

Congregation B'nai Israel
Friday Night Shabbat Service
August 7, 2026
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D'var Torah: “Sacred *Torah*, Sacred Places, and Sacred Animals: Paths to The Shekhinah”

This week's Torah portion is extensive, mindboggling, and full of life instructions. On this Shabbat, we are reading from *Torah*'s fifth book referred to as “Devarim” (Hebrew meaning “Words”) or.... If you a native Arkansan, then the fifth book of *Torah* is commonly referred as, “The Book of Deuteronomy” (Ozark English: “Tha'Book uv'Dewter-ono-mee”). The *Torah* portion, “Re'eh” (Reh-ay) (Hebrew meaning “See”), can be found in *Deuteronomy* from Chapter 11:26 to Chapter 16:17. Here we can find a whole smorgasbord of commandments from G-D, also found in previous books of *Torah*. So, we've got your *mitzvot* - ranging from the strict prohibitions against committing idolatry to the goodness of tithing to community; to the necessity of charity (tzedakah) for those in need; to the importance of observing Three Pilgrimage Festivals (Shavuot, Sukkot, and Pesach); and to fulfilling dietary observances frequently referred to as *kosher/kashrut*.

In my University of Central Arkansas *World Religions* courses, most students know very little about Jews and Judaism. Based on what they have heard, ‘kosher’ is just another word for - “Jews do not eat pork.” What they are unaware of is how *tahor* (Hebrew meaning “clean or kosher”) includes not just what we are to eat, but also how food is prepared. *Kashrut* extends to all eating utensils, dinner plates, cookware, appliances, and some type of assurance that kosher animals being consumed did not have to suffer from birth to slaughter. Some animals are deemed *tamei* (Hebrew meaning “unclean”). It is not because they are inherently evil and unethical. Unclean animals do not chew both their

cud and have split hooves. Fish must have both scales and fins. No eating of turkey vultures, coyotes, mosquitos, snapping turtles, copperhead snakes, catfish, cats, and dogs. Questions: Are only kosher animals deserving of our love and care? How are non-kosher animals to be treated? Can my pet dog be unclean and a blessing at the same time? Can my pet cat be unclean and a curse at the same time? Surely, that question does not refer to MY precious cats: Taki and Ethel.

Protection of all non-human animals, both clean and unclean, are mitzvot taught throughout *Torah*. Here are four out of several commandments concerning treatment of animals:

1. Work animals, like horses and cows, must rest on Shabbat (*Exodus 20:10*).
2. Do not kill a mother animal and her offspring on the same day (*Leviticus 22:28*).
3. Do not secure a work animal's mouth to stop it from eating grain while working (*Deuteronomy 25:4*).
4. Never take a mother bird and her eggs from the nest at the same time (*Deuteronomy 22:6-7*).

Notice how these four commandments do not refer to Jewish dietary instructions. Instead, they are commandments luring us (calling us) to take ethical stands against acts of animal cruelty. But there is something else: As Jews, we are commanded to be compassionate and merciful to all animals, especially on the holy day of Shabbat.

Thankfully, Union of Reform Judaism has adopted positions opposing cruelty against animals with goals of stopping - stopping the emotional and physical agony – stopping the hunger - and stopping feelings of hopelessness. We are just referring to animals. Right?

Rabbi Emily Langowitz, URJ's Executive Director of Women's Leadership Institute, summarized in her blog that Reform Judaism's commitment to stand up against the *purposeful* suffering of animals is essential to Jewish life and living.

Surprisingly, Rabbi Langowitz also posted a reference to *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh*. This is a little handbook written in the 1800s listing numerous traditional Jewish observances, specifically for the Jewish working classes unable to pray in synagogue all day. The handbook is still mostly studied and followed to some degree by our Orthodox Jewish sisters and brothers today. Rabbi Langowitz quotes from the handbook, “It is forbidden to inflict pain on any living creature. On the contrary, it is our duty to relieve the pain of any creature, even if it is without an owner or belongs to someone else.”

Today, we Jews around the world love our pets. They are our special friends, beloved family members, and companions we always wanted but were never able to have. The Shekhinah (G-D's Presence) is all around us in so many ways - watching over both animals and people: those who are stray, without a loving home, cold, and afraid. I don't have to ask questions: Do your pets smile at you? Do they love you? Do they express their emotions to you?

There is a secret: The *Shekhinah* is not only in an external world swirling around us. G-D is with us here - in this place: our synagogue. G-D's Presence can also be found at home – emanating from the shining faces of our beloved friends and gentle companions. As we depart for home, let us remember: Tonight, G-D's loving presence is waiting for you at the door. Shabbat Shalom.