



THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

Conservative Judaism

General Information

Conservative Judaism (known as Masorti Judaism outside of the United States and Canada) is a middle path between traditionalist Orthodox Judaism and liberal Reform Judaism.

Founded in the 1850s by Rabbi Zacharias Frankel, Conservative Judaism teaches that Jews should “conserve” Jewish laws and rabbinical traditions while remaining open to contemporary culture and scholarship. In 1988, the Leadership Council of Conservative Judaism applied this moderate position to matters of faith through the Emet Ve Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism. According to the Emet Ve-Emunah, Conservative Judaism affirms: the existence of one God; the divine inspiration of Torah; the legitimacy of applying literary criticism and historical analysis to Torah; halakha (Jewish religious law) as normative and binding but also as evolving in response to changing historical circumstances; and Jewish identity as dependent upon matrilineal descent or conversion in accordance with law and tradition.

Number of Members in the United States: 1.7 million

Governing Body:

Within the United States and Canada, Conservative Judaism is a unified movement with policies and positions coordinated by the Leadership Council of Conservative Judaism. This council, which meets twice a year, is a coalition of member organizations, each of which represents identifiable interests within the Conservative movement. These member organizations include the influential United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (which provides resources for and represents the needs of congregations) and The Rabbinical Assembly (which shapes the ideologies and practices of the Conservative movement).

Official Statements on Animals

In 2007, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Rabbinical Assembly joined together to form the Hekhsher Tzedek Commission. This Commission was assigned the task of articulating the ethical standards behind kashrut (Jewish dietary laws) and of providing a seal—known as the Magen Tzedek seal—to companies that adhere to these standards.

According to the Hekhsher Tzedek Commission, the Torah, Talmud, and Midrash all assert that “God is concerned with the well-being of all his creatures, and so must we be.”

“God is concerned with the well-being of all his creatures, and so must we be. The ninth verse of Ashrei (Ps 145) announces this, and the peroration of the book of Jonah upbraids Jonah for failing to have similar compassion. There are several express Biblical commands predicated on concern for the welfare of domestic animals. It is said in the Book of Proverbs (12:10): ... ‘A righteous man considers the soul of his beast’ reflecting a relationship of man to beast similar to that of God to man...The Talmud extrapolates from the text of the Sh’ma.... (Deut 11:15) that before one may sit down to eat, one must attend to the needs of one’s animals (Berakhot 40a). A poignant midrash has Moses designated as the leader of Israel out of Egypt, because God saw that ‘you have compassion in shepherding a mortal’s flock’ and swore, ‘by your life, you will shepherd My flock, Israel.’ (Ex. Rabbah 2.:2).”

--from Hekhsher Tzedek: Al Pi Din by Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner; The Hekhsher Tzedek Commission of the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism; 31 January, 2008. Link to the full text available at <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/law/kashrut.html>

Over time, says the Commission, Jewish concern for the well-being of all creatures developed into a prohibition against causing living creatures to suffer (tzaar baalei hayim). This prohibition, however, was difficult to reconcile with the Bible’s acceptance of animal slaughter. Rabbis eventually concluded that animals may be eaten, but that slaughter must be done in a manner that causes animals the minimum amount of pain possible.

“The rabbis extracted the principle that it is forbidden to cause...suffering to living things, and utilized this as a test of the propriety of various actions throughout the Talmud. They debated if this was a Biblical prohibition or a Rabbinic one, and, on the whole, concluded that it was a Biblical precept, wherefore it requires greater strictness or vigilance. But the tradition was taxed by the Biblical permission to slaughter animals for eating and sacrifice and, balancing them, concluded that animal suffering might be justified for human needs but must always be minimized in that context. The laws of slaughter were interpreted in that light.”

--from Hekhsher Tzedek: Al Pi Din. Link to the full text available at <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/law/kashrut.html>

When kosher methods of slaughter (shehita) first were instituted in ancient Israel, they were the most humane methods available.

“We will say further, that the reason for slaughter at the neck and with an inspected knife is so as not to cause excessive suffering to living things...When the necessity for good food led to the killing of animals, the Torah chose the easiest of deaths and prohibited tormenting them through an inferior slaughter or by piercing.”

