

Keeping at it: Yom Kippur lessons from animal protection work and life

September 23, 2015

Mimi Brody

Member of Machar

When I was asked to give this talk, I thought about how my work for a nonprofit group ties in with the broader themes of the High Holidays, which are really my favorite aspect of Judaism. These aren't the most festive holidays, but I've always thought it's just great that our religion puts such a priority on honest self judgment – reflecting on what went wrong the previous year, what was good, and what we want to work on doing better – making that commitment to improve ourselves and our role in the world.

I've been very lucky to have a career that basically calls on me to do *just that* every day. For 15 years, I've directed the federal legislative program for the Humane Society of the United States. We lobby for animal protection legislation – and against bills that will harm animals – across a broad spectrum of issues affecting farm animals, pets, animals in research, and wildlife. We try to be the animals' voice in Congress, since they can't speak for themselves. We try to represent, and mobilize, the millions of Americans who care about animals. And we work with the media to raise awareness about these issues. We're always taking stock, asking ourselves what reforms are needed, what strategies will bring about change, what do we wish we'd done differently, and how can we be more effective?

Now some of you may have seen some nasty ads in Metro stations attacking the Humane Society of the United States. It's part of a smear campaign that's been going on for some time. I was with my mom and daughters in New York City four years ago when Talia looked up at the giant electronic billboard in Times Square and said, "Mommy, why does that sign say bad things about your organization?" We've become a prime target of the so-called "Center for Consumer Freedom," run by a shill named Rick Berman. He used to focus his energies as a front man for the tobacco and alcohol industries – attacking, for example, the Centers for Disease Control and Mothers Against Drunk Driving – and for any of you who saw the hilarious movie "Thank You For Smoking," I heard it was based on him. But now he's busy attacking us on behalf of agribusiness interests that don't want reforms to factory farming. Our organization's president, Wayne Pacelle, likes to say they're not attacking us because we're ineffective, but because we *are* effective – as we're challenging the status quo of large-scale, institutionalized animal cruelty.

It can be unnerving for us to deal with this sort of attack, especially in an era when some Members of Congress join in efforts to tear down nonprofit organizations. Not long ago, they succeeded in destroying the community action organization ACORN, before investigations

showed that damaging undercover video had been falsified and the allegations against ACORN were unfounded; and now of course Planned Parenthood is in the crosshairs again.

There are undoubtedly some on Capitol Hill who buy in to the attacks against my group, HSUS, too. But we try to keep focused on the work at hand, building bipartisan support for needed reforms. And we get other voices to weigh in with legislators who might be inclined to believe our detractors. For example, two former Senators and presidential candidates – Republican Bob Dole of Kansas and Democrat Bob Kerrey of Nebraska – recently joined our organization as Special Advisors (serving in that role as volunteers). They jointly signed an open letter urging Members of Congress to support an agenda of five key animal protection bills, stating, “At a time when there are many fault lines in American politics, animal welfare is an issue that should remain bipartisan.”

Now I’d like to give you some examples of specific issues we work on. My husband Harry said, “make it engaging – like you’re at a dinner party, not a conference.” Unfortunately, I’m not good at making this stuff entertaining table talk. But here goes....

More than 9 billion farm animals are slaughtered for food every year in this country, so they get a good amount of our attention. Mistreatment of farm animals is directly associated with food safety risks, and we use that point to build coalitions with consumer and public health advocates and win over legislators. For example, an undercover investigation by HSUS revealed terrible abuse of “downer” cattle – these are cows too sick or injured to stand and walk on their own. They were being dragged with chains, sometimes attached to a broken leg (you can imagine how painful that would be), and subjected to electric shock, kicked, doused with high-pressure water hoses, bulldozed and dumped by forklift, all in an effort to move them to slaughter. Downer cattle are at much higher risk for transmitting illnesses such as Mad Cow Disease – as well as *E. coli* and *Salmonella* since they’re often lying in their own waste – and it turned out that the facility we investigated was the #2 supplier of meat to the National School Lunch Program. This led to the largest beef recall in U.S. history, several congressional hearings, and finally a new bright line rule at USDA to ensure that no downer cattle would be allowed into the food supply. By requiring that all downer cattle instead be immediately humanely euthanized, USDA removed the incentive for workers to abuse them to get them on their feet for inspection.

