

## Compassion for all Creatures

By Rabbi David Sears

"God is good to all, and His mercy is upon all His works" (Psalms 145:9). This verse is the touchstone of the rabbinic attitude toward animal welfare. The Torah espouses compassion for all creatures and affirms the sacredness of life. These values are reflected by the laws prohibiting cruelty to animals and obligations for humans to treat animals with care.

A basic rule of Jewish ethics is the emulation of God's ways. In the words of the Talmud, "Just as He is merciful, so shall you be merciful" (Tractate *Sotah* 14a). Therefore compassion for all creatures is not only God's business; it is everyone's. Moreover, rabbinic tradition describes God's mercy as above all other divine attributes. Thus, compassion must not be reckoned as one good trait among others; rather, it is central to the entire Jewish approach to life.

As the Maharal of Prague (1512-1609) observed, "Love of all creatures is also love of God; for whoever loves the One, loves all the works that He has made."

Benevolence entails action. Beyond moral sentiment, Judaism mandates kindness toward animals in religious law; prohibits their abuse; and obligates their owners concerning their well-being.

One of the main human uses of animals is for food. As a concession to the desire for meat, the Torah permitted the slaughter of animals to Noah and his descendants.<sup>1</sup> However, the permission to slaughter animals for food was given within a complex set of limitations, an important part of which is concern for the suffering of those creatures who forfeit their lives for our benefit. The humane handling of livestock immediately prior to slaughter is required by *halakhah* (Jewish law).

In today's food industry, treatment of animals prior to slaughter remains problematic. Until recent times, animals belonging to Jews typically were raised on private farms, under relatively humane conditions (although no doubt there were some farms with bad conditions, then as now). The *shochet* (Jewish ritual slaughterer) was a familiar figure to his community; he worked for each customer on an individual basis, and probably slaughtered large animals relatively infrequently. In modern society all this has changed. Since the 1940s we have witnessed the rise of "factory farms," which today produce beef cattle by the millions and fowl by the billions every year for human consumption (for detailed statistics based on USDA figures, see [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov)). The Jewish community ineluctably has been enlisted into this system; it is not commercially feasible for kosher meat suppliers to raise their own livestock, and none do so.

The meat industry has developed systems of raising animals that have exponentially increased production and profits. According to the methods of factory farming, animals are commonly raised in intensely crowded, artificial environments in which their

emotional needs are largely ignored. In the United States, the Federal Animal Welfare Act specifically excludes animals raised for food.

The late Rabbi Aryeh Carmell of the Association of Orthodox Scientists of Great Britain and faculty member of Israel's D'var Yerushalayim Yeshiva, wrote: "It seems doubtful ... that the Torah would sanction factory farming, which treats animals as machines, with apparent insensitivity to their natural needs and instincts. This is a matter for decision by halakhic authorities" (*Masterplan: Judaism It's Programs, Meanings, Goals* (1991), p. 69).

However, there are factory farms that are exceptions to the rule. In the belief that animal slaughter can be humane, animal scientist Dr. Temple Grandin of Colorado State University in particular has pioneered efforts to improve animal welfare conditions. Dr. Grandin created a set of humane standards under the aegis of the American Meat Institute (AMI). Many of these standards have been taken up by factory farms, but they are not legally required.

Inhumane practices have a long, dark past in the American food industry, and the Jewish community cannot be blamed for them. However, we must not implicitly condone such practices, rationalizing that we have not directly violated Jewish law. The establishment of higher humane standards is a moral undertaking for which we, as willing participants in the system, must take responsibility. Implementing change is certainly within our reach. The real question is if enough people care.

The Talmud (Tractate *Berakhot* 20b) states that the Jewish people are praiseworthy for their desire to serve God 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? By engaging in acts of compassion, we become worthy of the blessing of our sages (Tractate *Shabbat* 151b): "God will show mercy to those who are merciful."

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