stomach. It goes to your emotions and it goes around your norms and social training and et cetera. And in this respect, yeah, we used methods that come from art. And there is a whole segment of art that is using animals to say something that is not about animals. And it can be kind of exploitation, and I would like to dissociate myself from this genre of art. But clearly art can be a very, very, very strong way to convey ideas and feelings and empathy and go beyond people's defensive mechanism.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think that's a really good point, the differentiation between using animals to say something else, and just the way this protest takes these corpses of animals and lets them reach people in a new way. What was the reaction of people on the street to this protest?

YOSSI: It was very positive. We were a little afraid that people will become defensive and angry and aggressive. But nothing like that happened. Most people were very, very moved. Some people really cried. The people who didn't respond like that just tried to ignore it or to go fast by and try to ignore it. But I think the main response was being moved.

JASMIN: While you were here visiting the U.S., you took a trip over to Atlanta to give a talk at a synagogue about Judaism and veganism. I'm curious to talk to you a little bit about some of the things you discussed during your talk. Were some of the points that you were making based in the Old Testament and some messaging that can be gleaned from that as far as veganism and animal rights?

YOSSI: Yeah. Well, I used texts from -- starting with the Old Testament in the Bible, and I think the latest one was by Agnon, a Jewish writer who got the Nobel Prize for literature. And you cannot say that Judaism is like veganist culture. I know that some rabbis at least ate meat sometime in some generation. But there are very strong voices in Jewish texts that un-favor meat-eating, that -- like, I really loved -- there's a passage like, according to the Jewish text, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are vegan. And only after were Noah and his sons were allowed to eat meat.

And then there is a passage allowing them eating -- like, God allows them to kill and eat animals. And God, in this very condensed passage, says, "Yeah, well, you may eat animals, but don't eat the blood. Blood is life, and you don't eat the blood. And you don't eat the blood. And by the way, if any one of them sheds the blood of a human, that's really not good. Like, he should be killed as well." So, actually it is a text about meat-eating and

murder in the same passage, and using the same word, and the “blood, blood, blood” just returns and returns. And it’s not really something that looks upon meat-eating as normal.

And you can find such texts through the Bible and through the Jewish commentators through all generations saying eating meat makes people cruel, butchers are the worst people of all, they’re evil. And you can find other texts as well. But so many people are religious. Personally, I’m not. But for so many people, religion means a lot, and we need to find ways to approach them on their own grounds, and not only in Israel and America. Like, throughout the world, I think that you have so many cultures that have very strong inclinations towards plant-based diets. And if you talk to them from their own biases and from their own culture, and not saying like, “We in the Western culture, we found out that veganism is good. You people of India, you’ve been eating vegan for many years, but now listen to us.” There’s a chance we need to learn how to be more cultural-positive.

MARIANN: I think that it’s a really important thing for us all to recognize, that there are at least respect for animals, if not actually a complete devotion to a vegan diet, but at least respect for animals in so many different cultures. And yeah, I agree that we have to mind that.

But I know that veganism is kind of on the upswing in Israel, and I’d really like you to tell us more about that. And I’m not sure that that would be rooted in any kind of a particular Judaism or -- because I know that Israel is a very secular society, except when it’s not. And I’m curious to know, where is this coming from? And describe it for us a bit, ‘cause it’s very exciting. And where is it coming from?

YOSSI: Well, especially in the last two years, there was a really explosion of vegan -- people who become vegan and vegan opportunities. I’ve been out to the States three weeks, and I heard there was a new vegan restaurant in Israel in this time, and they really expand. And non-vegan chefs, non-vegan like heavy meat-eating chefs, now do vegan dinners with a person named Ori Shavit. She has a blog named Vegans on Top. And in Hebrew, it’s actually, “Vegan Girls Enjoy it Better.” And she does work with heavy chefs and does vegan dinners with them. And we have this group called Vegan-Friendly that gives this tag that restaurants can put, saying, “We’re vegan-friendly.” And restaurants change their menus so that they can get this tag. It’s not like if you have one vegan option, you can get it. You have to have varied vegan options like throughout your menu to get this tag. And restaurants will go all the way to do it. We have a lot of celebrities becoming vegan. We have vegan news all the time.

