



THE HUMANE SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED STATES

# Commandments of Compassion: Jewish Teachings on Protecting Animals and Nature

*By Lewis Regenstein*

*A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast.  
—Proverbs 12:10*

**J**ews should take great pride in their centuries-long history of showing compassion and concern for animals and the environment—the first people in the world known to have adopted such teachings and laws. Thus have the Jews, charged with the mission of being “compassionate children of compassionate ancestors” and “a light unto the nations,” given the world, along with monotheism, the important legacy of compassion for other living creatures.

The Bible and Jewish law teach us to treat animals with kindness and respect and to protect nature and conserve its resources. Indeed, such teachings are fundamental to Judaism and its traditions. The rules governing the raising and slaughter of animals used for food are especially detailed. Their original purpose was clearly to ensure that such creatures are not subjected to

any unnecessary pain or suffering. Unfortunately, today's production and slaughter methods often ignore and violate the intent of such laws.

The massive suffering inflicted on billions of farm animals every year clearly violates the teachings of Judaism and cannot be justified by any person of faith and decency. If Jewish teachings were better known and followed, much of the destruction of the natural world and the suffering of animals would be eliminated, and this would be a better world for all of G-d's creatures—including humans.

## **The First Two Commandments**

The importance of animals in the Jewish religion becomes obvious in the very beginning of the Torah, the so-called Books of Moses that comprise the first five books of the Bible. The first commandments given by the Lord to humans and to animals concern the welfare and survival of animals and nature and human stewardship responsibilities toward them. So the Almighty must consider this a very important thing!

G-d's very first commandment (Genesis 1:22) is to the birds, whales, fish, and other creatures to “be fruitful and multiply” and fill the seas and the skies. His first Commandment to humans (Genesis 1:28) is to “replenish the earth ... and have dominion” over other creatures.

(Jewish sages have long interpreted “dominion” as meaning responsible stewardship rather than unconditional control over the Creation. Writer and publisher Roberta Kalechofsky, founder of Micah Books, points out that “[i]n the Bible, the Sun is said to have ‘dominion’ over the heavens. Dominion is often used in a variety of ways, none of which has the implication of unlawful or cruel power, but rather of a natural relationship.”)

Throughout the Book of Genesis, G-d looks with special favor on “the swarms of living creatures” He creates. G-d blesses them and repeatedly characterizes their creation as “good.”

On the Fifth Day, G-d creates the fish and other life forms of the sea (populations of which we are today rapidly destroying in every ocean of the world). The Lord blesses them, commands them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters of the sea,” and says, “Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creatures that hath life ...” (Genesis 1:20-22).

G-d pronounces all of the creatures He makes—the fish, whales, birds, cattle, “everything that creepeth upon the ground,” and the other “beasts of the earth”—as “good” in themselves (Genesis 1:21, 25). But when the Creation is completed and

united, the Lord declares it “very good” (Genesis 1:31), the suggestion being that He has achieved His will of creating a universe of harmony—a balanced ecosystem.

Later, when G-d makes his promise to Noah and generations to come never again to destroy the earth with a flood, He includes in the Covenant “every living creature ... the fowl, the cattle, and every beast of the earth ...” (Genesis 9: 8–17). He restates the Covenant a total of five times, which is an amazing example of emphasis in the Torah, showing the importance the Almighty attaches to the inclusion of “every living creature.”

### **The Bible Requires Kindness to Animals**

Kindness to animals is stressed throughout the Bible and is even required in the holiest of the laws, the Ten Commandments. G-d forbids us to make our farm animals work on the Sabbath; we must give them, too, a day of rest (Exodus 20:10, 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14). Indeed, through this commandment, the Jews can be said to have pioneered the concept of kindness to animals some 3,500 years ago.

The last verse of Jonah (4:11) describes how the Lord decides to spare the city of Nineveh from destruction, saying, “... should not I have pity on Nineveh ... wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons ... and also much cattle?”

Moreover, Psalm 36 states, “... man and beast thou savest, O Lord. How precious is thy steadfast love. ...” And Proverbs 12:10 suggests there are two types of people: “A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.”

