



THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

Orthodox Judaism

General Information

Orthodox Judaism teaches that the Torah, in both its written and oral form, was given to Moses directly by G-d and that strict adherence to the Torah is required of all Jews in all areas of life. This core set of beliefs unites various subgroups with significant social, cultural, and organizational differences. Within the United States, the largest of these subgroups are “Modern Orthodox” Judaism, which finds positive value in interactions with contemporary society, and “Haredi” and “Hasidic” Judaism, which advocate segregation from non-Jewish culture but not complete isolation from the secular world.

More information about Orthodox Judaism can be found by going to <http://www.ou.org>, <http://www.rabbis.org>, and <http://www.chabad.org>.

Number of Members in the U.S. and Canada: 600,000

Number of Members Worldwide: 1.8 million

Official Statements on Animals

Humans are the “pinnacle” of creation and have “dominion” over animals

- **Because Orthodox Judaism is not a monolithic movement, there is no one organization with the authority to speak on behalf of the entire Orthodox community. However, the Orthodox Union, the Rabbinical Council of America, and Chabad Lubavitch do speak on behalf of a large segment of the Orthodox population. According to these organizations, G-d rules over a cosmic hierarchy and has made humans “the pinnacle of creation.” Our privileged status is accompanied by the right to exercise dominion over animals.**
 - “The Torah tell[s] us that in the beginning, when G-d created all living creatures...the Creator placed the animal kingdom under the dominion of man.”
—from Chabad Lubavitch, Tzivos Hashem Kids!, Noah’s Ark, [“Animals Rights.”](#)
 - “Animals occupy an intermediate level above plants and inanimate material, but below human beings.”
—from Orthodox Union: Rabbi Asher Meir, Torah Tidbits: Meaning in Mitzvot, “Tzaar Baalei Chayim ([Avoiding Cruelty to Animals](#)).”
 - “[T]he Rabbinical Council of America recognizes that the Torah...places humanity...as the pinnacle of creation...”

—from Rabbinical Council of America, Policies and Positions of the RCA: May 18, 2006, "[On the Importance of Preserving the Environment](#)."

Humans may "employ animals in useful services"

- **The Torah gives humans "permission to employ animals in useful services." This permission includes, but is not limited to, the "right to kill animals for food," to employ animals as labor, to use animals for clothing, and to perform medical experiments on animals.**
 - "The Torah tell[s] us that...[m]an was given permission to employ animals in useful services, such as helping him plow his field, carry his loads, provide wool for his clothing, and the like....[A]fter the Flood....G-d [gave] man the right to kill animals for food or to enhance his life."
—from Chabad Lubavitch, "[Animals Rights](#)."
 - "The Torah permits the killing of animals for medical experiments which may save or enhance our lives, but it must be done as humanely as possible."
—from Chabad Lubavitch, "[Animals Rights](#)."
 - "Human beings are not forbidden to eat meat, to wear leather or fur, or to perform vital experiments on animals."
—from Orthodox Union, "[Avoiding Cruelty to Animals](#)."

Although humans may use animals, we also must emulate G-d's mercy over all His creatures

- **Although the Torah states that humans may make use of animals to serve our needs, it also states that our dominion over them has limits. Jewish law instructs us to treat animals "with consideration, kindness and respect" and to "emulate G-d's ways" by extending mercy "upon all His creatures."**
 - "Jewish law requires that animals be treated with consideration, kindness and respect. The Bible (Torah) is the first systematic legislation prohibiting cruelty to animals and mandating their humane treatment. These laws are binding on Jews today."
—from Chabad Lubavitch, "[Why Do Jews Practice Shechita?](#)"
 - "We must emulate G-d's ways. Concerning G-d it is written, 'And His mercy is upon all His creatures'; so we, too, show our mercy to animals."
—from Chabad Lubavitch, Aryeh Citron, "[Feeding Animals: Parshat Noach](#)."
 - "We should be cognizant of [G-d's] providence over both man and beast. He watches over all species and permits them to endure and we should not take His handiwork for granted. We should be aware of the things He has given us and not wantonly slaughter his creatures with reckless abandon. Being aware of such things helps us to cultivate the trait of mercy and avoid becoming cruel, even when we slaughter animals for food."
—from Orthodox Union, "[Mother and Child Reunion: The prohibition against slaughtering an animal and its offspring](#)."

