

The Life of His Beast

Rabbi Everett E. Gendler

Charles Darwin was not the first human being to posit a close relation between man and the other animals. He may have put this particular notion to new theoretical use, he may have made our sense of kinship with other animals function differently in this particular age from the way it did in the centuries preceding. But the fact is that man's sense of relatedness to other living creatures is a very ancient inheritance of the human species. The 104th Psalm and the 148th Psalm express clearly the Psalmist's close identification not only with human life but also with the entire life of the Universe, even as it expresses itself in the lives of the beasts of the field, the monsters of the deep, and the birds of the air.

Nor is this simply an accident of the Book of Psalms. Those of you who are familiar with the creation story in Genesis have perhaps noticed that the sea animals and the birds which fly receive the same blessings as men: "be fruitful and multiply."¹ One notices also that beasts of the earth as well as men are invited to the banquet provided by the herbs, fruits, and growths of the earth's surfaces.² One notices even that the important Hebrew term *nephesh chaya*—which means "a living being" or "a living soul"—is applied both to animals and to man in the creation story in Genesis.³ Granted, man in some respects, surpasses the capacities of the animals; Genesis is explicit about this. But the basic relatedness is not lost sight of even with the awareness of difference.

Nor is this sense of kinship confined simply to sentiments for singing on occasions of worship. The five Books of Moses include a number of specific laws dealing with proper treatment of the other animals, for they too are creatures of the Divine and objects of His express concern. To mention a few of them briefly: "You may not muzzle an ox as it threshes the grain."⁴ The grain looks good to it? Let it eat! It must not be subjected to the frustration of facing food while it works and is itself muzzled. "Lo tachsom." Don't muzzle the ox as it threshes. And this was extended by rabbinic interpretation to other animals, even birds, working within sight of food.⁵

Another example: Even at the time when the sacrificial cult was practiced, it was forbidden to take a newborn ox, sheep, or goat from the mother until it had at least seven days of warmth and nourishment directly from its mother.⁶ The idea that a newborn sacrifice is superior was rejected by the Bible lest there be the immediate theft of the offspring from the warm suckling of the mother.

There are other provisions, including the commandment that we're all familiar with: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements."⁷ Less famous but even more significant is the provision in Exodus, Chapter 23: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed."⁸ Here the Sabbath is proclaimed not only for the sake of man but for the sake of the animals as well!

All of this could be summed up in the saying in Proverbs: *vo-de-a tza-dik ne-fesh b'hem-to*, "the decent man considers the life of the beast."⁹

Nor is the notion confined in the West only to the Jewish tradition. One of the great figures of Western culture is surely Francis of Assisi, called St. Francis by the Church. Many of you are undoubtedly familiar with St. Francis' great friendship with other creatures, and you probably recall that St. Bonaventure, in *The Life of St. Francis*, mentions that when Francis "bethought himself of

the first beginning of all things, he was filled with a yet more overflowing charity, and would call the dumb animals, howsoever small, by the names of brother and sister, forasmuch as he recognized in them the same origin as in himself."¹⁰ And many of you, I'm sure, are also aware of the provision in *The Mirror of Perfection* which St. Francis urges upon the emperor: "to make a law that men should make a good provision for birds and oxen and asses and the poor at Christmas-time," with a specification thereof.¹¹

It is against this background of biblical and traditional Western religious concern for all living creatures, then, that I want briefly to view this new development: so-called factory farming or intensive rearing. What do the terms mean? Not simply the use of machines in farming, nor the striving for efficiency as such, but rather the uncritical application of technology to animal rearing so that animals, admittedly useful to man, are not regarded as fellow creatures.

