

# Soul-Rights Activism

Category: Bereishis, Noach

*Are Jews not allowed to be vegetarians?*

## Eating Meat

A family once shared with me that their son had become observant, and now they were looking for some support to help navigate life with their “new and improved” family member and all the changes he was making.

According to them, their son had always been a vegetarian. But once he started keeping Shabbos, he would stay over at observant families’ homes each week. Everywhere he stayed, he’d get the same question: “Why don’t you eat meat on Shabbos? Isn’t it a mitzvah?” This happened week after week, with him explaining each time that he was vegetarian... until he eventually just gave in and started eating meat again.

The irony? There’s actually no mitzvah in Jewish law that says you *have* to eat meat on Shabbos. The Alter Rebbe writes in his *Shulchan Aruch* about an obligation called *oneg Shabbos*, or “Shabbos delight.”

The idea of *oneg Shabbos* comes from a verse in the Prophet Isaiah (58:13): “If you restrain your foot because of the Shabbos, from performing your affairs on My holy day, and you call the Sabbath a delight...” But what does it mean to delight in Shabbos? The Alter Rebbe explains that it’s about “foods and drinks that are considered pleasurable to them”—whatever foods make a person feel special and bring them joy should be eaten on Shabbos.

He goes on to say, “There is no obligation to eat meat and drink wine on Shabbos; rather, because most people find meat and wine pleasurable, they are encouraged to enjoy those foods” (Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Laws of Shabbos 242:2).

In truth, the entire idea of eating meat is a relatively “new” idea.

# The Original Vegetarians

Just last week, we read the Torah portion of Bereishis, where G-d created Adam and Chava—the famous Adam and Eve. When they were first created, they were only allowed to eat plants. As Rashi explains in Chapter 1, verse 29, “the man and his wife were not allowed to slaughter a living thing and eat meat, but every green herb they could all eat together.” And so it was for over 1,650 years until the Flood, which we read about in this week’s Torah portion.

After the Flood, because people’s strength had declined and they weren’t living as long, G-d permitted Noah and his descendants to eat meat for added strength and health. But along with this new permission came a condition: G-d forbade them from eating the limb of a living animal (Rashi, Bereishis 9:4). So, right from the beginning, the Torah teaches us *tza’ar ba’alei chaim*—the concept that we can’t cause unnecessary pain to animals. While it’s allowed to use animals for food or other human needs, it must be done with the least amount of suffering.

This is especially relevant today, in a world where animal rights are a hot topic and have been for the past 100 years or so. But Judaism has been forbidding unnecessary animal suffering for over 2,000 years! Many of our leading halachic authorities even hold that causing pain to animals is not just a Rabbinical rule, but a Biblical prohibition.

A few years back, a documentary called “Food, Inc.” exposed the modern-day treatment of livestock and poultry raised for food. The film shows animals kept in cramped cages and harsh conditions, to the point that some can’t even stand on their own. There’s no question that the Torah forbids this kind of treatment.

## Animal Rights

Beyond this week’s Torah portion, there are many other sources that bring up *tza’ar ba’alei chaim*, the concept of preventing animal suffering:

1. In the Book of Shmos (Exodus 23:5), the Torah says that if you see the donkey of your enemy struggling under a heavy load, you must help unload it—even though it belongs to someone you don’t get along with—because of *tza’ar ba’alei chaim*, the obligation to ease an animal’s

suffering. And, of course, this applies to anyone's animal, not just your enemy's!

2. In the Shema, a verse we all know, the Torah says, "I will provide grass in your field for your animals, and you will eat and be satisfied." The Talmud (Brachos 40a) teaches from this verse that it's forbidden for a person to eat before feeding their animals.
3. In Devarim (Deuteronomy 25:4), we're commanded, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it's threshing." In other words, if your ox is working in the field, you can't prevent it from eating some of the grain as it works—because that would be causing it unnecessary pain.

And then there's the famous story of Bilaam, the prophet who intended to curse the Jewish people but ended up blessing them instead. The Torah describes how he was traveling on his donkey when suddenly, the donkey veered off the path. Bilaam didn't understand why, so he struck the donkey to get it back on track. This happened twice, and then the donkey finally just lay down, refusing to move. Bilaam struck it again—and then an angel appeared and explained, "I was the one blocking the donkey, because I disapprove of the path you're on."

What's striking here is the first thing the angel says to Bilaam: "Why did you hit your donkey these three times?" You'd think the angel would jump straight to the main issue—stopping Bilaam from cursing the Jewish people. Why even bring up the donkey? Isn't it normal to tap an animal to keep it moving?

The Rebbe explains that this moment shows how seriously we need to take *tza'ar ba'alei chaim*. The very first thing the angel rebukes Bilaam about is that he struck his donkey—teaching us just how careful we should be to avoid causing any unnecessary pain to animals.

## The Animal In You

So why do we need to be sensitive to the pain of animals?

For one thing, they often can't defend themselves. (Unless, of course, we're talking about grizzly bears—those guys might need a mitzvah to be kind to *us*! Definitely not animals that can't stand up for themselves!)

Another reason is that many animals can't even express their pain. At least a dog

or cat will yelp or whine if they're hurting. But some animals stay silent even when they're in pain. That means it's up to us to be aware and compassionate, recognizing that certain actions might cause suffering—and to know that it's our responsibility to avoid doing those things.

In our personal lives, we also have a “living being” inside of us that can suffer silently—our soul. Every Jew has a soul, an actual part of G-d, that came down from Heaven to live inside us. And just like every living being has its own needs, our soul has its needs too.

Our souls need their own kind of nourishment. Just as each animal has its specific food, and humans have theirs, the soul's food is spiritual. Even though we don't physically hear our soul cry out when it's hungry, that doesn't mean it isn't longing for something. The Zohar says it cries with “an inner voice that isn't heard.”

But when we do a mitzvah—like a man putting on tefillin, a woman lighting Shabbos candles, giving charity, or praying—we're giving our soul what it craves.

These days, it feels like everyone has a pet, or, as our friends at PETA might say, an “animal friend.” A good pet owner will dedicate at least 30 minutes a day to walking the dog—or, for cat owners, maybe chasing the cat around the house.

If we're willing to put in that much time for our pets, and for our own physical health, it's only right to put at least that much time into caring for our souls! Call it “soul rights activism.”

So this Shabbos, let's set aside 30 minutes each day to pray a little, study some Torah, do a mitzvah or two, and give our souls the attention they deserve.

It's a new year, after all, and there's no better time to start a positive, spiritual habit.