



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

Reform Judaism

General Information

Reform Judaism—also known as Progressive or Liberal Judaism—is the largest branch of Judaism in North America. It emphasizes Tikkun Olam (repair of the world), a concept, according to the Reform movement, that requires Judaism to continuously re-form itself in response to the changing needs of changing times and circumstances. Reform Judaism encourages each member to decide for him- or herself which mitzvot (sacred acts) have meaning today, but it also asserts that certain tenets are central to the Jewish faith. These tenets include: belief in one God, to whom the Jewish people are bound in an everlasting covenant; belief that Torah is the work of inspired humans and that Torah’s moral codes are the foundation of Jewish life; and a commitment to Israel and the full equality of all Israel’s people.

Number of Members in the United States and Canada: 2.2 million

Governing Body:

Reform Judaism has no central governing body—each congregation has autonomy over its own services and programs. In the United States, educational and worship materials, as well as other forms of personal and congregational support, are available through the Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The movement’s political interests are supported by the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism.

Official Statements on Animals

The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) publishes the *Mishkan T’filah*, a Siddur (prayerbook) for North American Reform Jews. Prayers within the *Mishkan T’filah* remind us that all creatures are beautiful, are created by God, and are subjects of God’s compassion.

“My soul came to me pure,
drawn from the reservoir of the Holy.
All the time it remains within me,
I am thankful for its thirst
for compassion and justice.
Let my eyes behold the beauty of all creatures,
let my hands know the privilege of righteous deeds.”

--from *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur*, New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis (2007), 35.

“Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came to be. Blessed is the One! Blessed is the One who continually authors creation. Blessed is the One whose word is deed; blessed is the One who decrees and fulfills. Blessed is the One who is compassionate towards the world; blessed is the One who is compassionate towards all creatures.”

--from *Mishkan T'filah*, 50.

The *Mishkan T'filah* also reminds us that the world is a fragile place that can be both damaged and healed by human activities. God allows us to choose our path on Earth, but warns that there will be no divine intervention if we choose a path of destruction. In order to encourage us to choose a path of healing, God has set aside one day each week when we are to pause, contemplate the miracle of creation, and remember that faith is expressed most fully through loving actions.

“In the same hour that the Holy Blessed One created the first human being, God guided the person before all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said: See My works, how fine and excellent they are! Everything I have created, I created for you. Think about this carefully so that you do not corrupt and devastate My world: for if you corrupt it there is no one to repair it after you.”

--from *Mishkan T'filah*, 83.

“There are days when we exploit nature
as if it were a horn of plenty
that can never be exhausted.
On Shabbat, we stand in wonder
before the mystery of creation.”

--from *Mishkan T'filah*, 127.

“Those who keep Shabbat by calling it a delight
will rejoice in Your realm.
The people that hallow Shabbat will delight in Your goodness.
For, being pleased with the Seventh day, You hallowed it
as the most precious of days, drawing our attention to the world of Creation.”

--from *Mishkan T'filah*, 162.

“To love God is to love each other,
to work to make our lives better.

To love God is to love the world God created
and to work to perfect it.”

--from *Mishkan T'filah*, 126.

“Religion embraces both faith and action.

The primary quality is action,

for it lays the foundation for faith;

the more we do good,

the more readily do we grasp the meaning of duty and life

and the more readily do we believe in the Divine

from which stems the good.”

--from *Mishkan T'filah*, 425.

Historical Statements on Animals

Reform Judaism was founded in the 19th century, but it, like all branches of Judaism, lays claim to the full history of the Jewish people. According to the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), Judaism contains many concepts that historically have upheld environmental protection and the care of animals.

“- Shomrei Adamah: Meaning guardians of the earth, this phrase captures the Jewish belief that we are charged with the task of protection and renewal of the earth.

- Tikkun Olam: As the Jewish teaching that we are to repair the world in partnership with God, this is the phrase most commonly used when speaking about the Jewish obligation to care for the environment.

- Bal Tashchit: This concept teaches us we should not be wasteful in our consumption and we should consider the value of even the tiniest insect as it is one of God’s creations.”