Another example of how farm animal welfare and food safety intersect is the way animals are housed. Packing them in really tightly with thousands of other animals all on top of each other in unsanitary cages too small for the animals to even turn around is a recipe for illness and disease transmission. We worked with the egg industry to jointly lobby for national legislation to phase out “battery cages,” which are so small each hen has less space than the size of an iPad. The egg industry agreed to work with us because of the success we’d been having getting laws passed at the state level – they didn’t want to deal with a patchwork of different state standards – and they knew that customers, including large retailers like McDonald’s, were calling for more humane housing for laying hens. Unfortunately, the pork industry’s trade association waged an all-out war against the egg bill – claiming that they were concerned about a “slippery slope” that would somehow force Congress to impose a law on their industry. This was ridiculous because Congress barely does anything these days, let alone something it doesn’t want to do. And the fact that the pork industry would be strongly opposed, rather than jointly lobbying with us, would make it completely distinguishable. Nevertheless, despite enormous bipartisan support for the egg bill, apparently the pork lobby has more clout than the egg lobby, and it’s always easier to block something than to get it enacted, so they carried the day.

On the other hand, we were successful in keeping out of the 2014 Farm Bill a provision that would have negated state laws on farm animal protection. That amendment had been added to the House Farm Bill by Iowa Representative Steve King – whom you may know for his anti-immigrant remarks about swarms of drug-running teenagers with calves the size of cantaloupes. Because King had written his amendment so broadly that it could wipe out state laws on everything from pesticides to child labor to fire-safe cigarettes, we were able to mobilize a huge coalition and block it.

Another practice that raises serious public health concerns is the overuse of antibiotics in animal agriculture. 80% of all antibiotics sold in the U.S. are for food animals – these precious drugs are being routinely laced into the animals' feed at low doses virtually every day of their lives just to make them grow faster and compensate for overcrowded, stressful, unsanitary conditions on factory farms. Squandering the drugs this way spurs the development of antibiotic resistance, so there won't be effective medicine available to treat sick people or animals. We've started to see some baby steps toward addressing this problem, but it's been tough because of the fierce opposition by agribusiness and pharmaceutical interests.

Shifting gears to pets, we did get Congress to require state and local governments to consider the needs of pets as part of their disaster response planning. That measure moved relatively quickly in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans 10 years ago.

Tragically, many individuals had stayed behind and died there because they didn't want to abandon their beloved pets and didn't have the option to evacuate with them.

Now we're working on a somewhat similar issue: legislation to help an estimated one-third of domestic violence victims escape from an abusive partner – these are victims who delay their decision to flee a violent situation out of fear for their pets' safety. Statistics show a very clear link between acts of animal cruelty and human violence. Often, abusers prey on their battered partners' pets, threatening and sometimes carrying out extreme cruelty to demonstrate what might happen next to the woman or to destroy a loving life line for her. Up to 84% of women entering domestic violence shelters have reported that their partner abused or killed the family pet.

On the wildlife front, a key problem now is illegal trafficking in species and parts such as elephant tusks. I really can't imagine a world without any elephants, but if poaching continues at the current rate, extinction looms within one to two decades. 35,000 elephants are being killed each year; that's one every 15 minutes. The ivory trade is decimating populations, and it's also terribly cruel on an individual scale. Poachers brutally hack off the faces of elephants to obtain the tusks attached to their skulls, and leave them to die. Wildlife trafficking generates annual revenues of \$8-10 billion dollars a year, and has become one of the most lucrative criminal enterprises internationally. It's helping finance terrorist groups including the Janjaweed, Lord's Resistance Army, and al-Shabaab. Effectively addressing the poaching epidemic is crucial not only for the sake of the animals but also for global security and the stability of fragile democracies around the world. The U.S. definitely has an important role to play, since our country is the second largest market for ivory products in the world, after China. The Obama Administration is taking steps to close the U.S. market, and we're working hard to defend these proposed regulations against attack by some in Congress. One way you can help is to make sure not to purchase anything with ivory. And on this or any other issue, I'd be happy to talk with you about how you can contact your legislators.

