

ששכה  
טובה!



# Including Animals in Jewish Ritual

## Introduction

*Do you have any rituals that you practice with your companion animals? Maybe you have a special day that you give your dog her regular bath, or a day your cat gets his brushing. Maybe you've even given your companion animals a gift on Hanukkah to include them in your holiday activities. Domesticated and wild animals have been part of Jewish ritual for a long time, and Jews today still create novel rituals to honor the animals in their lives.*

## Vocabulary

HEBREW	TRANSLITERATED HEBREW	ENGLISH
שְׁמִטָּה	<i>shmitah</i>	sabbatical year
בְּהֵמָה, בְּהֵמוֹת	<i>behemah (s.) behemot (pl.)</i>	domesticated animal/s
חַיָּה, חַיֹּת	<i>chayah (s.) chayot (pl.)</i>	wild animal/s
חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה	<i>chayat hasadeh</i>	literally, “wild animal of the field”

## Activity 1:

# Learning from the Laws of Shabbat and Shmitah

The Jewish people have been building their schedules and their budgets around the animals in their lives for centuries. But what about including them in cultural practices? The following texts include animals in sets of rituals around Shabbat and Shmitah.

In Text A, the section of Exodus that commands the laws of Shabbat shows that animals also need a rest of the sabbath. In texts B and C which refer to the sabbatical or “shmitah” year of a rest or “sabbath” of the land, they indicate the importance of wild animals having sufficient access to food, even when storage meant for humans is scarce.

**Read the following two texts and answer the questions.**

### TEXT A:

...Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of YHVH (Hashem) your god: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your animals, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days Hashem made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and they rested on the seventh day; therefore Hashem blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

—Exodus 20:9-11

...שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-  
מְלֹאכֶתְךָ וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַה'  
אֱלֹקֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלָאכָה אַתָּה  
וּבִנְךָ-וּבִתֶּךָ עֹבֵדְךָ וְאֹמֶתְךָ וּבְהֵמָתְךָ  
וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים  
עָשָׂה ה' אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ  
אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיִּנַּח  
בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בֵּרַךְ ה' אֶת-יּוֹם  
הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהּ:

TEXT B:

*For six years you are to sow your land and to gather in its produce, but in the seventh, you are to let it go and to let it be, that the needy of your people may eat, and what remains, the wildlife of the field shall eat. Do thus with your vineyard, with your olive-grove.*

—Exodus 23:10-11

וּשְׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע אֶת-אֲרֶצְךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ  
אֶת-תְּבוּאָתָהּ: וְהַשְּׁבִיעִת תִּשְׁמְטָנָהּ  
וּנְטִשְׁתָּהּ וְאָכְלוּ אֲבִינֵי עִמָּךְ וַיִּתְּרֵם  
תֹּאכַל מֵיַד הַשָּׂדֶה בֶּן-תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכַרְמְךָ  
לְיִיתְךָ:

TEXT C:

*You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce—you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you, and **your animals and the wild animals** in your land may eat all its yield.*

—Leviticus 25:5-7

אֶת סְפִיחַ קְצִירְךָ לֹא תִקְצֹר וְאֶת-  
עֲנָבֵי נִזְיֶרְךָ לֹא תִבְצֹר שְׁנַת שְׁבִתוֹן  
יְהִי לְאָרֶץ: וְהִיְתָה שְׁבֵת הָאָרֶץ  
לְכֶם לְאֲכֹלָה לָךְ וּלְעַבְדְּךָ וּלְאִמְתְּךָ  
וּלְשִׁכְיֶרְךָ וּלְתוֹשְׁבֵי הַגְּרִים עִמָּךְ:  
וּלְבְהֵמָתְךָ וּלְחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר בְּאֲרֶצְךָ תִּהְיֶה  
כָּל-תְּבוּאָתָהּ לְאֲכֹל:

## Questions

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# Questions

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**1:** *Most of us are familiar with Shabbat as a day of rest from our work. Why do you think animals are included in the laws of Shabbat? How might this apply to animals who aren't working the other six days?*

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**2:** *What might be the importance to humans in including animals in the laws and rituals above?*

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**3:** *Text B and C outline the basic laws of Shmitah, which include sharing the harvest with wild and domesticated animals. How do these groups of animals benefit from the ritual of having access to eat whatever is growing naturally?*

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**4:** *Choose a wild or a domesticated animal that you've observed in modern times. What would be different for that animal to receive a full day or year of rest? Pretend you are that animal writing a letter where you are asking for a day off. What does a day of rest mean for you? What does it look like? What are you resting from?*

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## Activity 2:

# Honoring Our Animals as a Jewish Practice Today

*Can a cat say kiddush? Does a dog do motzi? Even though our animals won't be saying the prayers out loud with us, we can still find creative ways to include our companion animals when we make blessings and take part in Jewish rituals at home.*

**Read through the suggestions below. Then, take a few minutes to design a ritual where you can involve the animals in your life. Use the following sentences as a guide, or design your own using examples from above.**

*Here are a few suggestions for including your companion animals in rituals at home:*

- 1. As you are preparing challah for Shabbat, put aside some extra dough to play with and eventually make into the shape of one of your or your neighbor's' pets. Then make a photo collage with the animal and the challah shaped version next to each other.*
- 2. On Shabbat or any Yom Tov (holy day) when we are meant to take a break from our busy lives, include your companion animal on a nature walk or hike in a place where you can both safely explore and enjoy some quiet time.*
- 3. When gathering the family in the sukkah to shake the lulav on Sukkot, grab a few treats and encourage your cat, dog, or other type of companion animal to join. Say the blessings with your family. For animals that can safely join you outside during a meal, enjoy some quality time with them surrounded by nature!*
- 4. The weeks leading up to Passover can include long hours cleaning and sorting out pantries. If you have chickens or another animal who can safely eat food scraps, this can be a lot of bonus snacks for them!*
- 5. The next time you gather as a family to take part in a Jewish ritual, design another way to include the animals in your life.*

# My Vision for Animals in a Jewish Ritual:

Using the worksheet below, design a new way to include animals in a Jewish ritual. It could be something you already do, or it could be something special you design just for them.

*The animal(s) we can include will be (list the species):* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Their name(s)* \_\_\_\_\_

*When we do the ritual, this is how I expect the animal to react:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Including this animal in the ritual might make me feel:* \_\_\_\_\_

*This is what the ritual would include:*

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# Conclusion

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*It is important to remember that much of our heritage included rituals that used, included, and honored animals. Even if we won't always be able to interact with the animals we are eating before we consume them or their products, Jewish tradition offers a variety of rituals to honor the animal's life. As for ritual sacrifice, which we no longer perform, we can still understand the history and meaning behind the original practice. As you'll learn in the next section, as contemporary Jews we can also renew our tradition with meaning through designing new rituals that honor animals.*