



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED STATES**

## Orthodox Judaism

### General Information

Orthodox Judaism is the most conservative of the three primary branches of Judaism. Members of the Orthodox faith believe that both the Written Law (Torah) and the Oral Law (Mishnah) were given to Moses directly by G-d and that strict adherence to the Law is required of all Jews.

The Talmud (ancient Rabbinic commentaries on the Mishnah) is considered authoritative in questions concerning the Law's interpretation. Halakhah (the law plus its traditions and interpretations) affects every aspect of Orthodox life, infusing the mundane with divine significance and keeping G-d constantly in one's thoughts. Because Halakhah is a comprehensive system, it includes practices that govern humanity's relationship with G-d, with other humans, and with animals.

**Number of Members Worldwide:** 1.8 million

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

**Governing Body:** Orthodox Judaism has no central governing body. Broadly speaking, Orthodox Judaism can be divided into two sub-groups: Modern Orthodox Judaism and Haredi Judaism, the latter of which includes Hasidic Judaism and Mitnagdish (non-Hasidic Haredi) Judaism.

In the United States and Canada, Modern Orthodox Judaism is the largest of these subgroups. The interests of Modern Orthodox Jews in North America are represented by several organizations, the largest of which are the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and the Rabbinical Council of America. The largest organization representing the interests of Mitnagdish Jews in North America is Agudath Israel of America.

### Official Statements on Animals

**There is no central governing body within Orthodox Judaism with the authority to issue official statements on matters of faith or practice. However, particular texts and traditions are considered normative across the Orthodox faith.**

**Each day, Orthodox Jews recite three prayers, with additional prayers recited on the Sabbath and on most Jewish holidays. The daily, morning prayer includes Torah verses that bless G-d for creating and preserving animals, ecosystems, and human beings and that acknowledge the capacity of all creatures to know and praise their creator.**

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth....On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate...All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you....Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their G-d, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry...He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry... Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!...Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven...Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!"

--from Shacharit, Pesukei D'Zimrah (Morning Prayer, Verses of Praise, Psalms 100, 145-150).

**On the Sabbath during the winter, the afternoon prayer again offers gratitude to G-d for creation. This prayer acknowledges that G-d cares about animals in themselves, independent of any use they may have for human beings.**

"You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart. The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all animals of the forest come creeping out. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from G-d. When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens...O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures."

--from Shabbat, Mincha, Barekhi Nafshi (Sabbath, Afternoon Prayer, Psalms 104, 120-134)

**The need for humanity to recognize and appreciate the magnificence of all creatures is given additional weight by a special prayer that devout Jews are required to recite when they see a beautiful animal.**

"Blessed art Thou, O Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, who created beautiful animals in His world"

--from The Talmud, Berachot 9.

**In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, an attempt was made to offer practical guidance in the application of Written and Oral Laws. This Code, known as the Shulchan Aruch, is considered authoritative within Orthodox circles. Within the Shulchan Aruch, the concept of “tzaar baalei chaim” (the mandate not to cause unnecessary pain to any living creature) is affirmed and explained.**

“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.”

--from Rabbi Solomon Granzfried, *Code of Jewish Law*, New York: Hebrew Publishing Co. (1961), book 4, pg 84, reproduced in **Jewish Veg: Our Diet as Kiddush Hashem**

**The Talmud asserts that the concept of tzaar baalei chaim includes not only the need to avoid causing pain to animals but also the need to show them compassion. The Talmud explains that humanity will receive compassion from G-d in proportion to the compassion we show to animals.**

"Whoever has compassion for other creatures is shown compassion from Heaven; whoever does not have compassion for other creatures is not shown compassion from Heaven."

--from Talmud: Shabbos 151b

## **Historical References on Animals**

**Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides or the Rambam, was a renowned 12<sup>th</sup> Century rabbinic scholar whose “13 Principles of the Faith” is widely accepted as the definitive distillation of Orthodox beliefs. Maimonides taught that although Jewish Law permits the use of animals “when necessary,” great care must be taken to observe the compassion dictated by tzaar baalei chaim. Humanity must always remember, said Maimonides, that animals exist for their own sake, not for ours, and that they, like us, experience emotional and physical pain.**

“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 God’s will, and to satisfy by its existence the intention [of the Creator]. This is expressed by the phrase, ‘And God 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.

“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 Sefer ha-Chinuch, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Spanish commentary on the Torah, affirms the need for compassion toward animals, explaining that when a human soul grows kind to animals it also grows kind to human beings.**

“When a man becomes accustomed to have pity even upon animals who were created to serve us...his soul will likewise grow accustomed to be kind to human beings.”

--Sefer ha-Chinuch as reprinted in Richard H. Schwartz, *Judaism and Vegetarianism* (Lantern Books, 2001), 97.

**Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer—also known as Ba’al Shem Tov or the Besht—was the 18<sup>th</sup> century founder of Hasidic Judaism. According to the Besht, every creature is infused with Divine sparks. Early Hasidic rabbis explained that, because all creatures possess Divine sparks, all creatures are holy.**

“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.”

--In Yisroel ben Eliezer, *Zava'at ha-Rivash*, photocopy (Brooklyn: Otsar Hahasidim, 1991), section 141, p. 54 (Hebrew). Reproduced and translated by [Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs](http://www.jcpa.org/art/jep5.htm) <http://www.jcpa.org/art/jep5.htm>

"There is nothing material in the world which exists and has vitality without sparks from the upper worlds...there is nothing material which has vitality without holiness."

