

The Vision of Eden: Animal Welfare and Vegetarianism in Jewish Law and Mysticism

by David Sears Quotes

“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, appearing in a number of contexts in Torah literature. At first glance, its relevance may be somewhat obscure. It speaks of God, not man. However, a basic rule of Jewish ethics is the emulation of God’s ways. In the words of the Talmudic sages: “Just as He clothes the naked, so shall you clothe the naked. Just as He is merciful, so shall you be merciful...”¹

And shall I not take pity on Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, as well as many cattle? (Jonah 4:11) Commentary: “As well as many cattle.” The cattle of the city are innocent and deserving of compassion; moreover, they are many (Rabbi David Kimchi, ad loc.).²

Primarily due to misunderstandings surrounding the Jewish method of slaughter (shechitah), many uninformed Jews and non-

¹ Location 438 Kindle Ed

² Loc 563

Jews assume that Judaism is less concerned with animal welfare than other religions. If anything, the opposite is true. From its earliest origins, Judaism has been distinguished by its concern for the humane treatment of animals, often in marked contrast to surrounding religions and cultures. Where the wall paintings and bas-reliefs of ancient Assyria and Egypt extol the drama of the hunt, the Torah associates such pursuits exclusively with villains such as Nimrod and Esau. Not only is hunting for sport forbidden; to the Jewish mind, it is almost unthinkable. Where Roman citizens flocked to attend animal fights in the Coliseum, such gruesome entertainments were unheard of among the Jews. According to the Talmud, animal fights epitomize the “dwelling place of scorners” so vehemently decried by the Book of Psalms. Indeed, the author of Chavas Da’as (a classic work on Jewish law) deems one who attends a bullfight or similar event “an accomplice to murder.”³

Once a calf being led to slaughter thrust its head into the skirts of Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi]’s robe and began to bleat plaintively. “Go,” he said, “for this is why you were created.” Because he spoke without compassion, he was afflicted [at the hand of Heaven]. Then one day, his maidservant was cleaning his house and came upon some young weasels. She was about to chase them away with a broom, when Rabbi Yehudah said to her, “Let them be—for it is

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written: ‘His tender mercies are upon all His works;’ (Psalms 145:9). They said [in Heaven], “Since he is merciful, let him be treated with mercy.” [Thereafter, his pain ceased] (Talmud: Bava Metzia 85a).⁴

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⁴ Loc 1598