I don’t really know how it happened. Probably, I would like to attribute this to the grassroots work, to the emphasis of letting every person do his own stuff, what he likes, and go with his own initiative. And the thing that’s really maybe like changing -- there’s a group I mentioned, Animal TV. They do a lot of video activism, both on the internet and not on the internet. And they translate stuff from English. And they translated a lecture by Gary Yourofsky, and they showed this lecture, for some odd reason, catches Israeli public even more than it catches here. And they started promoting it. They promoted it under the presumptuous title, “The Best Lecture You Would Ever See,” and it got like--

JASMIN: Zillions.

YOSSI: Zillions, six hundred thousand views for the Hebrew translation, and we have six million people or something like that. But I don't think this is the reason that veganism caught in Israel. I think this was the right thing in the right time done by smart activists that found the opportunity. Generally speaking, we have a lot of good people doing the work, and we have a society that may be eager to absorb it, maybe, maybe because we're not so good in other aspects.

JASMIN: Well, one thing I thought was really interesting that we were talking about at dinner is that in Israel, you said that veganism is based largely in animal rights reasons in the mainstream. And here, I think that veganism in the mainstream is based largely in health. Would you agree with that?

YOSSI: Yeah. I don't know why, but yeah. I agree.

JASMIN: And I'm not trying to make you like the be-all and end-all expert on animal rights issues in the U.S. and in Israel, but I would really like your opinion on something. And obviously, you've been working on these issues for a very long time, so you kind of are in many ways a world-renowned expert on these issues. So, not to put you on the spot, Yossi, but what would you say is one thing that the U.S. could learn from the animal rights movement in Israel, and one thing that the animal rights movement in Israel could learn from the U.S.? Am I completely putting you on the spot here?

YOSSI: Yeah. I'll say something without being an expert. I think that, well, we learn a lot from the U.S. Probably one thing that people in the U.S. might want to adopt, if they can, is that, we talk to each other, almost everyone in the movement talks to each other, even if it is maybe under the table, and we help each other. So, if someone has a campaign and someone has the resources that could help this campaign in terms of media relations or anything, we'll help each other. And we don't say that others are doing bullshit.

JASMIN: So you mean you're not just fighting each other and stabbing each other in the back? Really?

YOSSI: No, no. Like, you can check on me, maybe I'll come to Israel and you will get the news that I was stabbed. But no, we don't do it so much. I think, on the other side, there's a lot of things behind the work that is going on here. One thing that really inspired me and I really want to try to do in Israel is the institutional work for reduction of meat consumption. Like, we have things like Meatless Monday in Israel, which is very, very successful. And we have this, as I said, about like restaurants giving vegan opportunities. But the idea of like going to a corporation and saying, "Why do you have eggs in your cakes and why do you have skim milk in your chocolate? You can get rid of that." And just by that, like changing the total meat consumption in huge quantities, that's a nice idea that I like.

MARIANN: It's interesting because I think that one of the reasons that corporate campaigns have become the focus of a lot of animal rights groups in the United States is because legally, it's just impossible to get anything done, so a different route had to be found. So, I think in Israel they've had more success legally.

JASMIN: Isn't it kind of surreal that we're sitting here in our living room with Yossi Wolfson?

MARIANN: It is, and learning all about what's going on on the other side of the world.

JASMIN: Rose, however, is over Yossi. She said, “You know what? He might be cute and he might be smart.”

MARIANN: “But he’s not paying attention to me!”

JASMIN: Rose is the center of all things. Well, we really admire you and all of the work you’re doing. And it’s really an honor to have you here in Our Hen House, quite literally, and to learn more about everything you’re doing to change the world for animals over in Israel. And I thank you for everything that you’re doing, and for inspiring us so much. And I love that. “*Talk to each other.*” Can you imagine? Who knew?

MARIANN: No, I can’t believe that that’s a good idea.

JASMIN: Radical! Such a radical idea.

MARIANN: Not fight with each other? That’s just crazy.

JASMIN: Just -- we have to actually start a fight with Yossi right now just to prove him wrong. Yossi, thank you so much for joining us today.

YOSSI: Thank you very much. And nowadays you can listen to the Hen House in Israel, and it’s really inspiring. And it is an honor for me to be on your podcast, really.

JASMIN: That was the fabulous, *fabulous* Yossi Wolfson.