Mercy demands that we refrain from inflicting "needless pain" on animals

- **If we are to emulate G-d's mercy over all His creatures, we must never inflict "needless pain on animals," must never take "the life of a fellow creature...casually, as if it were of no importance," and must always strive to treat animals humanely. The Torah makes it clear "that the inhumane treatment of animals is not the Jewish way."**
 - "[I]t is forbidden, according to the law of the Torah, to inflict pain upon any living creature, even if it is ownerless or belongs to a non-Jew (Cf. Ramo, Shulchan Arukh, Choshen Mishpat 272:9)."
—from Rabbinical Council of America, "[On the Importance of Preserving the Environment](#)."
 - [Y]ou are permitted to eat [meat] 'to satisfy your full desire.' But taking the life of a fellow creature should never be done casually, as if it were of no importance, as if there were no difference between roast beef and broccoli."
—from Orthodox Union, Rabbi Pinchas Frankel, A Second Opinion, Shabbat Parshat Re'eh-5762"Ma'achalot Asurot"--[Prohibited Foods](#)."
 - "Torah law...is most insistent about not inflicting needless pain on animals and in emphasizing humane treatment of all living creatures....As Torah Jews, we are imbued with the teachings which...make it clear that inhumane treatment of animals is not the Jewish way."
—from Orthodox Union, *The Daf HaKashrus: A Monthly Newsletter for the OU Rabbinic Field Representative*, Shevat 5765, January 2005, Rabbi Menachem Genack, "[Setting the Record Straight on Kosher Slaughter](#)," 7, 9.

"One must not only refrain from causing an animal pain but actively intervene to relieve it"

- **The Torah and Talmud reveal that it is not enough to passively refrain from harming animals, we also must actively intervene to relieve their suffering. This obligation includes the relief of both physical and emotional pain.**
 - "One must not only refrain from causing an animal pain but actively intervene to relieve it....[W]e are obligated to assist an animal; and, on the Sabbath, this obligation takes precedence over all rabbinic restrictions."
—from Canfei Nesharim, Rabbi David Sears, "[Compassion for All Creatures](#): Longer Article."
 - "Within the moral ecology, respect for animals has a significant place. Animals too are part of G-d's creation. They have their own integrity in the scheme of things...we have duties toward them. One of those duties, expressed in many Torah laws, is not to cause them unnecessary pain, and that includes...psychological pain."
—from Orthodox Union, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, "Covenant and Conversation—[Animal Welfare](#)."

Kindness to animals benefits humans as well as animals

- **Being kind to animals not only benefits animals, it also benefits us. Through kindness to animals we: 1. avoid idolatry, 2. understand the Torah more completely, 3. learn to appreciate all G-d's works, 4. acquire virtue and rid ourselves of vice, 5. learn to be kind to each other, and 6. increase G-d's mercy upon us.**
 - 1. "We become what we worship, the Torah implies. At most times, ancient and contemporary, people have worshipped power. Jews learned early that the worship of power is idolatry. Power exalts one part of creation by diminishing another. The G-d of Abraham is

the G-d not of a part but of the whole. Therefore a society based on Torah respects the whole, especially the powerless. Hence the consistent emphasis in Ki Testse on the different categories of vulnerable individuals—women, employees, borrowers, animals—each of whom are often exploited, taken advantage of, used. That is not how you, My people, may behave, says G-d.”

—from Orthodox Union, “[Animal Welfare](#).”