--from Union for Reform Judaism, “Greening Reform Judaism: Glossary, Green Words,”

<http://urj.org/green/101/glossary/>

The URJ states that the concept of tsa’ar ba-alei chayim (the mandate to avoid causing pain to any living creature) has been especially relevant to animal protection throughout Jewish history. This mandate is so important that Heaven shows compassion to human beings in proportion to the compassion we show to animals.

“One of the most touching expressions in the Jewish lexicon is tsa’ar ba-alei chayim, literally, ‘pain of living things.’ In the Jewish view, animals are just as much creatures of God as is humankind; and humankind has the responsibility, not only of respecting their needs and their feelings, but also of treating them with compassion. Animals suffer tsa’ar, pain, sorrow, and Jews are therefore prohibited from inflicting pain upon them.”

--from Union for Reform Judaism, “10 Minutes of Torah: Pity for the Living,”

<http://tmt.urj.net/archives/2socialaction/013007.htm>

“Rabbi Y’hudah HaNasi observed a calf as it was being led to the slaughterhouse. The animal broke away from the herd and hid itself under Rabbi Y’hudah’s clothing, crying for mercy. But Y’hudah pushed it away, saying, ‘Go. This is your destiny.’ They said in heaven, ‘Since he showed not compassion, we will bring suffering to him.’ For many years after this act, Rabbi Y’hudah suffered a series of painful illnesses. One day, Y’hudah’s servant was sweeping the house. She was about to sweep away some young weasels that she found on the floor. ‘Leave them alone,’ Y’hudah said to his housekeeper. Subsequently they spoke of Y’hudah this way in heaven, ‘Since he has shown compassion to these rodents, we will be compassionate with him,’ and he was cured of his illness.”

--from Union for Reform Judaism, “10 Minutes of Torah: Kindness to Animals: Story of the Calf, Babylonian Talmud, ava M’tzia 85a” <http://tmt.urj.net/archives/4jewishethics/032907.htm>

Contemporary References on Animals

Reform Judaism’s commitment to Tikkun Olam has inspired it to tackle a broad range of issues connected with animals. These issues include: endangered species protection, hunting, medical experimentation, the proper care of pets, vegetarianism, and factory-farming.

Endangered Species Protection:

Reform Judaism firmly supports the protection of endangered species and the habitats on which they depend.

“We seek here to affirm the Jewish community’s longstanding commitment to protect biological diversity. We also affirm our conviction that the Endangered Species Act is one of our generation’s richest fulfillments of our biblical destiny as *b’tselem elohim*, created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), with the unique power and responsibility to shape, preserve, and renew creation through the work of our hands, our hearts, and our minds....We are determined, with our allies in other faith communities, to see [the Endangered Species Act] maintained and strengthened as a resource for building our environmental future.”

--from Noah Alliance, “The Entirety of Creation: A Jewish Call to Protect the Endangered Species Act, September 2005,” www.noahalliance.org/resources/jewish.htm.

“Thousands of creatures are at risk of extinction. Worldwide, 25% of mammals, 20% of reptiles, 25% of amphibians, and 34% of fish are in danger of extinction. Destruction of forests is a leading cause...Our heritage calls on us to serve as protectors and defenders of God’s magnificent creations ...Therefore, the Central Conference of American Rabbis...calls upon the federal government to: ... manage all public lands in such a

manner that preserves and restores biological diversity...”

--from Central Conference of American Rabbis, “Protecting Ancient Forest Ecosystems: Resolution adopted at the 111th Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis March, 2000)
<http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/resodisp.pl?file=forest&year=2000>

“We are currently faced with the greatest rate of species extinction worldwide since the disappearance of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. More than 50,000 species become extinct worldwide each year (that’s five to six each hour!)...Species extinction rates are greatly accelerated by the effects of global climate change on the critical habitats and ecosystems of countless species. When the polar bear was listed as threatened in April of 2008, many environmentalists asserted that this is the first of many examples of a species directly threatened by the changing climate....If we fail to stop this crisis, fully one-quarter of the world’s species could be lost forever within 50 years.”

