I HAVE A GREAT DEAL of respect for Charles Patterson and the work he is doing to educate people about the many abuses of animals on factory farms. But, as president of Jewish Vegetarians of North America, I would like to respectfully differ on some of the statements related to Judaism in his thoughtful review of Hiranmay Karlekar’s Savage Humans and Stray Dogs: A Study in Agression (Global Asia, Vol. 4, No. 2, Summer 2009).

Certainly Jews, like most, if not all, other groups are not doing enough to preserve the environment and improve conditions for animals. But, this is not because of the nature of Judaism, but because Jews are not putting some basic Jewish teachings into practice.

Patterson states that for Judaism, God is outside of nature, not part of it. However, Judaism teaches that God created nature and is very concerned with it. Every morning, religious Jews recite as part of the morning prayers: “Blessed is the One (meaning God) Who has compassion on the Earth; blessed is the One Who has compassion on all of the creatures.”

Patterson states that Judaism has man set apart from nature. But, Genesis 2:15 indicates that humans are to work the land, and also to guard or preserve it. Judaism teaches that Jews are to be guardians of the Earth and co-workers with God in preserving it. Based on the mandate not to destroy fruit-bearing trees in times of warfare (Deuteronomy 20:19,20), the Jewish sages made a general prohibition against wasting or unnecessarily destroying anything of value.

With regard to the often misinterpreted and misapplied teaching in Genesis that people are to have dominion, this is interpreted by Jewish sages as responsible stewardship. A few verses after humans are given dominion, their diet is prescribed to be strictly vegan (Genesis 1:29). It is noteworthy that the two ideal times in the Jewish tradition (the Garden of Eden and the Messianic period, when “the wolf will dwell with the lamb, … the lion will eat straw like the ox… and no one shall hurt nor destroy in all of God’s holy mountain…” are pictured as vegetarian times.

There are also many Jewish teachings that are based on compassion to animals. It is so important that it is even part of the Ten Commandments, which indicate that animals as well as people are to rest on the Sabbath day. The book of Psalms (145:9) indicates that God’s compassion is “over all of His creatures.” And the book of Proverbs (12:10) states that “The righteous individual considers the lives” (literally the souls) of his or her animals.

If only Jews and others lived up to these teachings we would have a far more humane, healthy, environmentally-sustainable world.

Very truly yours,
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