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Concern for Helping Animals in Israel

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What responsibilities do we have toward the animals in our direct care?

Theme:

Jewish tradition doesn't just require that we **not** inflict pain on animals; it requires **positive actions** toward the animals in our care.

Sources:

- A. Several stories about how Noah and his family fed all the animals in their care.
- B. Talmud: a human cannot eat before feeding his/her animal.
- C. Talmud: a human cannot have animals unless he or she is able to take good care of them.
- D. Story of Rabbi Berlin and the hungry fowl on Rosh Hashanah.

Talmud and Feeding Animals

The Talmud says that before people eat a meal, they have to feed the animals in their care. (Gitten 64) The Talmud also says that before people decide to take a work or companion animal into their home, they must first make sure they can feed the animal properly.

(Yevanot 15)

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin

It was Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, and Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin, head of the famous Yeshiva (Talmudic Academy) of Volozhin came home from the synagogue. His household was waiting for him so they could all sit down to the festival dinner.

Before he said the Kiddish (blessing on the wine starting the meal), Rabbi Berlin asked if the chickens had been fed. When he found out they hadn't, he insisted it be done immediately. The key to the barn was missing, however.

After the members of the household searched in vain for the key, Rabbi Berlin instructed them to call in a non-Jewish neighbor to break the lock. Only after the barn door was opened and the fowl fed did the Rabbi sit down with his family to the holiday meal.

Rabbi Shlomo the Admor

In Jerusalem several centuries ago there lived a man as great in learning as in piety. His name was Rabbi Shlomo the Admor, from Zuahil. Every day Rabbi Shlomo would walk on foot to the Western Wall to pray for the handicapped and the oppressed.

Rabbi Shlomo lived in great poverty. His small hut had only a bed, a table, and a chair, but he managed to care for many cats in his home. The cats would lie on his bed, waiting for him to return from the Western Wall. Rabbi Shlomo took great care to feed all his cats properly.

Rabbi Yitzhak Elchana

Rabbi Yitzhak Elchana, the rabbi of Dovno and Lithuania, was very fond of animals. His cat always sat on the back of the couch, behind his head. A neighborhood dog would regularly come to his house during meals.

Rabbi Hiya bar Abba

Rabbi Hiya bar Abba was a scholar during the period when great academies were holding the discussions on Jewish law that later became the Talmud. One day at a lecture given by Rav, the great scholar, Rabbi Hiya could not concentrate. Rav noticed that the Rabbi's mind was wandering and asked him why. Rabbi Hiya replied, "I'm worried about my donkey. She's about to give birth and I'm afraid she might catch cold and die."

Midrash Rabba

Pioneers in Israel

In the early years of the rebuilding of the Land of Israel, pioneers founded an agricultural society in the lower Galilee. One of the laws of the society was "It is forbidden to leave work animals outside in the afternoon without shelter from the burning rays of the sun. Care must also be taken that the animals are kept healthy and given food and water on time."

Questions for Students:

1. Is the requirement to feed animals properly based primarily on self-interest, according to the Jewish tradition?
2. Why should it matter if the animal is fed after we eat or before we eat? What does it tell us about the Jewish tradition that animals must be fed before we eat?
3. What is the significance of the fact that both Noah and Joseph were called "tzaddik" because they dedicated themselves to feeding people **and** animals?
4. Carriage horses, race horses, and greyhound racing dogs are worked very hard. Frequently, when they become injured, old, or fail to perform well, they are neglected, destroyed, or sold (sometimes as pets, often as animal food). What do you think about people who make their horses or dogs work very hard and don't feed them well because new ones can be cheaply bought if these die? Is it right to do this?