- 2. “[T]he same [G-d] who created every living thing, implanting instincts and attributes in every creature, also wrote the Torah which refers to specific animals for specific reasons...A careful examination of the animal kingdom from a Torah perspective provides us with the ability to view the animals as living, breathing manifestations of the Torah.”
—from Orthodox Union, by Nosson Slifkin, *Jewish Action*, Fall 5761/2000, “[Zoo Torateinu](#).”
- 3. “We should be cognizant of [G-d’s] providence over both man and beast. He watches over all species and permits them to endure and we should not take His handiwork for granted. We should be aware of the things He has given us and not wantonly slaughter His creatures with reckless abandon.”
—from Orthodox Union, “[Animal Welfare](#).”
- 4. “The duty not to be cruel is ultimately based on the need to acquire virtue and rid ourselves of vice...Those who are cruel to animals are often cruel to people. Cruelty to animals is forbidden not only because of its effect on animals but also because of its effect on us.”
—from Orthodox Union, “[Animal Welfare](#).”
- 5. “The most important reason to be kind to animals is to engender in ourselves the Divine trait of kindness and feelings of mercy and compassion.”
—from Orthodox Union, Rabbi Yosef Edelstein, *Insights Into Numbers*, Parshat Eikev 22 Av, 5761, August 10-11, “[Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25](#).”
- 6. “[W]hen we act with mercy in our dealings with others, measure for measure, G-d deals in a merciful manner with us...We shouldn’t treat animals with deference because they are our masters. We are gentle and kind with them because G-d is our master. May we merit fulfilling this lofty potential that G-d bestowed in us, thereby earning the reward...of those who walk in G-d’s ways: And whoever is merciful upon others, there will be mercy upon him, for it is written: ‘...he will grant you mercy, and be merciful with you and increase you...’”
—from Orthodox Union, “[Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25](#).”

Historical References on Animals

Maimonides: “Each being exists for its own sake” and is declared by G-d to be good

- **Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides or the Rambam, was a renowned 12th century rabbinic scholar whose *13 Principles of the Faith* is widely regarded to be the definitive distillation of Orthodox beliefs. Maimonides taught that although Jewish Law permits the use of animals, we must always remember that animals exist for their own sake, not for ours, and that they are a good in the eyes of G-d.**
- “I consider therefore the following opinion as most correct according to the teaching of the Bible, and best in accordance with the results of philosophy; namely, that the Universe does

not exist for man's sake, but that each being exists for its own sake, and not because of some other thing...each part is declared to be the product of [G-d's] will, and to satisfy by its existence the intention [of the Creator]. This is expressed by the phrase, 'And [G-d] saw that it was good' (Gen i.4, etc.)."

—from Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, M. Friedlander trans. (1903) Reprinted by Forgotten Books (2008), 493-494.

Maimonides: "There is no difference in...the pain of man and...of other living creatures"

- **According to Maimonides, in some ways there "is no difference...between the pain of man and the pain of other living beings." This is why the "law enjoins that the death of the animal should be the easiest" and why the Torah contains regulations that minimize an animal's physical and emotional suffering.**
- "Since...the desire of procuring good food necessitates the slaying of animals, the law enjoins that the death of the animal should be the easiest. It is not allowed to torment the animal by cutting the throat in a clumsy manner, by poleaxing, or by cutting off a limb whilst the animal is alive."
—from Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 637.
- "It is also prohibited to kill an animal with its young on the same day (Lev xxii. 28), in order that people should be restrained and prevented from killing the two together in such a manner that the young is slain in the sight of the mother; for the pain of the animals in such circumstances is very great. There is no difference in this case between the pain of man and the pain of other living beings, since the love and tenderness of the mother for her young ones is not produced by reasoning, but by imagination and this faculty exists not only in man but in most living beings."
—from Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 638.