There is even a suggestion that practicing conservation and compassion toward animals may ensure one of a long life. In a passage that is remarkable for an ancient agricultural society that gathered all it could from nature, Deuteronomy (22:6–7) says that if a person chances upon a bird’s nest with the mother sitting upon the eggs or the young and takes the latter, the mother should be let go “that it may go well with” that person and that he or she may live a long life.

And the prophet Isaiah (11:6–9) describes how the animals will be included in the blessings of peace on Earth when that ideal state is achieved: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion. ... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the Earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.”

## Judaism Forbids Cruelty to Animals

Judaism has strict laws forbidding cruelty to animals. An entire code of laws (“tsa’ar ba’alei hayim,” the requirement “to prevent the suffering of living creatures”) mandates that animals be treated with compassion. Jews are not allowed to “pass by” an animal in distress or animals being mistreated, even on the Sabbath.

As the *Encyclopedia Judaica* observes, “In rabbinic literature ... great prominence is given to demonstrating G-d’s mercy to animals, and to the importance of not causing them pain.” The passage continues:

Moral and legal rules concerning the treatment of animals are based on the principle that animals are part of G-d’s creation toward which man bears responsibility. ... The Bible ... makes it clear not only that cruelty to animals is forbidden but also that compassion and mercy to them are demanded of man by G-d.

The *Encyclopedia Judaica* sums up the rabbinical law by saying, “The principle of kindness to animals ... is as though G-d’s treatment of man will be according to his treatment of animals.”

Similarly, the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* observes that “[t]he Jewish attitude toward animals has always been governed by the consideration that that they, too, are God’s creatures ... [and] the obligation to respect and consider the feelings and needs of lower creatures. ... The non-canonical ... writings strongly urge kindness towards animals, declaring that one who harms an animal harms his own soul.”

The renowned Irish historian W. E. H. Lecky (1838–1903) writes in his monumental work *History of European Morals, from Augustus to Charlemagne* (1869) that “the rabbinical writers have been remarkable for the great emphasis with which they inculcated the duty of kindness to animals.” Two important works from the Middle Ages demonstrate this.

The 12th or 13th century Hebrew work *Sefer Chasidim* (or *Hasidim*): *The Book of the Pious* states: “Be kind and compassionate to all creatures that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in this world. Never beat nor inflict pain on any animal, beast, or bird, or insect. Do not throw stones at a dog or a cat.”

The 16th century *Code of Jewish Law* (*Schulchan Aruch*) clearly states that “it is forbidden, according to the law of the Torah, to inflict pain upon any living creature. On the contrary, it is our duty to relieve the pain of any creature, even if it is ownerless or belongs to a non-Jew.”

Modern day Jewish prayer books contain numerous admonitions on kindness to animals, such as the High Holidays passage of *The Union Prayer Book*: “Every living soul shall praise Thee. ... Thou rulest the world in kindness and all Thy creatures in mercy.” This passage is recited on every Shabbat and all major festivals. *The Gates of Repentance* prayer book service for the Day of Atonement states, “The Lord is good to all; His compassion shelters all His Creatures.” Observant Jews recite this verse, which is found in all siddurs (daily prayer books), three times a day.

The morning prayers said on the Sabbath include praising “the G-d of all creatures; endlessly extolled, You guide the world with kindness, its creatures with compassion.”

## **Protecting the Environment**

The obligation of humans to respect and protect the environment is another theme that appears throughout the Bible, often in references to just the kinds of problems we face today: the destruction of wildlife and habitat and the pollution of our food, air, and water.

In the books of Jeremiah (9: 9–11) and Habakkuk (2:17), the Lord warns against destroying nature and wildlife. Habakkuk specifically condemns “... the destruction of the beasts.” In both cases, the punishment is that the land is “laid waste,” just what we are doing today to much of our farmland, wilderness, and oceans.