--from Hekhsher Tzedek: Al Pi Din. Link to the full text available at <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/law/kashrut.html>

Today, however, new methods of rendering animals unconscious before slaughter exist. Conservative Jews have debated whether or not these methods violate kosher regulations. In 2001, the Rabbinical Assembly declared that the practice of stunning was “halakhically reasonable and acceptable.”

“It is clear...that there are grounds to permit stunning before slaughter. At best we are dealing with...double doubt, and at worst with...apprehensions, which are not actual facts. While there is a position that opposes [stunning] for various reasons....the bottom line is that of tendentious reasoning. That is to say, whatever position you choose to follow you can find arguments to support it. For our purposes, the fact that there are grounds that are halakhically reasonable and acceptable to permit stunning prior to [slaughter]...is paramount.”

--from “A Stunning Matter” by Rabbi Mayer Rabinowitz. Adopted by the Committee on Jewish Laws and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, March 31, 2001. Reproduced at http://www.hsus.org/web-files/PDF/religion/rabinowitz_stunning.pdf

The Rabbinical Assembly (RA) also declared that shackling and hoisting animals and/or utilizing pens that turn an animal upside down in preparation for slaughter violate the prohibition against causing suffering. According to the RA, only “an upright pen satisfies the requirements of Jewish law forbidding cruel treatment of animals.”

“[M]eat from cattle that have been shackled and hoisted while they were conscious is still kosher in the sense that the technical procedures required by the laws of kosher slaughter can be fulfilled even if the cattle are shackled and hoisted, but shackling and hoisting violate the laws prohibiting undue pain to animals in doing so. We therefore maintain that now that both sanitation and Jewish ritual fitness....can be assured through the use of upright pens without shackling and hoisting, the latter procedures should no longer be used so as not to violate the prohibition of causing undue pain to animals. To be clear, then, in the ruling we intend not only to ban shackling and hoisting animals, but also those pens that turn the animals upside down before slaughtering them. Only moving and killing the animals in an upright pen satisfies the requirements of Jewish law forbidding cruel treatment of animals.”

--from “Shackling and Hoisting” by Rabbi Elliot N. Dorf and Joel Roth, http://www.hsus.org/web-files/PDF/religion/dorffroth_shackling.pdf

Although Conservative Judaism has focused most extensively on the need to minimize animal suffering during slaughter, the Hekhsher Tzedek Commission acknowledges that cruelty can, and frequently does, occur during the raising of animals. After careful deliberation, the Commission decided to incorporate the standards set by Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC) within its larger social justice framework. It awards its seal only to kosher companies that operate within this framework.

“The Hekhsher Tzedek will indicate that a kosher product was made in compliance with a set of social justice criteria, in keeping with the teachings of the Jewish faith. In order to qualify for the Hekhsher Tzedek, a product must have been produced in a way that aligns with a strict set of standards regarding Wages and Benefits; Employee Health and Safety/Relations/Training; Product Development; Corporate Transparency and Integrity; and Environmental Impact...Companies that work with animals should have policies and practices in place to ensure they are treated humanely at all points of the production cycle....Companies will be favored for the Hekhsher if they adhere to the Humane Farm Animal Care Standards (HFAC).”

--from "Policy Statement", Heksher Tzedek

<http://hekhshertzedek.org/pdfs/Policy%20Statement%20and%20Guidelines.pdf>

Humane Farm Animal Care standards require that all farm animals have adequate space, shelter, food, and water, and that animals are handled gently and knowledgeably at all times. Specific requirements for each species of farm animal are available at the HFAC website.

"Humane Farm Animal Care's Animal Care Standards require that animals have ample space, shelter and gentle handling to limit stress. The use of growth hormones and antibiotics is prohibited. Animals must be free to move and not be confined. Cages, crates and the stalls are forbidden...for example, chickens are able to flap their wings and dust bathe.... [A]nimals must have access to clean and sufficient food and water; their environment is not dangerous to their health; they have sufficient protection from weather elements; farmers and ranchers must comply with food safety and environmental regulations. In addition, the standards require that managers and caretakers be thoroughly trained, skilled and competent in animal husbandry and welfare, and have good working knowledge of their system and the livestock in their care."