The Besht: There are "holy sparks" in all creatures

- **Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, also known as the Besht, was the 18th century founder of Hasidic Judaism. According to the Besht and his followers, each creature is infused with "holy sparks" and is a manifestation of the sacred.**
- "It is a great principle that there are holy sparks in all there is in the world. Nothing is void of sparks, even trees and stones."
—from Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, as quoted by Manfred Gerstenfeld and Netanel Lederberg, "[Nature and the Environment in Hasidic Sources](#)," *Jewish Environmental Perspectives*, No. 5 Heshvan 5763/October 2002 (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs).
- "There is nothing material in the world which exists and has vitality without sparks from the upper worlds...[T]here is nothing material which has vitality without holiness."
—from Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk, as quoted in Gerstenfeld and Lederberg, "[Nature and the Environment in Hasidic Sources](#)."

Rabbi Zusya of Anapole: Freeing caged animals is "a form of 'ransoming prisoners'"

- **Although early Hasidic rabbis were in agreement that animals may be used for human purposes, some were saddened by the suffering that this caused G-d's creatures. Rabbi Zusya of Anapole,**

for instance, was so affected by the sight of caged birds that he would “purchase them from their owner in order to set them free.” He viewed this as a moral imperative akin to “ransoming prisoners.”

- “It is told of the Hasidic master, R. Zusya of Anapole, that, saddened by the sight of caged birds, he would purchase them from their owner in order to set them free. He informed his disciples that he regarded this to be a form of ‘ransoming prisoners,’ which constitutes a moral imperative.”
—from Rabbi Zusya of Anapole, as quoted in Gerstenfeld and Lederberg, “[Nature and the Environment in Hasidic Sources.](#)”

Contemporary References on Animals

“Humane methods of animal slaughter [are] a matter of great concern to rabbis”

- **Orthodox Judaism strictly regulates the slaughter of animals, utilizing a method known as shechita (or shechitah) which “seeks to minimize the animal’s pain...” The minimization of animal suffering during slaughter has been “a matter of great concern to rabbis in every generation.”**
- “[T]he permission to slaughter animals for food was given within a complex set of limitation, an important part of which is concern for the suffering of those creatures who forfeit their lives for our benefit...Aside from any ritual or other significance it possesses, shechitah (Kosher slaughter) seeks to minimize the animal’s pain...”
—from Canfei Nesharim, Rabbi David Sears, “[Compassion for All Creatures.](#)”
- “We must show sensitivity to needless animal suffering, preventing it where possible, and minimizing it when unavoidable. This is particularly true when it comes to practicing humane methods of animal slaughter, a matter of great concern to rabbis in every generation.”
—from Rabbinical Council of America, “[RCA Issues Statement about Agriprocessors:](#) Regarding Recent Developments at Agriprocessors Meat Processing Plant in Postville, Iowa,” June 3, 2008.

“It seems doubtful...that the Torah would sanction factory farming”

- **Factory farming is a 20th century invention that treats animals “like machines” packed into “intensely crowded, artificial environments.” Because the practice did not exist in earlier generations, the Torah does not address it specifically. However, the Torah’s repeated calls for kindness to animals makes it “doubtful” that it would have sanctioned such “apparent insensitivity to [an animal’s] natural needs and instincts.”**
- “Since the 1940s we have witnessed...the rise of ‘factory farms,’ which produce beef cattle by the millions and fowl by the billions every year for human consumption... According to the methods of factory farming, animals are commonly raised in intensely crowded, artificial environments in which their emotional needs are largely ignored...From a Jewish point of view, these methods are highly questionable. Rabbi Aryeh Carmell...who...has served on the faculty of Israel’s D’var Yerushalayim Yeshiva, has written: ‘It seems doubtful...that the Torah would sanction factory farming, which treats animals as machines, with apparent insensitivity to their natural needs and instincts.’”
—from Canfei Nesharim, Rabbi David Sears, “[Compassion for All Creatures.](#)”

The suffering of animals for “questionable” needs “may not be discounted as morally inconsequential”