Trees and forests are accorded a special reverence in the Bible, and one of the first things the Israelites are commanded to do when they enter the Promised Land is to plant trees and allow them to mature before eating the fruits in order to ensure that the trees are not damaged (Leviticus 19:23).

One of the world’s first and strongest nature-protection regulations is found in the Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 20:19–20), which forbids the destruction of fruit-bearing trees even when waging war against a city. The Jewish sages later extended this biblical law into a general prohibition (known as “bal tashchit”) against wasting or destroying anything unnecessarily.

In stressing the reverence humans should have toward the land, the Bible imparts a strong conservation message, warning against overusing natural resources. In Leviticus (25:2–7), the Lord commands that every seventh year “the land shall keep a sabbath unto the Lord.” The fields and vineyards shall

be allowed to rest, and what grows naturally will be shared with the wildlife, “the beasts that are in thy land.”

The Lord’s appreciation for the land is made clear in Leviticus (26:3–6), when He promises that, if humans obey His commandments, the land will reward them:

If ye walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them; then I will give you rains in their season, and the land shall yield her produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. ... And I will give peace in the land.

With our planet facing an ecological crisis of unprecedented proportions, the teachings of Judaism help provide an effective approach to addressing the environmental problems that threaten our future.

## **Influence on Christianity**

Jewish teachings had a profound influence on early Christianity and its Bible, known as the New Testament. Jesus, who is portrayed as an observant (if rebellious and reform-minded) Jew and well-read scholar of the Bible, repeatedly uses analogies and favorable references to animals in his teachings.

Jesus is quoted by two disciples as saying that even the “lowliest” of creatures are loved by G-d. In the book of Luke (12:6), Jesus says, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before G-d.” And Matthew (10:29) cites this passage accordingly: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.”

Jesus uses the strict Jewish laws requiring humane treatment of animals to justify healing a crippled woman on Shabbat, saying, “[D]oes not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger and lead it away to water?” (Luke 13:15).

Jesus’ disciple, Paul, perhaps the most influential of the founders of Christianity, often quotes Jewish teachings on animals. In his first letter to Timothy (5:18), Paul advises that those who preach and teach should be honored, “for the scripture says, ‘you shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain’” (Deuteronomy 25:4).

Many of the early Christian saints are noted for their devotion to animals, and for the first thousand years of Christianity, they are traditionally depicted as having close and friendly relationships with various pets and wild animals—

even wolves and lions! Several Christian denominations have established “Caring for Creation” and similarly themed programs based in part on biblical teachings. Jewish teachings on compassion for animals have thus profoundly influenced Christian doctrines and helped provide scriptural support to today’s environmental and animal protection movements.

The eminent historian W. E. H. Lecky observes that the Jews have the longest history of concern for animals of any people, writing “[t]hat tenderness to animals, which is one of the most beautiful features in the Old Testament writings, shows itself, among other ways, in the command not to muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn, or to yoke together the ox and the ass.” He notes the irony that the Jewish commandment that the ox be allowed to eat while working in the field was already some 2,500 years old when peasants tending grape orchards in 18th-century Sicily would have their mouths muzzled so they could not “steal” a grape.

## **Respect for Wildlife**

Appreciation for the sanctity of nature as the work of G-d has always been an important part of the Jewish tradition. There are special blessings that are to be recited when one beholds the beauty of lofty mountains, beautiful animals or birds, trees blossoming in the spring, rainbows, and shooting stars.

The Talmud requires that when devout Jews see a lovely animal, they must recite the special blessing, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, who created beautiful animals in His world” (Berachot 9). And a well-known Jewish blessing states, “Blessed art thou, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who created everything for His glory.”

The prophet Jeremiah (8:7–8) and the book of Proverbs (6:6–8, 30:24–28) praise the intelligence of birds, ants, and other creatures, as does Job (12:7–10), writing of “the beasts ... and the fowls of the air ... and the fishes of the sea. ... Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.”

Psalms extol the creatures of “this great and wide sea,” marveling at the glories of G-d’s Creation: “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom thou hast made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. ... The glory of the Lord shall endure forever.”