--from Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk, Noam Elimelekh (Bnei Brak: Hekhal Hasefer, n.d.; 1st ed., 1788), p. 13b (Hebrew). Reproduced and translated by Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

**Although early Hasidic rabbis saw all creatures as holy, they continued to permit animals to be used for food, clothing, and other purposes, provided such uses were undertaken with compassion and reverence. Despite agreement that such uses were permissible, some rabbis were saddened by the plight of animals and showed their concern by attempting to ransom animals from cages and by praying for forgiveness for sins committed against them.**

"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."

--in David J. Bleich, Contemporary Halakhic Problems, vol. 3 (New York: Ktav, 1989), 195. Reproduced by Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

"I ask forgiveness from all that is created in the world—inanimate, vegetative, living and speaking—for what I have sinned against them or pained them, physically or spiritually."

--in Rabbi Abraham ben Nahman, Kochvei Or, Leket Sipurim al Rabbi Nahman Mibratslav, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Shmuel Halevi Horwitz, 1933; 1st ed., 1896), 59 (Hebrew). Reproduced and translated by Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

## **Contemporary References on Animals**

**The Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), which has nearly 1,000 ordained rabbis in 14 countries among its members, states that all possible efforts must be made to prevent the suffering of animals during slaughter.**

"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.](http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105319)"  
<http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105319>

**The RCA also encourages its members to partner with Canfei Nesharim, an organization dedicated to teaching Torah perspectives on environmental protection and animal welfare.**

“Whereas the Rabbinical Council of America recognizes that the Holy Torah commands us ‘to work and to guard’ the earth (Bereishit 2:15), and places humanity, as the pinnacle of creation, in the role of responsible stewardship toward it; and...Whereas the RCA recognizes that a new movement, led by the organization Canfei Nesharim, is creating the opportunity for Orthodox Jews to engage in environmental action from a Torah perspective, and is creating Torah-based shiurim, programmatic materials for synagogues, and educational curriculum for schools; Now, therefore, it is resolved that the RCA supports the new Torah-based environmental movement and encourages its members to partner with Canfei Nesharim to develop programs for their communities.”

--from Rabbinical Council of America, [“On the Importance of Preserving the Environment: RCA calls upon its members to educate concerning the importance of preserving the environment.”](http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=100776)  
<http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=100776>

**On its website, Canfei Nesharim explains the Torah doctrine of tzaar baalei chaim and states that the doctrine’s injunction against causing animals pain includes an injunction to avoid causing them to “worry.”**

“Tzaar Baalei Chaim: Mitzvah not to cause animals needless pain, based on two verses in the Torah commanding us to help our enemy unload a straining animal (Shemos 23:5 and Devarim 22:4). Similarly, we do not plow with an ox and donkey together (Devarim 22:10). The Chinuch says the reason is that this would cause the animals “Daagah” (worry) because one would be stronger than the other.”

--from Canfei Nesharim, [“What Does the Torah Say about the Environment?”](http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?page=11872)  
<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?page=11872>

**Canfei Nesharim also provides Torah concepts that support the protection of endangered species....**

“Shiluach Ha-Ken: Sending away the mother bird before taking her young. (Devarim 22:6-7) The Ramban says that it is related to the prohibition against slaughtering an animal and its kid in one day and gives two reasons for the prohibitions: First, that we should not have a cruel and merciless heart (by causing pain to the mother). The second reason is that ‘the Torah should not permit us to destroy and uproot a species, even though [the Torah] permits ritual slaughter of this species. One who kills a mother [animal] and her children in one day or who takes them...it is as if she annihilates that species.”

--from Canfei Nesharim, "What Does the Torah Say about the Environment?"

**...that demand the preservation of adequate habitat for animals...**

"Migrash: an open space around a city (called a greenbelt in environmental parlance). The Torah says that the 'open space shall be for their animals, for their possessions, and for all the amenities of life' (Vayikra 35:3). This green belt gives urban dwellers a connection to nature, while bringing benefit to their animals, as they can roam and graze there. A city cannot expand at the expense of the green belt."

--from Canfei Nesharim, "What Does the Torah Say about the Environment?"

**...and that forbid the wasteful destruction of G-d's good creatures.**

"Sefer HaChinuch, Parshat Shoftim, Mitzvah 529: The root of the Mitzvah (Bal Tashchit) is well known—that it is to teach our souls to love the Good and the Greater Value and to cling to it. Therefore we should attach ourselves to the good and distance ourselves from anything that is bad and any type of destruction. This is the path for Hasidim (Righteous People) and People of Good Deeds – who love Peace and are happy with the goodness of the Creation and draw themselves close to Torah. They do not ever waste anything, even a kernel of mustard. They should fashion themselves in such a way that any wastefulness or destruction that they see—if they are able to (save) prevent it—they should save it from all forms of destructiveness with all their energy."

--from Canfei Nesharim, "What Does the Torah Say about the Environment?"

**In all our dealings with animals, concludes Canfei Nesharim, we must remember that we serve G-d when we heal "this fractured world" through loving kindness toward all G-d's creatures.**

"Within our dealings with creation, we must recognize our directive to approach nature with the utmost respect. The callous uprooting of another creature's life force to sustain frivolous or reckless action is irresponsible. Our dominion over animals is based on our obligation to sincerely serve Hashem, thus helping manifest healing in this fractured world... our every action is dedicated to honoring His creation, performing His mitzvos, and directing loving kindness to all of those around us."

--from Canfei Nesharim, "[You Are What You Eat.](#)"

<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/torah.php?page=11804%20>

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For more information, visit The Humane Society of the United States Faith Outreach program at [www.humanesociety.org/faith](http://www.humanesociety.org/faith)