It's an enterprise with which many of you are surely more familiar than I, but the effect on the observer is quite shocking. My own awareness of the development dates from a couple of years ago when my wife and I were in Maine, driving along a country road at night, and discovered time and again buildings, multistoried, with light shining from them, looking very much like urban apartment dwellings. Yet there were no signs of any other habitations around, no sizeable towns on the map, and it was very puzzling. A couple of days later, walking along a country road, we came upon one such building by daylight and discovered that a door was open. There was netting across the opening, making sure that none of the "contents" of the structure would spill out, and we saw crowded against the netting, piled on top of one another, countless numbers of chickens. From an elevated vantage point we were able to discern that this particular structure contained tens of hundreds of chickens, most of them in a semigloom, barely visible, obviously enclosed permanently. We were rather horrified by this forceable enclosure of beings who, however "low" on the evolutionary scale, presumably are gifted with flesh, blood, and at least a rudimentary sensory apparatus. For it is now the case that millions of animals spend their entire lives in darkness or semidarkness, without any free exposure to the natural

elements, crowded together in pitiless fashion, subsisting but hardly living.

"... day-old chicks are installed, eight or ten thousand at a time, sometimes more, in long, windowless houses punctuated only with extractor fans in surried rows along the ridge of the roofs, and air intake vents along the side walls. . . Inside a house the impression is of a long, wide, dark tunnel disappearing into the gloom, the floor covered with chickens as far as the eye can see."¹³

And the results? . . . the battery chickens I have observed seem to lose their minds about the time they would normally be weaned by their mothers and off in the weeds chasing grasshoppers on their own account. Yes, literally, actually, the battery becomes a gallinaceous madhouse. The eyes of these chickens through the bars gleam like those of maniacs. Let your hand get within reach and it receives a dozen vicious pecks not the love peck or the tentative peck of idle curiosity bestowed by the normal chicken, but a peck that means business, a peck for flesh and blood, for which in their madness they are thirsting. They eat feathers out of each other's backs or, rather, pull out each other's feathers and nibble voraciously at the roots of the same for tiny blocks of flesh and blood that may adhere thereto."¹³

Thus feather-pecking and cannibalism replace the normal "pecking order" of the farmyard. And the "solutions" to these technologically created problems? Not the establishment of conditions of life considerate of the instinctual needs of these creatures, but rather debeaking, reduced light, the fitting of opaque "specs" which prevent the chicken from seeing directly in front of it, cages, etc.

Please notice that I am not raising the issue of a few technological improvements, nor am I raising the issue of food production, though that is a consideration. Neither am I raising the question of the ultimate end of these animals, slaughter for human food, though that also is a question. I am rather asking that in the light of our religious heritage we face the question posed by Ruth Harrison on *Animal Machines*: "How far have we the right to take our domination of the animal world? Have we the right to rob them of all pleasures in life simply to make more money more quickly out of their

carcasses? Have we the right to treat living creatures solely as food converting machines? At what point do we acknowledge cruelty?"¹⁴ In the words of St. Francis, even while they live, how in fact are we treating our "brothers and sisters" who help sustain us? In the words of Proverbs, how are we regarding the lives of our beasts?

Listen to the terms we use now. As Ruth Harrison points out, the animal terms *hens* and *chickens* have become changed to such terms as *capons*, a marketably profitable result of hormonal distortion, or *broilers*, a term descriptive of the end result of creatures whose living identity no longer matters to us.

Listen to this quotation from a technical journal:

The modern layer is, after all, only a very efficient converting machine, changing the raw materials—feeding stuffs—into the finished product—the egg—less, of course, maintenance requirements.¹⁵

And such examples can be brought in relation to veal calves, milk cows, and other animals whose very animality is disregarded in this one-dimensional viewing of them as mere food machines.

And please let's dispell a certain kind of technological provincialism. Technology has never before on this planet been developed to its present heights. But there was awareness long ago of the fact that if you let an animal run around, part of the energy which could go into eggs or milk or flesh for consumption is dissipated. It's interesting that there is a discussion by a medieval Jewish commentator in which he asks whether the provisions for resting the beast on the Sabbath mean that you simply rest the beast while being permitted to keep it enclosed, or whether this requires that the beast be permitted to graze freely on the farmland, nibbling the grass, etc. And the opinion of the commentator is that because the Bible uses the term "that your beast enjoy," it is required that it be permitted free grazing.¹⁶ All of which suggests that the calculations we make and can act on with greater efficiency in our age are not unique to our age. The most significant

difference between previous ages and our own may be that while they to some extent regarded the lives of their beasts, we seemingly manage to ignore them almost completely.