- **Although the Torah does not specifically forbid the use of animals for nonessential purposes, it does call for mercy towards them. For this reason, using animal in “areas of questionable human necessity,” such as cosmetic testing or the production of luxury items like foie gras, white veal, or fur garments “may not be discounted as morally inconsequential” and should call forth a “higher sensitivity” from us.**
 - “[T]he suffering of animals in the service of human needs may not be discounted as morally inconsequential. Surely...higher sensitivity should be applied to areas of questionable human necessity. Several examples include animal experiments for cosmetics or luxury items; the forced feeding of geese for the production of foie gras; raising calves for white veal; and common practices of the fur industry....The Talmud states that the Jewish people are praiseworthy for their desire to serve [G-d] beyond the letter of the law. This expression of religious devotion has been applied to many ritual precepts; should we not apply it with equal diligence to precepts that affect other living creatures?”
—from Canfei Nesharim, Rabbi David Sears, [“Compassion for All Creatures.”](#)

The “Jewish tradition has a very poor regard” for hunting

- **Orthodoxy does not forbid hunting, but it does have “a very poor regard for this pastime.” Cruelty to animals is among the reasons for this disfavor, as is the difficulty of rendering hunted meat halachically acceptable for consumption.**
 - “[I]t is necessary to acknowledge that Jewish tradition has a very poor regard for this pastime....The Torah does not forbid hunting, and specifically refers to hunting wild animals for food (Leviticus 17:13)...But note that the verse is careful to specify that the...animal must not be killed by the hunt but rather must be ritually slaughtered like a domesticated animal...I believe that Judaism’s approach to hunting was well summarized by the great 18th century authority Rabbi Yechezkel Landau....Rabbi Landau concluded...: ‘I am very surprised at the whole subject; we don’t find any hunters [in our tradition] besides Nimrod and Esau, and this is not the way of the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...There is an unseemly element in it, namely cruelty, and also a measure of danger...Therefore, one who listens to me will dwell securely and placidly in his house and not waste his time with such things’.”
—from Orthodox Union, [“Judaism and Hunting.”](#)

Female animals may be sterilized, although male animals may not

- **In the United States, the uncontrolled breeding of pets results in four million cats and dogs being put to death in shelters every year. Although the Torah specifically forbids the castrating of male animals, it does not prohibit “sterilizing a female” in order to prevent the overpopulation of unwanted pets.**
 - “The spaying of animals, in order to prevent undesired reproduction or in order to make them more docile, is an ancient custom of animal husbandry, but it is one which is forbidden by the Torah...”
—from Orthodox Union, Rabbi Asher Meir, Torah Tidbits: Meaning in Mitzvot, [“Spaying Animals.”](#)

- “The reason for this mitzvah [against sterilizing a male animal] is [that G-d] created the world and all the species in it, and it is His desire for these species to procreate and fill the world with their progeny....Sterilizing a female does not fall under this prohibition as the obligation to procreate is only incumbent upon the male.”
—from Orthodox Union, “Don’t Do That, Either!: [The Prohibition Against Castrating Animals.](#)”

“We are not permitted to bring an entire species to extinction”

- **Although we are permitted “to slaughter individual animals, we are not permitted to bring an entire species to extinction.” This prohibition honors G-d as the creator of all life, for “[e]verything G-d created has a purpose. Not one thing was created in vain.”**
 - “One may not take chicks or eggs while the mother bird is still in the nest. She must first be sent away. One of the reasons for this mitzvah is to guarantee that the species will not die out. After sending away the mother bird, she will be able to start a new family and preserve the species...[T]o quote Nachmanides, “while G-d gave us permission to slaughter individual animals, we are not permitted to bring an entire species to extinction.”
—from Chabad Lubavitch, Tzivos Hashem Kids!, Noah’s Ark [“Animal Conservation.”](#)
 - “‘Everything G-d created has a purpose. Not one thing was created in vain’ (Talmud).”
—from Chabad Lubavitch, [“Purpose of Animals.”](#)

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See more entries, including Conservative Judaism and Reform Judaism, in *Facts & Faith: Religious Statements on Animals* and other resources at humansociety.org/faith.