--from Humane Farm Animal Care <http://www.certifiedhumane.org/about/faq.html>.

Historical References on Animals

Conservative Judaism, like Orthodox and Reform Judaism, views hunting for sport as antithetical to Jewish principles. Historically, four reasons have been used to support this view.

"Our sages teach that the Torah forbids hunting on several grounds. First, it represents cruelty to animals (tza'ar ba'alei hayim). Second, it violates the prohibition against wanton destruction. Third, it constitutes 'spilling of blood.' Fourth, it is a forbidden act of 'copying the ways of the gentiles.' These four grounds represent Biblical prohibitions (Isurei deOraita). One who hunts would thus violate four distinct Biblical commandments and numerous secondary rules."

--from Rabbi J.J. Tilsen, "Chai Online: Judaism and Animals: Hunting in Law and Tradition,"

http://www.chai-online.org/en/compassion/judaism/heritage_judaism_hunt.htm

Contemporary References on Animals

Conservative Judaism bases much of its treatment of animals on the concept of tzaar baalei hayim. According to Conservative Rabbi Jill Jacobs, this concept is implicit in the story of Adam and Eve, where God "establishes a fundamental connection between human beings and animals."

"Beginning with the first chapters of the Torah, Judaism establishes a fundamental connection between human beings and animals. Animals, created on the fifth day of the biblical story of creation, can be understood as prototypes of the first human beings—Adam and Eve, created on the sixth day. One of Adam's first responsibilities as a human being is to name the animals. As evidenced by the episode in which a serpent tempts Eve to eat a forbidden fruit, humans and animals originally speak one another's language (Genesis 1-3)."

--from Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "The Ethical Treatment of Animals: The concept of Tzaar Baalei Hayim demands that we take animals suffering seriously,"

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Nature_and_the_Environment/Traditional_Teachings/Animals/Ethical_Treatment.shtml

The concept of tzaar baalei hayim receives further development in the Torah, explains Rabbi Jacobs, when God grants humanity permission to eat animals (possibly as a concession to human violence) while simultaneously instituting prohibitions "against unnecessary cruelty."

"The story of Noah's ark represents a turning point in the relationship between human beings and animals...Perhaps as a concession to the violent tendencies that God now recognizes within human nature, God here permits humans to eat animals. At the same time, God protects animals against unduly cruel slaughter by banning the practice of cutting a limb off living animals (Genesis 9:3-4). This balance between simultaneously permitting the use of animals for human need and prohibiting unnecessary cruelty to animals becomes the overarching principle of later Jewish law regarding the treatment of animals. Within the Talmud, this prohibition against unnecessary cruelty acquires a name—tzaar baalei hayim: the suffering of animals."

--from Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "The Ethical Treatment of Animals,"

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Nature_and_the_Environment/Traditional_Teachings/Animals/Ethical_Treatment.shtml

Tzaar baalei hayim's prohibition against cruelty inspired the development of shehita, ...

"Later biblical and rabbinic law extends the prohibition against taking a limb from a living animal to mandating that animals meant for human consumption be slaughtered as humanely as possible. In order to be kosher, an animal must be slaughtered through a process known as shehita, in which the animal is killed with a single stroke of the knife. Shehita is generally understood to cause less suffering to the animal than modes of slaughter that do not guarantee immediate death."

--from Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "The Ethical Treatment of Animals,"

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Nature_and_the_Environment/Traditional_Teachings/Animals/Ethical_Treatment.shtml

...regulated the treatment of work animals, ...