"To some extent, as the Minister is so fond of telling us, farm animals have always been exploited by man in that he rears them specifically for food. But until recently they were individuals, allowed their birthright of green fields, sunlight, and fresh air; they were allowed to forage, to exercise, to watch the world go by, in fact to live. Even at its worst, with insufficient protection against inclement weather or poor supplementation of natural food, the animal had some enjoyment in life before it died. Today the exploitation has been taken to a degree which involves not only the elimination of all enjoyment, the frustration of almost all natural instincts, but its replacement with acute discomfort, boredom, and the actual denial of health. It has been taken to a degree where the animal is not allowed to live before it dies."¹⁷

Let me briefly suggest also that if we were to look closely at the issue, it might even occur to us that the issue of respect for animals is really the issue of respect for life as such. Great seers such as Gandhi and Schweitzer also suggest that life is a continuum, and that one cannot make arbitrary cuts anywhere in the chain without doing injury at all levels. The least that Darwinism should mean for rational man is that, in a continuum, orientation toward one level of life will affect orientation toward all other levels of life. The issue of treatment of His beasts is, I suspect, in a subtle way also the issue of the treatment of other human beings and ourselves as well. There are those who have noticed that the sound of the planet is somewhat different now from what it used to be. St. Francis heard the songs of the beasts in praise of the Lord, and the psalmist recites his extravagant poetry with the accompanying sounds of all Creation praising Him, the Creator of all life. Our own ears seem to hear only the whirl of machinery, not only as once in cities and factories, but now increasingly in the mangers of the beasts and the nests of the feathered ones, and this, I think, poses yet another part of the grave problem for us.

I want to conclude with a story about one of the Hasidic rabbis, Reb Zusya:

Once Rabbi Zusya traveled cross-country collecting money to ransom prisoners. He came to an inn at a time when the innkeeper was not at home. He went through the rooms, according to his custom, and in one saw a large cage with all kinds of birds. And Zusya saw that the caged creatures wanted to fly through the spaces of the world and be free birds again. He burned with pity for them and said to himself: "Here you are, Zusya, walking your feet off to ransom prisoners. But what greater ransoming of prisoners can there be than to free these birds from their prison?" Then he opened the cage, and the birds flew out into freedom.

When the innkeeper returned and saw the empty cage, he was very angry, and asked the people in the house who had done this to him. They answered: "A man is loitering about here and he looks like a fool. No one but he can have done this thing." The innkeeper shouted at Zusya: "You fool! How could you have the impudence to rob me of my birds and make worthless the good money I paid for them?" Zusya replied: "You have often read and repeated these words in the psalm: 'His tender mercies are over all His works.'" Then the innkeeper beat him until his hand grew tired and finally threw him out of the house. And Zusya went his way serenely.¹⁸

The conditions of captivity are different and the requirement for freeing the birds and other animals perhaps less radical. But their captors today will not initially smile at any attempt to reopen the cages, and those so concerned will seem, like Reb Zusya and St. Francis, rather strange and somewhat queer creatures. There will be verbal beatings, and out of many an agricultural establishment and academic department we are likely to be tossed unceremoniously. But I would nonetheless suggest that if ever again on this anguished planet we are to realize that His tender mercies do indeed extend over all His works, even human creatures; and if ever again we are to sing a full hymn of praise to the Creator of all Life, then somehow all of us must ourselves regain, and help our society itself regain, some considerable regard for the lives of our beasts.

1. Genesis 1:22.
2. Genesis 1:30.
3. Genesis 1:20, 21, 24.
4. Deuteronomy 25:4.
5. Rashi, citing Talmud Baba Metzia 94b in support.
6. Leviticus 22:27.
7. Exodus 20:8-10.
8. Exodus 23:12.
9. Proverbs 12:10.
10. Ch. VIII Sec. 6.
11. Sec. XII Ch. CXIV.
12. Ruth Harrison *Animal Machines* (London, 1964, Vincent Street Ltd.) p. 12.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
16. Rashi on Exodus 23:12.
17. Harrison, *op. cit.* p. 3.
18. *Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber, Volume I, p. 249.