The Bible even suggests that the fate of animals will be shared by humanity. Ecclesiastes (3:19–21) stresses that if wildlife perishes, humans will not long survive:

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts, even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other, yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast ....

## **Treatment of Domestic Animals**

Jewish teachings have important implications for regulating how animals raised for food are kept and killed, especially if they are designated as “kosher.”

The people of early Israel were intimately familiar with wildlife and domestic animals, and rules were set forth regulating the treatment of cattle and other creatures to prevent any unnecessary pain and suffering. Oxen must be allowed to eat while they are working in the fields (Deuteronomy 25:4), and animals of different sizes and strengths could not be forced to plow together (Deuteronomy 22:10), as noted above.

The story of Rebekah at the well (Genesis 24:19)—an account that is repeated four times in this chapter—stresses the importance of kindness to animals as showing good character. When Rebekah shows concern for and draws water for the 10 thirsty camels of the servant of the patriarch Abraham, she is deemed fit to be chosen as the wife of Abraham’s son Isaac.

Similarly, the Lord uses the sad story of the killing of a family’s beloved pet lamb to show King David the error of his ways (2nd Samuel 12:1–10). And when Jacob called together his 12 sons—representing the 12 tribes of Israel—Simeon and Levi were castigated and chastised for crippling their oxen (Genesis 49:6–7).

The Talmud especially stresses the obligations of humans toward animals: “As the Holy One, blessed be He, has compassion upon man, so has He compassion upon the beasts of the field ... and for the birds of the air.”

The Talmud ordains that people must provide for their animals before eating anything themselves. According to Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, the duty to give nourishment to an animal first “is no casual statement: it was pronounced as binding law by the greatest rabbinic authority of later centuries, Maimonides” (Yad ha-Hazakah; Avadim 9:8).

The Talmud also states that one should not have an animal unless one can properly feed and care for it (Yerushalmi Keturot 4:8, 29a; Yevanot 15). Another Hebrew teaching is that “a good man does not sell his beast to a cruel person” (Sefer Hassidim 13c, 142). Rabbinical literature even says that one should not live in a city where the bark of a dog or the neighing of a horse is not heard.



## **Animals Must Be Allowed Rest on the Sabbath**

The biblical prohibition against working animals on the Sabbath exemplifies how important this concept is to Judaism. Full chapters of the Talmud and of the 16th century code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Arukh* (Orah Hayyim 305), discuss this law.

The revered biblical scholar Rabbi J.H. Hertz, in his authoritative work on Jewish law, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, cites the tenet that “to relieve an animal of pain or danger is a Biblical law, superseding a Rabbinic ordinance (the Sabbath Observance).” He also notes:

Care and kindness to cattle are of such profound importance for the humanizing of man that this duty has its place in the Decalogue [the Ten Commandments]. The Rabbis classed cruelty to animals among the most serious of offenses.

Rashi (d. 1105), the famous medieval French-Jewish scholar of the Torah and the Talmud, explains that the duty to let animals rest on the Sabbath means they must be free to roam in the fields on this day. Such a requirement could not of course be even partially fulfilled under the factory farming techniques that supply almost all American meat, egg, and dairy products today.

## **The Cruelty of Modern Food Production**

The renowned rabbi, physician, philosopher, and scholar Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, often called Rambam, 1135–1204), emphatically promoted kindness to animals. Considered by many to be the greatest of all rabbinic scholars and authorities on Jewish law, he writes in his famous book *Guide for the Perplexed*, “There is no difference between the worry of a human mother and that of an animal mother for their offspring.” He also notes that “there is a rule laid down by our sages, that it is directly prohibited in the Torah to cause pain to an animal.”

The great halachic authority Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895–1986), perhaps the most respected orthodox authority in America in his time, issued an authoritative “responsa” in 1982, stating categorically that Jewish law forbids the usual way calves are raised for veal. (In order to produce white veal, newborn calves are forcibly taken from their mothers, placed in small crates in which they can hardly move, and deprived of nourishment their entire short lives—all in order to make their flesh tender and pale. Some 800,000 calves are crated this way every year in the United States.)