"The prohibition against unnecessary cruelty to animals...sets limits on the use of animals.... One may not beat one's animal or force it to work excessively or unnaturally. ...Building on the prohibition against causing unnecessary pain to work animals, the nineteenth-century legal work Arukh ha-Shulhan forbids working one's animal night and day, without a break, saying that such a practice violates the prohibition against tzaar baalei hayim (*Hoshen Mishpat* 307:13)...Shabbat, perhaps more than any Jewish observance, posits an essential relationship between God, human beings, and animals. Because God rested on the seventh day of creation, human beings also rest on the seventh day of each week. In addition to mandating a day of rest for human beings, the laws of Shabbat also provide a day off for animals. The biblical command to keep Shabbat specifies, 'For six days, you shall do all of your work, but the seventh day is God's Sabbath; you shall not do any work, neither you nor your son or daughter or your servant

or your animals, or the stranger who is in your midst (Exodus 20:8).’ Like humans, animals cannot be expected to work seven days a week, but must be allowed one day a week to recuperate.”

--from Rabbi Jill Jacobs, “The Ethical Treatment of Animals,”
[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Nature_and_the_Environment/Traditional Teachings/Animals/Ethical_Treatment.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Nature_and_the_Environment/Traditional_Teachings/Animals/Ethical_Treatment.shtml)

...and mandated that all domesticated animals receive adequate food, water, and medical attention.

“The prohibition against tzaar baalei hayim not only prevents unnecessary cruelty to animals, but also imposes certain positive obligations on those entrusted with caring for animals. Owners must feed, water, and otherwise care for their animals’ basic needs, and may, in some cases be required to take extra precautions to alleviate the suffering of their animals. One commonly cited mitzvah mandates relieving an animal who is suffering from carrying too heavy a load. In some instances, it is even permissible to break Shabbat in order to care for a wounded animal...While not as extensive as the laws that require one to break Shabbat in order to save human life, tzaar baalei hayim can overrule certain ritual laws when the life or comfort of an animal is at stake.”

--from Rabbi Jill Jacobs, “The Ethical Treatment of Animals,”
[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Nature_and_the_Environment/Traditional Teachings/Animals/Ethical_Treatment.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Nature_and_the_Environment/Traditional_Teachings/Animals/Ethical_Treatment.shtml)

Some Conservative Jews argue that a vegetarian diet is the logical extension of tzaar baalei hayim. Others are uncomfortable with the label “vegetarian,” but nevertheless eat a diet devoid of meat because of Jewish commandments concerning the protection of human health (v'nishmartem me'od), the poor (pato'ach tiftach), and the environment (l'ovdah ul'shomrah).

“This leads us to an ultimate question: can we ever really ever kill a cow, goat, etc. without causing some pain and fear? Thus, Judaism has endorsed vegetarianism as a ‘higher’ form of eating because it means not taking a life. For some it has meant not even eating an egg and others have made a distinction between a mammal and a fish. This often is a personal question, but overall it is a fact that Jews are concerned with animal rights and minimizing the pain and fear that results from slaughtering animals.”

--from Rabbi Barry Dov Lerner, “Does Kosher Slaughtering cause animals to suffer?”
http://judaism.about.com/od/kosherdietarylaws/f/cons_koshslaugh.htm

“Current methods for raising animals do violate Jewish ethics about tza’ar ba’alei hayyim, the suffering of animals. Diets rich in meat products endanger health, and we are commanded v'nishmartem me'od, to be very careful with our health (Deuteronomy 4:6). Grasping at huge amounts of grain in order to feed animals for slaughter diverts needed food resources from the world’s hungry and violates the obligation of pato'ach tiftach, opening our hands to the needy. And the environmental degradation due to a meat-eating consumer culture threatens the health of our environment and ignores God’s command l'ovdah ul'shomrah (Genesis 2:15), to preserve and work the land properly...If meat were produced in a sustainable way without cruelty, with

minimal impact on the environment and without diverting significant resources from feeding the poor, and if it were consumed in smaller, healthier portions, then I would be all for eating meat. But this is not yet the situation, and I still do not eat meat. Consider me mahmir (strict) regarding Jewish obligations to have compassion for animals, prevent hunger, preserve the earth, and avoid unhealthy behaviors. But don't call me a vegetarian."

--from Jeffrey Spitzer, "I Eat No Meat, but I'm No Vegetarian: Rejecting the 'vegetarian' label," http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Kashrut_Dietary_Laws/Themes/Contemporary_Themes/Vegetarianism/Rejecting_the_Label.shtml?PRR

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