

How Animal Abuse Impacts Israeli Society

Aviva Cantor

An Israeli youth just out of Army service showing his visiting American cousin around Tel Aviv, came to the Carmel Market where pigeons crammed into cages were being sold. His cousin, terribly upset at the sight, insisted on buying the squashed birds. When she opened the cages and let the pigeons out, they wobbled, fell over and straightened themselves, but could not move around or fly. Children watching the scene pointed to the pigeons' agony and laughed and laughed. The cousin cried. Finally, she fended off the crowd and fed the birds. They eventually become calm, steadied themselves and flew off.

Meanwhile, the ex-soldier had been a silent by-stander, neither commenting nor reacting. When his cousin asked about this later, he said he couldn't afford to let himself feel emotion every time he saw a sad incident. If he did, he would always be having such feelings and this would be dangerous: he would never be able to be strong, to struggle, to fight.

When I heard this story, I thought it provided a clue to the cruel behavior of so many Israelis toward domestic animals—the feral cats and dogs and birds on the street, the overworked, pencil-thin donkeys, horses, camels and mules employed in hauling, whipped mercilessly—as well as extremely confined farm animals. And it might also help us understand what effect this kind of cruelty has on the evolution of Israeli society—and how ending it can influence Israel's future development.

I first witnessed cruelty toward animals when I visited Israel in 1971 and 1972. The children in the Jerusalem shikun where I lived spent their free time torturing cats—behavior their parents, when I protested to them, blew off along the lines of “kids will be kids.” I saw teenage boys sic their dogs on cats and learned of children throwing puppies and kittens off the roof.

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There has been some improvement in recent years. The mass immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union brought with it humane attitudes toward companion animals. Some anti-cruelty legislation has been passed. Various animal protection groups have arisen to engage in public advocacy and rescue efforts. These include an American-Israeli organization, CHAI: Concern for Helping Animals in Israel, whose work involves humane education, the

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neutering of companion animals, rescue work, the building of shelters, and drafting legislation. Volunteers for its *amuta* (non-profit group), HaKol Chai, helped rescue companion animals abandoned by settlers who had evacuated their homes in Gaza in 2005. (Its website is www.chai-online.org.)

Nevertheless, cruelty persists and I find the lack of interest in it and its consequences, even by educators and political leaders, disturbing—not only because I am opposed to animal abuse on ethical grounds, but also because of my concern for how Israeli society is evolving.

The Empathy Connection

Cruelty to animals involves three important aspects that are deeply connected with the character of a society. First is the use of violence to inflict pain on a living, sensitive and vulnerable creature, which engenders and reinforces the suppression of empathy. Second is that inflicting pain with impunity conveys the message that society approves of, condones and/or is indifferent to suffering, and thereby increases the probability that it will be perpetrated repeatedly—and not only against animals. Third, it reinforces the concept that difference from the dominant majority or minority legitimizes scapegoating of out-groups.

Humane (animal rescue, protection, and cruelty prevention) organizations have recognized the connection between the good treatment of animals, character-building in children, and the development of a just society since the 19th century, but it is only fairly recently that this reality is finally being recognized by educators, social workers, and law-enforcement personnel.

Psychiatrists have identified the torturing of animals as a key indicator of emotional disturbance and abuse in children. Authorities often see animal abuse in homes where domestic violence goes unchecked; the torture of pets is frequently used by abusive men as a “warning” to women and children. Consequently, cross-reporting systems have been instituted in many American cities between the police, shelters for domestic violence victims, child protection agencies, and humane societies and animal shelters.

Over eight centuries ago, Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish philosopher, propounded the view that the Scriptural laws

prescribing kindness to animals were designed to serve as training for people to be kind to humans. Dr. Frank Ascione, a social psychologist who has written and lectured extensively about the connections between violence toward animals and toward humans, told a 1994 CHAI conference that children need to learn how to be sensitive to each others' feelings "by watching those around them, by the models they see...and caring for animals may be a vehicle, may be a mechanism by which that caring can be instilled."

Maimonides and other Jewish sages recognized the crucial corollary here: that cruelty to animals trains people in cruelty to humans. As the 19th century German Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote, "do not forget that the boy who...finds delight in

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the convulsions of an injured beetle or the anxiety of a suffering animal will soon also be dumb towards human pain."

Psychologists today recognize that society can encourage and cultivate empathy or denigrate and suppress it, beginning in childhood. Richard Calore, founder of the National Cat Protection Society, once told me that children by nature feel empathy for animals and that they have to be taught to suppress it. Children in Israel who see a dog—or more often, a cat—run over by a hit-and-run driver and left wounded on the road, to be run over repeatedly, learn to suppress their empathy; their behavior will then metastasize from non-human animals to human animals.