Almost all of the animals eaten by Americans are raised in inhumane conditions, with some 250 million egg-producing hens spending their lives in small cages, never being outdoors and hardly being able to turn around. The billions of chickens cramped together on factory farms are unable to practice many of their natural behaviors, never being allowed to sun themselves and “bathe” in the dust, scratch in the grass for food, or even fully stretch their wings.

Paul Shapiro, senior director of the Factory Farming Campaign for The Humane Society of the United States, notes that “Americans raise and kill some 10 billion chickens, turkeys, cows, and pigs every year, the overwhelming majority of whom are confined in factory farms, where they suffer immensely.” Many of the animals are crowded into huge, filthy buildings, never seeing sunlight their entire lives, until they are crammed into trucks for the agonizing trip to the slaughterhouse—a journey that often takes 24 hours or more in extreme heat or cold—and denied water, food, rest, and relief from the ordeal. Such inhumane treatment of almost all of the animals raised for food in America raises the question of whether or not products from them can really be considered kosher and produced in conformity with Jewish law, regardless of how the creatures are slaughtered.

In “Why I Became Vegan,” Rabbi Adam Frank, spiritual leader of Jerusalem’s Congregation Moreshet Yisrael, explains:

In the United States, more than nine billion animals are killed each year for our food supply—the number equates to more than 25 million animals a day. It is not possible to breed, raise, handle, transport and slaughter this number of animals in a non-abusive way. Cruelty to animals is the industrial norm and not the exception. ... For a Jew who has spent years learning Jewish sources that indicate that part of the mission of an ethical society is to protect its weakest members, the decision to abstain from foods directly related to animal abuse is a mandate. ... A holistic reading of Jewish law prohibits modern factory-farming practices. ... My decision to abstain from the consumption of animal products is an expression of my adherence to Jewish law, and it expresses my disapproval and disdain for the cruel practices of the industry.

## **The Threat to the Planet**

Our meat-producing activities are so destructive that they threaten the existence of entire species of wildlife and of Earth's critical biological support systems that are essential to our own survival. Indeed, raising massive numbers of animals for food may be putting our very civilization at risk by, among other things, accelerating global warming.

The United Nations has reported that raising animals for food generates more greenhouse gases (in carbon dioxide equivalents) than all the cars, trucks, and other forms of transportation in the world combined. A November 2006 U.N. study, *Livestock's Long Shadow*, states that livestock production contributes 18 percent of all greenhouse gases, and such emissions are expected to double by 2050.

Another recent study shows that producing a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of beef causes more greenhouse gas emissions and other pollution than a person driving a car for three hours and leaving all the house lights on. Producing this much meat causes the release of carbon dioxide equal to the amount emitted by a small- to medium-size car going 150 miles.

## **Depletion of Natural Resources**

Water is perhaps our most precious natural resource, one we literally cannot live without, and it is becoming increasingly scarce, especially in these times of frequent, long-lasting droughts. Jewish law requires us to conserve natural resources and not to waste or use them carelessly.

Raising animals for food uses more water than any other activity, and in America an estimated 80 percent of our water use is devoted to livestock production, primarily for the irrigation of crops grown to feed the animals. Producing just one pound of edible beef uses as much as 5,200 gallons of water, while it takes just 25 gallons to produce a pound of edible wheat, potatoes, tomatoes, or lettuce.

An American who eats the standard American meat-based diet uses some 4,200 gallons of water a day (in the irrigation of crops and water for livestock and in the processing, washing, and cooking of meat), while a person following a diet free of animal products uses just 300 gallons daily.

Waste from animals pollutes our streams, rivers, and groundwater at the astounding rate of 1.4 billion tons of manure per year (almost 90,000 pounds per second), which is about 130 times the amount excreted by the U.S. human

population. Farm animals contribute five times more organic waste to the pollution of our water than do people, and twice as much as industry. Pesticides and fertilizers used in growing crops for animals also cause pollution of our water, air, and oceans, resulting in health problems for countless people across the country. This has created vast “dead zones” in the ocean, and the widespread pesticide contamination of our society has been blamed in part for the alarming incidence of cancer—as well as for numerous birth defects and miscarriages—among the American population.