--from Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, “Endangered Species: The Basics”
http://rac.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=1851&pge_prg_id=8610&pge_id=2405

“Despite the progress made in the past 35 years, there is still much to be done to raise awareness about the threats to our ecology including animal species. Among the most urgent is the... plan to waive more than 35 environmental laws, including the Endangered Species Act, in order to continue construction of the U.S.-Mexico border fence. Across the country, the gray wolf, the polar bear, jaguars and scores of other precious animals that are an integral part of our nation’s ecology, risk devastation at the hands of irresponsible human actions on the part of individuals and government policies at all levels.”

--from Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, “Reform Jewish Movement Commemorates Endangered Species Day, Condemns Border Fence Plans Threatening Biological Diversity in the Southwest,” http://rac.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=2794&pge_prg_id=7864

Hunting:

Hunting for sport violates the principles of tsa’ar ba-alei chayim (pain to living things) and of bal tashchit (wastefulness), according to the URJ. Hunting for food is permitted, but kashrut regulations place restrictions on it.

“Of course we Jews could not consume the meat of an animal taken during a hunt unless it had been ritually slaughtered. This was possible when the animal was trapped. Such hunting was permissible to provide food (M. Shab. 72.), but it was considered wrong to hunt merely for sport. This was cruel to animals and was also considered wasteful (Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed, Chap. 48; Meir of Rothenburg, Responsa #27).”

--from Union for Reform Judaism, "10 Minute of Torah: Was Adam a Vegetarian?" by Mara Judd, <http://tmt.urj.net/archives/4jewishethics/071207.html>

Medical Experimentation:

The CCAR states that while medical research on animals is permissible if it will save human lives, animals must not be subjected to pain during these experiments or be used in "frivolous" experiments such as cosmetic testing.

"Human life must be saved if it is at all possible...When dealing with experimental animals we should be quite certain that they are not subjected to pain or used for frivolous reasons as for example cosmetic experimentation."

--from Central Conference of American Rabbis, "New American Reform Responsa: Jewish Involvement in Genetic Engineering," <http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/respdisp.pl?file=154&year=narr>

The Proper Care of Pets:

The CCAR asserts that Reform Jews have a moral obligation to ensure that all domesticated animals are properly fed, rested, and given medical attention when necessary. Cruelty to pets is prohibited, including the abandonment or euthanizing of unwanted pets and the uncontrolled breeding of pets.

"One should not consider acquiring an animal unless one has the means to feed it (J Ket 4.8) and a person should then feed his animals before feeding himself (Git 62a; Yad Hil Avadim 9.8)."

--from Central Conference of American Rabbis, "New American Reform Responsa: Jewish Involvement in Genetic Engineering," <http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/respdisp.pl?file=154&year=narr>

"The Sabbath commandment of the Decalogue insisted that animals rest on the Sabbath along with their masters (20.9; Deut 5.14)...Sick or injured animals were to be healed if that was possible (Shab 144a; Ker 22a; Tos M K 2.11)."

--from Central Conference of American Rabbis, "New American Reform Responsa: A Blessing for Pets," <http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/respdisp.pl?file=81&year=narr>

"The care of animals was always an important part of our tradition. We would, therefore, say that the heirs [of a man who left behind a dog when he died] are duty bound to either care for this animal which was important to their father or to find an appropriate home for it. They may certainly not put it to sleep or abandon it."

--from Central Conference of American Rabbis, "New American Reform Responsa: Responsibility Toward Pets," <http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/respdisp.pl?file=240&year=narr>

“The overpopulation of dogs and cats has become a tragic problem, due to uncontrolled breeding. The discarding of these animals results in the annual killing of more than three and one half million [a year]...The Jewish concept of tsa-ar ba-a-lei chay-yim, of mercy toward animals, has always been a principle of our faith. The Central Conference of American Rabbis advocates the strengthening of humane legislation to eradicate the problem of stray dogs and cats and their subsequent destruction in our country.”

--from Central Conference of American Rabbis, “Overpopulation of Cats and Dogs,”
<http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/resodisp.pl?file=animals&year=1979>

Vegetarianism:

According to the URJ, God created humans to be vegetarian, but allowed us to eat meat after the Flood as a concession to human weakness. Today, we may eat meat if we choose, but we should consider minimizing the amount we eat in order to improve our health and reduce our environmental impact.

