

Source Sheet: Jewish perspectives on animals

Jewish tradition tells us that we should not view animals as created 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 people desire. How do we reconcile these two ideas? Though diverse Jewish perspectives agree *that* animals matter, there is a huge diversity of views about *how much* they matter and the reasons *why* we should care about animals. What amount of suffering is actually necessary before it violates Jewish Law? Does kashrut promote high enough levels of animal welfare in today's industrial production of meat and other animal products? Jewish law provides us with context to dive into complex questions such as these, which we can then use for modern day application.

Tza'ar baalei chayim, or prevention of unnecessary cruelty to animals, is a core concept in the Torah. Below are a few examples of the many laws that teach us respect for our fellow creatures:

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

– Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 40a

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

– Jerusalem Talmud, Ketubot 4:8

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.

– Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 31a-32b

Throwing stones at a dog or cat or hurting an animal in any way is against Jewish Law.

- Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 128b

Killing an animal for sport or fun is against the Jewish Law.

- Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 18b

If you see the donkey of your enemy lying helpless under its load, you must be sure to help unburden the animal.

-Exodus 23:3-5

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, has compassion for human beings, so does He have compassion for animals.

- Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:1

Additionally, all of creation praises God in its own way, the frogs, the birds and all living things. Below are examples from Perek Shira, a text that tells us how each animal praises God:

The sheep says “God set me down amidst the choicest grasses, leads me to calmest waters.”

-Psalm 23:2

The fish whisper “Praise the sound of the Almighty on the waters, the glory of god thundering.”

-Psalm 29:3

The lion roars “The noble one emerges like a mighty soldier.”

- Isaiah 42:13

The elephant declares “How great are your deeds, almighty one, your thoughts are very deep.”

-Psalm 92:6

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

God said, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.”

-Genesis 1:29

Then, after the great flood that takes place at the time of Noah, God gives Noah and his sons permission to eat animals:

“The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky-everything with which the earth is astir-and upon all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hand. You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it.”

-Genesis 9:2-4

Rabbinic Perspectives on Eating Meat

Jewish tradition supports both the eating of meat and vegetarian eating. Here are three different views:

Rav Avraham Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Palestine, thought that in an ideal world everyone would be vegetarian, 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.

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), rabbi, doctor, and philosopher, believed that it was important to treat animals raised for food with respect since animals feel physical and emotional pain. Yet, Maimonides still taught that a balanced diet, which included meat, was the most healthful and most advisable.

Today, **Rabbi Katy Allen** and Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb advocate for a vegetarian diet they call a "new kosher." Because of how factory farmed animals are raised, and because of environmental concerns, they argue that only vegetarian foods are "fit to eat".