### **Violations of Jewish Law**

Professor Richard Schwartz, an Orthodox Jewish scholar, is one of the foremost authorities on the teachings of Judaism concerning the treatment of animals and is the author of *Judaism and Global Survival* and *Judaism and Vegetarianism*. He writes that “[i]n Judaism, one who does not treat animals with compassion cannot be regarded as a righteous individual.”

Schwartz often describes “the many realities about the production and consumption of animal products, and the ways they contradict several basic Jewish teachings.” He observes:

1. While Judaism mandates that people should be very careful about preserving their health and their lives, numerous scientific studies have linked animal-based diets directly to heart disease, stroke, many forms of cancer, and other chronic degenerative diseases.
2. While Judaism forbids “tsa’ar ba’alei hayim,” inflicting unnecessary pain on animals, most farm animals—including those raised for kosher consumers—are raised on “factory farms” where they live in cramped, confined spaces, and are often drugged, mutilated, and denied fresh air, sunlight, exercise, and nearly any enjoyment of life, before they are slaughtered and eaten.
3. While Judaism teaches that “the earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24:1) and that we are to be G-d’s partners and coworkers in preserving the world, modern intensive animal agri-business contributes substantially to global warming, soil erosion and depletion, air and water pollution, overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the destruction of tropical rain

forests and other habitats, and much environmental damage. We have a mandate to be “shomrei adamah” (guardians of the earth), based on the admonition that we should “work the earth and guard it” (Genesis 2:15).

4. While Judaism mandates “bal tashchit,” that we are not to waste or unnecessarily destroy anything of value, and that we are not to use more than is needed to accomplish a purpose, animal agri-business requires the wasteful use of grain, land, water, energy, and other resources.
5. While Judaism stresses that we are to assist the poor and share our bread with hungry people, over 70 percent of the grain grown in the United States is fed to animals destined for slaughter, while an estimated 20 million people worldwide die because of hunger and its effects each year.

“In view of all this,” asks Schwartz, “shouldn’t committed Jews (and others) sharply reduce or eliminate their consumption of animal products?” He notes:

One could say “dayenu” (it would be enough) after any of the arguments above, because each one constitutes by itself a serious conflict between Jewish values and current practice that should impel Jews to seriously consider a plant-based diet. Combined, they make an urgently compelling case for the Jewish community to address these issues.

Since we are to be “rachmanim b’nei rachamanim” (compassionate children of compassionate ancestors), we worship a G-d who is “Harachamon” (the compassionate One) and “Av Harachamim” (the Father of mercies), and, as we say during morning services for Shabbats and festivals, “the soul of all living beings shall praise G-d’s name,” can we fail to abstain from a diet that involves so much cruelty to animals?

## **Kosher Slaughter**

Thousands of years ago, when rules were formulated for slaughtering farm animals, the Jewish laws were remarkably enlightened for their time. The knife had to be as sharp as possible, to avoid inflicting any unnecessary suffering to the animal being killed. The laws also prohibited the then-common practice of cutting limbs off live animals, which was performed in the belief that the creature would remain alive and the meat would not spoil.

But today, some aspects of ritual slaughter fail to employ modern methods that could reduce the suffering and fear of animals being killed. Practices secretly filmed at some kosher slaughterhouses in the United States have shown that animals are often killed in ways that make them suffer enormously, such as when the ears of conscious cattle are cut off, their tracheas are ripped out, and a metal hook is used to reach into their throats before the animals stop moving.

Schwartz observes that sometimes the raising and slaughtering of animals under kosher conditions “completely contradicts our mandates to be ‘rachmanim b’nei rachmanim’ (compassionate children of compassionate ancestors) and to imitate God whose ‘mercies are over all of His creatures’” (Psalms 145:9). According to Schwartz:

Even if ritual slaughter is performed flawlessly, consistent with halacha, we should not ignore the severe violations of Jewish law occurring daily on factory farms. We should fulfill our charge to be “a light unto the nations” by helping to lead the world away from a diet that is so harmful to people, the environment, and animals, to one that is far more consistent with basic religious values.