In all our work, we're always looking for related angles – the human benefits such as protecting health and public safety – to help elevate the issue so it can get attention in Congress. But some things we work on because the animal cruelty is just so wrong, it's simply a moral imperative for Congress to act. One example of this is horse “soring,” where trainers inflict gruesome pain on the front legs and hooves of Tennessee Walking Horses and related breeds so that it will hurt them to step down and they'll lift their legs high in an exaggerated gait that wins prizes at some shows. We've managed to raise the profile of this problem in Congress – getting nearly the whole House and Senate to cosponsor legislation to fix it – but it's still stuck because of a few well-placed legislators who are doing the bidding of horse sorers in their states. I hope by next Yom Kippur, we'll have figured out how to get that one over the finish line!

Part of the challenge, as I mentioned before, is the general dysfunction of Congress. So little actually gets done that it requires extraordinary effort, plus very good luck, to win enactment of anything. We look for vehicles to hitch onto – broader packages that have a good chance of moving – and we always strive for bipartisanship.

It's been surprisingly easy for me, a proud liberal Democrat who campaigned on the playground at age 11 for presidential candidate George McGovern, and worked for Senator Ted Kennedy for 10 years before coming to HSUS. Senator Kennedy was known as the liberal lion of the Senate, but he was also a master of reaching across the aisle – teaming up with conservative lawmakers like Orrin Hatch and John McCain – and I learned a great deal from him about the importance of finding common ground. You compartmentalize a bit – putting aside other issues on which you disagree – and focus on what you can do together. At HSUS, I've really enjoyed working with conservatives such as Senators Rick Santorum, Bob Smith, and David Vitter, and Representatives Christopher Smith, Elton Gallegly, and Ted Yoho. I've discovered that they – and their wonderful staffs – really care about these issues and will go the extra mile to pursue them. I also love working for my boss, Cece Kremer, who is a Republican – she's one of the warmest people I've ever known and always has great insights.

She's a big believer that we need to keep forging ahead, trying to get incremental progress and build on it, and watch out for attacks seeking to unravel the gains. We can't get discouraged and throw up our hands – you have to keep at it, and do what you can, because doing nothing is worse.

The same principle can be applied to any number of difficult but important problems – such as climate change, gun violence prevention, and the challenge of Israeli-Palestinian peace. If you stay at it, you can help set the stage to be ready when the moment is ripe, to help make the ground shift when there’s an opening. As told in the Mishnah: “It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” Or, to quote my daughter Talia from her Bat Mitzvah a few years ago, “even if I can’t do everything to fix this problem, I have to do what I can.”

And this applies on a personal level, too. Change can take a long time, in incremental steps. I’m someone who always has a to-do list a mile long, and many of the items on it just carry over from year to year. My brother joked that I should have a separate “not happening!” list.

It seems like I come to every High Holidays season with pretty much the same set of personal goals – don’t waste time arguing, lose weight, get more sleep, leave work earlier, get rid of the crazy clutter, etc. It can feel like Sisyphus pushing up the mountain in a never-ending struggle to address the same problems with not much progress to show for it.

But then there are breakthroughs – like when I got myself a pedometer, and oddly, it really worked to make me walk more, and last October I quit a lifelong bad habit of picking my hangnails because someone suggested I keep a pair of nippers handy.

So I welcome the occasion of this holiday to redouble my efforts – on both the personal and the professional fronts – asking what can I do next to make myself a better person and to make the world a better place? I love the line on a little plastic construction cone that my mom gave me years ago: “The road to success is always under construction.”

I also love a story that my boss likes to remind me of whenever I’m freaking out about multiple daunting challenges. It’s Anne Lamott’s story about when her 10-year-old brother had to write a report on birds. He’d had 3 months to write it, but it was due the next day and he was completely overwhelmed, close to tears, sitting at the table surrounded by paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then their father sat down next to him, put his arm on his son’s shoulder, and said, “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.”

Shana Tova!