The Hefker Factor

The suppression of empathy is a key behavioral prerequisite in enabling the abuse of animals to function as a psycho-philosophical *hachshara* (training ground) for all variations of oppression of humans. This involves the designation by the dominant group in society of those who are "different"—in looks, language, means of mobility and communication, dwelling-places, habits, customs, responses to stimuli, and other forms of social and sexual behavior, and/or organization—as inferior and/or threatening. This designation becomes the basis for the targeting of the specific "different" out-groups as *hefker*—legitimately denied rights, open to abuse with impunity, and subject to an eternal open-season.

When animals are regarded as the fundamental prototype of difference, and difference is equated with inferiority and/or threat, the abuse of animals serves as a model and *hachshara* for the oppression of human *hefker* groups in the form of racism, ageism, colonialism, sexism and genocide.

It was philosopher Peter Singer, a child of Holocaust survivors, who pointed out in his ground-breaking classic, *Animal Liberation* (1975), that the ideology used to "justify" the mistreatment of animals has operated along the same fault-lines as that used by the dominant majority or minority to "justify" the oppression of Blacks

in America, colonized people in the Third World and women.

Once animals are classified as *hefker* and then have certain denigrated characteristics attributed to them, whatever human out-group is being targeted as *hefker* can be maligned in preparation for and/or justification of their oppression by identifying them with animals. Jews were called "vermin" and portrayed as rats by the Nazis; African Americans were called "coons" and "monkeys"; the Hutus who perpetrated the gruesome genocide in Rwanda called the Tutsi "cockroaches."

Jews through history have experienced the three strategies of oppression used against animals and *hefker* humans: the club (murder, maiming and mutilation, rape), the yoke (enslavement, forced labor, discrimination) and the leash (psychological oppression, including disparagement and vilification). It was precisely because the club strategy involved the use of Jews as scapegoats and lightning rods to absorb the rage of oppressed groups and thereby direct it away from oppressive ruling elites—being hunted, trapped, penned up in ghettos, murdered and exploited like animals—that Jews harbored such an emotional identification with animals. This is borne out in the compassion for animals expressed in Jewish folk tales and literature. As Nobel Prize-winner Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote: "For animals, it's an eternal Treblinka."

Significantly, Jews did not use animals as their scapegoat during millennia of oppression. The Scriptural laws preventing "*tzaar ba'alei chaim*"—the suffering of living creatures—were expanded in the

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Talmud and the Codes, including the *Shulkhan Arukh*. Blood "sports," including hunting "for pleasure," were outlawed. The Torah's instructions on kindness to working animals—who had to be allowed to rest on Shabbat along with humans—were expanded to include the requirement to feed one's animals properly.

The Israeli Reality

I find it especially painful that Israeli children and youth, as well as adults, are betraying this legacy by tormenting domestic animals with impunity. Not only is the beautiful and inspiring tradition of preventing *tzaar ba'alei chaim* not taught in the schools or practiced by the public, but the essential wisdom behind it is not recognized and appreciated.

Israel is still a nation under siege. Israelis are acutely conscious of their peril and of the challenges to their country's legitimacy. Common human reactions to the emotional stress this creates are to direct the anger, anxiety and depression against a scapegoat and to behave as a by-stander in the face of injustice and persecution.

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Meretz USA Israel Symposium

Between March 13-20, 2010, two dozen people took part in Meretz USA's fact-finding mission to Israel and Palestine, the annual Israel Symposium. It took place at the height of US-Israel tensions over continued Israeli expansion into areas of Jerusalem beyond the Green Line.

Over the course of seven intensive days, participants met with more than 50 different Israeli and Palestinian figures from across the

political spectrum - politicians and diplomats, military figures and human rights activists, journalists and entrepreneurs—in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ramallah, Nazareth, Beersheba and elsewhere.

Visit our website at <http://www.meretzusa.org/sections/programs/israel-symposium>, to learn more on the 2010 program and for details of the upcoming 2011 Israel Symposium, scheduled for March 26-April 2, 2011. You can also call the office at 212.242.4500 for information and to register. ✡

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Cruelty to animals reinforces Israelis' suppression of empathy and compassion. Compassion is considered incompatible with the perceived need to always be "strong," justified as necessary for the survival of the country. "Strength" in Israel has come to include the suppressing of one's emotions—above all, one's feelings of empathy. That is why the ex-soldier, fearing that compassion might break down his "strength," could not allow himself to have any feeling for the disabled pigeons.

This is significant because it concerns the aims of Zionism. The minimum objective of Zionism was establishing the Jewish state. This

was the prerequisite for the maximum program: creating a society steeped in Jewish ethical values, as envisioned by the Prophets and the greatest of our sages and theoreticians. Such a society is impossible to envision, attain and maintain without cultivating empathy.

All those who aspire to fulfill this maximum agenda should seriously address the issue of compassion for animals, especially in education. This work is inextricably connected with shaping and developing the character of individuals, and ultimately, of a society rooted in the values of empathy, altruism, and the pursuit of justice and peace. ✡



Panel at BDS debate; see pp. 12-13 (photo by Anita Altman)



Interns at beach: Rabbi Cohen, shirtless; author stands in rear; see pp. 14-15