

What We Owe Our Fellow Animals

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In 2006, the Sioux City *Journal* reported that state inspectors had found animal cruelty at the Agriprocessors kosher slaughter house in Postville, Iowa: “[V]ideo taken at the plant in 2004 . . . shows steers thrashing and struggling to get up and walk after their throats had been slit. . . . and that some appeared to be conscious as workers pulled out their tracheas to speed up bleeding. Agriprocessors ‘did not appear to be doing anything to assess if an animal was still conscious after the rabbi had performed the ritual slaughter.’”

The charge was not that kosher slaughter is inherently cruel. Instead, the claim was that Agriprocessors was not living up to the standards of Iowa law, let alone the “higher standard” touted in kosher hot dog ads.

Agriprocessors denied the charges, and indeed seemed indifferent.

This week’s Torah portion, on the other hand, suggests that we are commanded to pay attention to animals’ well-being: If one comes upon a birds’ nest, with eggs or fledglings, one is permitted to take the eggs or chicks for food, but must permit the mother to fly away.

At first blush, a logical explanation of that commandment is that it ensures propagation of the species. Eggs will not hatch and fledglings will not survive if their mother is taken for food. On the other hand, if we eat only the eggs or the young, the mother bird can still thrive and reproduce yet again.

Medieval rabbinic commentators though, assert that kindness to animals is the reason for this mitzvah. Maimonides reminds us that Jewish law is replete with commandments intended to avoid animal suffering, a category of sin called *tsar ba’alei chayim*. We take pity on the mother bird and are enjoined never to be cruel to animals. We are permitted to eat meat but must not cause undue pain and suffering to animals in the process.

Nachmanides disagrees with Maimonides. The Sephardic sage insists that pity for the bird herself is not the reason for the commandment. Instead, he teaches that the commandment is intended for our own human moral development. Nachmanides reminds us that “Butchers and slaughterers [can] become hardened to suffering by their occupation.” Commandments that restrict which animals can be slaughtered are intended, he says, to “inculcate humanity in us.” In other words, humans, not animals, are the ultimate targets of the commandment.

Indeed, modern social science has taught us of a remarkable correlation between cruelty to animals and violence toward other humans. Not only on TV do serial killers begin their life of crime with cruelty to animals.

Agriprocessors, too, was as indifferent to humans as to animals. Two years after it was investigated for animal cruelty, federal immigration authorities raided the same facility. There, they found hundreds of immigrant workers without work visas. Much more serious than any

immigration crime, these workers had been badly abused by their employers. The government ultimately fined Agriprocessors nearly \$10 million for failing to pay workers and for such violations as deducting from workers' pay to provide safety equipment. Apparently, those who perpetrate animal cruelty are all too quick to disregard the pain of any fellow creatures, even other human beings.

Most of us would never find ourselves happening upon a bird's nest, taking the mother or the young. Most of us would never dream of being cruel to cats and dogs like a future serial killer. And yet, if we eat meat, and I do, we risk participating in gross indifference to animal welfare. Unlike our ancestors, we do not live amongst the cattle and sheep destined to become steak and lamb chops. Most are raised inhumanely, far from our sight.

Yes, free range chickens to exist. And some cattle really are grass-fed. Nevertheless, most affordable American meat, dairy, and eggs are raised in industrial settings. Cattle are fattened with corn, not their natural diet, on feed lots deep in their own excrement, their feet never touching the Earth. Most chickens whose flesh or eggs graces our plates live their entire lives in small cages in dark hen houses.

Ibn Kaspi, a Separdic sage in medieval France, insists that Torah laws like the one we read tonight are intended to make us more humble, by reminding us of our kinship with our fellow animals. According to this line of thinking, we understand why we mustn't be cruel to one another. By extending the prohibition against cruelty from humans to other animals, "The Torah wished to make us conscious of our own status, to remove pride and self-importance." Only an arrogant person, lacking in humility, who imagines him or herself of so much higher status, would inflict cruelty. So Ibn Kaspi concludes: "The Torah inculcates in us a sense of our modesty . . . that we should be ever cognizant of the fact that we are of the same stuff as the ass and the mule."

Tonight, let us resolve to be humble, and let us be kind to the animals with whom we share planet Earth. As we contemplate the laws of tonight's portion, let us learn more about the animals we eat. If we are able to afford beautiful clothes and fine wine, let us pay the extra dollars and cents for meat, dairy, and eggs that have been raised humanely. As we are kind to the pets who bless our homes, let us resolve to remove animal cruelty from our land. Then, let our treatment of our fellow animals be pleasing in the sight of the One who created us all.

Amen.