

TO RAISE ANIMALS: ANIMALS AND US

This chapter is an excerpt from Min Ha'Aretz, a forthcoming Hebrew school curriculum from Behrman House, 2016.

Learning objective: To spark discussions around the ethical treatment of animals based on Jewish and secular, ancient and contemporary texts.

Materials: Some of the four activities in this chapter have a writing component or texts, which will require either copies of the activity or pen and paper.

Estimated length: 10-90 minutes, depending on how many of the following activities you run.

Instructions: The following activities and discussion-starters can be run in sequence, or you can pick and choose from them. These are designed for 10 year olds and up and are a great rainy day activity.

Intro

Judaism contains rich and diverse traditions about how we should relate to animals. Even though some texts may seem to point in opposite directions, one thing is clear: our texts express deep concern about treating animals with respect, both for the sake of the animals themselves and to cultivate the virtue of *rachamim*, compassion within people. Compassion toward animals is referred to as *tza'ar ba'alei chayim* (literally, [do not cause] suffering to living beings).

The Talmudic rabbis who lived between 1400 and 2000 years ago applied the principle of *tza'ar ba'alei chayim* primarily to two groups of animals: animals raised for meat and animals used for labor. Today, few of us use animals for labor, but the ethical questions raised by the use of animals for meat are more poignant than ever. How should *tza'ar ba'alei chayim* affect our food choices today?

1. Introducing Compassion for Animals

Jewish tradition tells us that we should not view animals as created only for the sake of human pleasure. Yet, at the same time, Jewish law has authorized the killing of animals to produce meat and other goods that humans desire. How do we reconcile the idea that animals were created for their own purposes by God with the permission Jewish tradition gives to use animals for our own purposes?

In this story, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi struggled with this question and changed his ways over the course of his life.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was sick for many years but he was cured, as he had become ill, through a strange happening.

He was once walking to the House of Study, when a calf, which was being driven to slaughter, broke loose and came up to the Rabbi, buried its head in the folds of Rabbi's clothes and wept, appearing to plead with him to save it from death. The Rabbi said to the calf: "Go to your fate, for to this end you were created." At this, a Heavenly Voice proclaimed from Heaven that, as the Rabbi had not had compassion on one of God's creatures, he should be punished with physical suffering.

For thirteen years this holy Rabbi suffered, and then one day he was healed just as suddenly. It happened like this:

A maidservant in the Rabbi's house was once cleaning a room when she found some newly-born weasels. She wanted to put them out of the house, but the Rabbi restrained her. "God has compassion on all creatures," he said, "and human beings must follow God's example. Leave the baby weasels in the house." A Heavenly Voice at once proclaimed that, just as Rabbi had had compassion on God's creatures, so should compassion be taken on him. He was immediately cured.

Adapted from Talmud, Bava Metzia 85a

In this story Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi both displays lack of compassion for animals and compassion for animals. List some examples of ways that people today are compassionate toward animals or not compassionate toward animals:

Compassionate:

Not-Compassionate

Has there been any time in your life that an animal "asked" you for help? How did you respond?

2. Eating Animals

Today, eating meat is a complicated issue. In the Torah we see that the controversy goes as far back as creation itself. In the first creation story in Genesis 1, God prohibits the eating of animals, and gives Adam and Eve only plants to eat.

I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.

Genesis 1:29

Then, after the great flood that takes place in the story of Noah and the Ark, God gives Noah and his sons a blessing to repopulate the earth, and gives them permission to eat animals:

The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given you're your hands. Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it.

Genesis 9:2-4

What are all of the questions do you have about this text?

What responsibilities do you think come along with the permission to eat animals?

Food Fact!: Some Jews today subscribe to a way of eating known as "MOOSHY," which means "meat only on Shabbat and Yom Tov (holidays)."

3. What do you think?

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Jewish tradition supports both the eating of meat, and vegetarian eating.



Rav Kook, left, the first Ashkenazi chief Rabbi in the land of Israel, thought that in an ideal world everyone would be vegetarians, and that God’s permission to eat meat was only a temporary concession. But he himself famously ate a small amount of chicken every Shabbat, perhaps to acknowledge that we are not yet living in a perfect world.

Maimonides, second from left, a doctor and philosopher, criticized both excessive meat-eating and strict meat-less eating, preferring a moderate diet. He advocated for eating meat on a rare and regular schedule – that is, eating it only on joyous occasions such as Shabbat, but indeed eating it each week.

Today, some rabbis and leaders, like Rabbis Katy Allen and Art Green, right, advocate for a vegetarian diet as a “new kosher.” Because of how factory farmed animals are raised, and because of environmental concerns, she argues that only vegetarian food is “fit to eat.”

Split into three different groups corresponding to each of the Jewish viewpoints below and with your group look at the fact sheet that corresponds to your position.

Based on what you have learned in this lesson, and your own feelings, with your group prepare a defense of your rabbi’s position. After each group presents, vote on which group was most convincing or that you most agree with personally!

- A. Rav Kook: In an ideal world, we would be vegetarians; but the world is not yet perfect, so we still eat some meat
- B. Maimonides: We should eat everything in moderation, and eat meat on joyous occasions
- C. Rabbis Katy Allen and Art Green: Eating a plant-based diet is a way to can uncover inner strength and holiness, and live out kashrut today

4. Eating Animals from Factory Farms

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Today the question of eating meat has become more ethically important because of the typical methods used to produce meat, milk, and eggs. Most animals raised for food today are raised on industrial farms unlike anything the ancient rabbis imagined. Most chickens raised for eggs are kept in cramped cages their entire lives, never seeing sunlight. Most chickens raised for meat have been bred to grow so large so fast that they have trouble even walking without pain. Cattle naturally eat grass, but most cattle today are fed a diet of grains for the last few months of their lives that makes them gain weight quickly but also makes them sick.

Do not buy an animal before buying food for that animal to eat.

Talmud Yerushalmi, Ketubot 4:8

You must not sit down to your own meal before you have fed your pets and barnyard animals.

Talmud Bavli, Berachot 40a

When an animal must be killed for food, it must be done in such a way that the pain to animal is as little as possible.

Talmud Bavli, Baba Metzia 31a-32b

Today, there are many individuals and groups working on animal welfare issues. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is the largest animal protection group in the US, with 11 million members from many different religions. Here is how they describe contemporary farming:

The vast majority of meat, eggs, and dairy products sold in American grocery chains and restaurants comes from animals raised in intensive-confinement systems (so-called factory farms) that impose significant stress on the animals in pursuit of efficiency. The result is that living creatures are often being treated as biological "machines."

The HSUS promotes eating with conscience and embracing the Three Rs—reducing the consumption of meat and other animal-based foods; refining the diet by avoiding products from the worst production systems (e.g., switching to cage-free eggs); and replacing meat and other animal-based foods in the diet with plant-based foods."

- HSUS

In Talmudic times, most people were farmers and so it was natural to think about how people interacted *directly* with farmed animals. Today, most of us don't interact directly with animals

but most of us eat them, so the HSUS guidelines focus on how we should eat rather than how we should directly treat animals.

How are these three rules from the Talmud similar or different from the secular idea of the “Three Rs” presented by the HSUS?

Food Fact!: Some schools, like public schools in Los Angeles, California and Houston, Texas are now participating in a program called “meatless Mondays” where only vegetarian meals are served on Mondays.

Take Away

Jewish tradition offers powerful resources that allow us to reflect on meat-eating today, but we have to apply that knowledge to a farming system that is vastly different from biblical times. There are many authentically Jewish ways to respond to the fact that today most farmed animals are raised on factory farms, from eating meat with a few restrictions to eating no meat at all.