“[In Genesis 1:29-30, t]here is no mention that humans may kill and consume the animals...human beings are explicitly told to consume plants (just like the animals)...Only after the flood of Noah are humans told...‘Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat... (Genesis 9:2-3)... Why did God’s mind change regarding human food consumption?... When God concedes to letting humans consume flesh after the Flood, God admits people’s weakness and compromises with it.”

--from Union for Reform Judaism, “10 Minute of Torah: Was Adam a Vegetarian?” by Mara Judd,
<http://tmt.urj.net/archives/4jewishethics/071207.html>

“While Judaism mandates that people should be very careful about preserving their health and their lives, countless scientific studies have linked the consumption of animal products directly to heart disease, stroke, many forms of cancer and other chronic degenerative diseases...While Judaism teaches that ‘the earth is the Lord’s’ (Psalm 24:1) and that we are to be God’s partners and co-workers in preserving the world, animal-based agriculture 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 other environmental damage... I believe that kashrut today should be interpreted to include the elimination of animal products or the reduced consumption of animal products that are raised under more humane, environmentally-sustainable conditions.”

--from Union for Reform Judaism, “Ten10 Minutes of Torah/Eilu V’eilu/Volume 12 Week 1: Kashrut in Modern-Day Reform Society,” by Richard Schwartz, <http://uri.org/torah/ten/eilu/v12w1>

Factory Farming:

Factory farming often violates Jewish moral principles, especially the principles of tsa'ar ba'alei chayim, bal tashchit, and tikkun olam. Reform Jews should strive to purchase meat that has been raised in the most humane manner possible.

“While Judaism forbids tsa'ar ba'alei chayim, inflicting unnecessary pain on animals, those animals raised on ‘factory farms’ live in cramped, confined spaces and are often drugged, mutilated and denied fresh air, sunlight, exercise and any enjoyment of life before they are slaughtered and eaten...While Judaism mandates bal tashchit, that we are not to waste or unnecessarily destroy anything of value, and we are not to use more than is needed to accomplish a purpose, animal agriculture requires the wasteful use of grain, land, water, energy and other resources...While Judaism stresses that we are to assist the poor and share our bread with hungry people, over seventy percent of the grain grown in the United States is fed to animals destined for slaughter, while an estimated twenty million people worldwide die due to hunger and its effects each year...Perhaps the Reform Movement should encourage its members to base the foods that they eat on what may be deemed ‘tikkun-kosher.’ In this way their food can be part of a tikkun, a healing or repair...By doing so, we should keep in mind that God’s compassion is over the entire world and its creatures...”

--from Union for Reform Judaism, “Ten Minutes of Torah/Eilu V'eilu/Volume 12 Week 1: Kashrut in Modern-Day Reform Society by Richard Schwartz, <http://urj.org/torah/ten/eilu/v12w1>

“‘Farmed’ fish are raised under very crowded conditions, necessitating the use of large amounts of pesticides, and causing many environmental and health problems.”

--from Union for Reform Judaism, “Ten Minutes of Torah/Eilu V'eilu/Volume 12, Week 4: Concluding Statements,” by Richard Schwartz, <http://urj.org/torah/ten/eilu/v12w4/>

“We have to consider that ‘free-range’ typically is still far from humane, that almost ten billion chickens are slaughtered annually each year in the U.S. alone and that chicken industries will wage a fierce battle to prevent changes that will reduce their profits. It would be great if the Reform movement would state that those who eat meat should only eat meat that is certified humane, and that Judaism opposes eating animal products from modern factory farms, the kind you get in virtually every restaurant and supermarket, including meat labeled kosher.”

--from Union for Reform Judaism, “Ten Minutes of Torah/Eilu V'eilu/Volume 12, Week 4: Concluding Statements,” by Richard Schwartz, <http://urj.org/torah/ten/eilu/v12w4/>

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For more information, visit The Humane Society of the United States Faith Outreach program at www.humanesociety.org/faith