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Why does Judaism require that nonhuman animals be allowed to rest on Shabbat?

Theme:

Shabbat is regarded as a foretaste of the Messianic Age. The Messianic Age will restore the original harmony between human and nonhuman animals. Requiring people to let their nonhuman animals rest on Shabbat creates a consciousness that the Messianic Age will also be one of peace between human and nonhuman animals as well as between nations.

Sources:

- A. Various Torah verses about animals resting on Shabbat.
- B. Quotes from Isaiah about Messianic Age.
- C. Rabbi Kook on the Messianic Age restoring the original harmony between humans and animals.
- D. Story of Rabbi Abramtzi.

Isaiah

In the ancient kingdom of Judea, the prophet Isaiah fearlessly told the people and their kings that they must practice justice. He shared with them — and us — his vision of a future of mercy and peace for all. He told the people that in that time, the Messianic Age:

The wolf will dwell with the lamb
and the leopard with the kid repose.
The calf and the lion cub and
baby sheep (will be) together.
A young child will be their steward.
The cow and the bear will eat together;
their young ones will repose with each other.
The lion will eat grass like the cow....
No one will cause harm or destroy in all My holy mountain,
for the knowledge of God will have spread all over the
earth like the waters that cover the seabed.

Isaiah 11:6-9

Yohanan ben Toraita

A pious Jew once owned a cow who he took care of very well, feeding her regularly and letting her rest on the Sabbath. But times were bad and he lost all he had. Finally, he couldn't even feed the cow and he sold her to a non-Jewish farmer.

The cow worked behind the plow all week. On the Sabbath, the owner harnessed her to the plow as usual, but she refused to work — she was used to resting on the Sabbath.

The non-Jew asked the Jew about what the Sabbath meant and why Jews were required to let their animals rest on that day, just as people rested. The Jew explained the matter and the more he talked, the more the non-Jew became interested in Judaism. He began to study the religion and eventually became a Jew himself. He took the new name of "Yohanan ben Toraita" — son of the cow — in honor of the Sabbath-observing cow who set an example for him in the observance of shabbat that led to his becoming a Jew.

Rabbi Abramtzi

Rabbi Abramtzi was a man full of compassion for all living things. He would not walk on the grass of the field lest he trample it down. He was very careful not to tread on grasshoppers or crawling insects. If a dog came to the door of his house, he would instruct the members of his household to feed the animal. In winter he would scatter crumbs of bread and seed on the windowsills. When sparrows and other birds arrived and began to pick at the food, he could not remove his gaze from them and his face would light up with joy like that of a little child.

He looked after his horses far better than his coachmen did. When traveling, if the coach had to ascend an incline, he would climb down in order to lighten the load, and more often than not he would push the cart from behind. On summer days he would compel his coachman to stop on the way and turn aside to a field in order that the horses could rest and partake of the pure green grass. The rabbi loved these rest periods in the forest. While the horses were grazing, he would sit under a tree and interest himself in a book. At times he would pray in the field or the forest. This gave him great pleasure, for he used to say, "The field and the forest are the most beautiful and finest of the Houses of the Lord."

It happened once that the rabbi was on the road on a Friday. It would take another three hours to reach home. Because of the rain, the road was a mess. The wagon could only proceed with difficulty; the mud gripped the wheels and slowed down its progress. It was midday and they had not even completed half the journey. The horses were tired and worn out. They had no energy to proceed further.

The "tzaddik" (saint) told the driver to stop and to give fodder to the horses, so that they could regain their strength. This was done. Afterwards the journey was continued, but the going was heavy and the wagon sank up to the hubs of the wheels in the mud. In fact it was with the greatest difficulty that the horses maintained their balance in the swampy ground. The vapor of sweat enveloped their skin. Their knees trembled and at any moment they would have to rest. The coachman scolded and urged them on. He then raised his whip on the unfortunate creatures. The tzaddik grabbed him by the elbow and cried out: "This is cruelty to animals, cruelty to animals." The coachman answered in fury: "What do you want me to do? Do you want us to celebrate the Sabbath here?"

"What of it?" replied the rabbi quietly. "It is better that we celebrate the Sabbath here than cause the death of these animals by suffering. Are they not the creatures of the Lord? See how exhausted they are? They have not the energy to take one more step forward." "But what of the Sabbath? How can Jews observe the Sabbath in the forest?" asked the coachman.

"My friend, it does not matter. The Sabbath Queen will come to us also here, for her glory fills the whole world, and particularly in those places where Jews yearn for her. The Lord shall do what is good in His eyes. He will look after us, supply us with our wants and guard us against all evil."

Ben Ami, quoted in Joe Green,
The Jewish Vegetarian Tradition
pp.19-20

Questions for Students:

1. Why should animals be allowed to rest on Shabbat when they are not required to observe Shabbat?
2. Does this law mean that animals have some need to rest and should we respect this as a right?
3. What does the concept of a Messianic Age foresee about what will happen to animals?
4. How does having a real Shabbat, including letting your domestic animals rest, give us a "foretaste" of the Messianic Age?

For Teenagers:

1. Since animals are allowed to roam freely on Shabbat and this is seen as a good thing, what should be our attitude toward factory farming, where animals never get to rest or even lie down?
2. The original creation story envisioned people eating only plant food (Genesis 1:29–30). It was only after the emergence from Noah's Ark that people were grudgingly allowed to eat animals. If the Messianic era is seen as restoring the original harmony between humans and animals, does this mean that people will be vegetarians?
3. One view holds that the laws of Kashruth with all their restrictions were an attempt to make eating meat more difficult and, at a minimum, make people aware of what they were doing. The Kashruth laws require that the shochet inflict a minimum of pain on the animal. Today, however, with shackling and hoisting common practice, various pre-shechita factory methods are completely against the spirit of these laws. Should we be eating kosher meat? Should we be eating meat at all?
4. Should people begin to be vegetarians as a "foretaste" of the Messianic era, just as they observe Shabbat as a "foretaste" of the Messianic era?