This is especially urgent at a time when animal-based diets are causing an epidemic of disease ... and when animal-based agriculture is a major contributor to global warming and many other environmental threats.

Rabbi Simeon J. Maslin, a past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, observes that “[i]n eating, as in every other human activity, ethical questions must be considered.” Rabbi Maslin asks:

Should food be considered kosher if its production involves pain to animals or the despoliation of natural resources? .... I firmly believe that those who do eat meat are obliged by ethical considerations to see to it that whatever meat they eat has been produced with the least possible pain to animals in observance of tzaar baalei chayim.

Rabbi David Rosen, former chief rabbi of Ireland, argues that “the current treatment of animals in the livestock trade definitely renders the consumption of meat halachically unacceptable as the product of illegal means.”

Ironically, if the laws of “kashrut” (Jewish dietary law) were strictly followed, meat would rarely if ever be eaten, since the consumption of any

blood or fat is forbidden (Deuteronomy 3:17, 7:23). (In fact, Jewish authorities have ruled that the amount of blood removed from kosher meat is sufficient to satisfy this biblical ordinance.)

Roberta Kalechofsky observes that meat was rarely eaten in the days of the Temple, and mainly on the three festival days. Indeed, the prophets railed against the Temple priests for their “meat gluttony.” She notes:

Jewish tradition has always taught that the point of Kashrut was to teach reverence and respect for life. Does Kashrut do that today?

### **The Eco-Kosher Movement**

Today, there is a growing “eco-kashrut” movement that urges consideration of environmental, health, humane, and other considerations in all purchases that Jews make in order to combine Jewish dietary law with concerns about animal welfare and the environment. Eco-kashrut advocates support recent efforts of Conservative Judaism to supplement the traditional kosher certification with one called “hechser tzedek,” or “justice certification,” which considers additional factors such as the treatment of animals, the impact on the environment, and fairness to workers.

With the traditional kosher certification now appearing on some 100,000 products worth an estimated \$225 billion a year, the potential for a new approach to the kosher process holds huge potential for having an impact on the way billions of farm animals are treated.

### **“Into Your Hand Are They Delivered”**

Some, of course, disagree with the view that Judaism requires a reverence and respect for animals and the environment. But their argument should not be with this publication but rather with the many teachings of the Torah and the Talmud and with the writings of Jewish sages, rabbis, and elders over the centuries that have repeatedly stressed this mitzvah.

Although Judaism pioneered the concept of kindness to animals thousands of years ago, today the long Jewish tradition of raising animals gently and humanely is almost forgotten. Who now remembers the story of the Slovakian farmer and Holocaust victim Itzhik Rosenberg, who, while being taken away by the Germans, cried out to his neighbors, “[B]ut who will take care of my animals?”

Today, every Jew should consider the massive cruelty inflicted on animals and harm inflicted on the environment by the way we produce much of the food we eat, as well as the destruction of fish populations throughout the world to feed humans and supply fishmeal for farm animals. We should ask if this is how G-d intended for us to treat His Creation, which He declared “very good” and over which He gave us dominion and stewardship responsibilities.

Can it be that our massive abuse of farm animals would be pleasing to a merciful G-d, who commanded us in the Torah, the holiest of our books, to allow our animals an entire day of rest on the Sabbath, to leave some crops in the fields for wildlife, and to allow oxen to eat while working and who set forth other rules prohibiting animal cruelty?

As the Lord said of “every beast of the earth, and every fowl of the air ... all that moveth upon the earth, and all the fishes of the sea: into your hand are they delivered” (Genesis 9:2). Can we truly say that we are fulfilling our responsibilities to the creatures that the Lord “delivered into our hand,” or can we do better?

As the great Jewish writer and Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer once wrote, “How can we pray to G-d for mercy, when we ourselves have no mercy?”

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