

The Beastly Blessings

PARSHA INSIGHTS - SHMOS (5759)

YOU ARE AN ANIMAL! THAT CAN BE A COMPLIMENT...

“Hashem formed man, dust from the ground, and He blew into his nostrils the breath of life. And so man became a living soul (*nefesh chaya*)” (*Beraishis* [Genesis] 2:7). Animals and wild beasts are also called living souls. However, the soul of man is the most alive and vital, for he additionally was given intelligence and speech (*Rashi* *ibid.*). We see that humans are totally superior to animals. Despite this reality, *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children of Israel] are at times compared to animals in regard to certain noble qualities they possess. Furthermore, we all have much to learn from some habits and tendencies of animals. We will now elaborate on this concept.

The evil monarch, Paroh, decreed that all Jewish male babies be killed immediately at birth (1:16). His astrologers had informed him that the savior of *Bnai Yisroel*, who was not yet born, would be a male (*Rashi* *ibid.* from the *Midrash Rabba*). Instead of paying attention to this sinister plan, the righteous midwives did the opposite. They sustained all the babies with food and water (1:17, *Rashi* citing bottom of *Gemara Sotah* 11B and *Midrash Rabba*). When the Egyptian king rebuked them for this, they explained their failure to support his agenda. “The Hebrew women are unlike the Egyptian women. For they are lively (*‘choyos haina’*), and they are delivered before the midwives come to them” (1:19). What is the meaning of the phrase “*choyos haina*”? *Rashi* explains that the Jewish women were experts in delivering their own babies, like professional midwives. (The word “*chaya*” can mean “midwife.” This is understandable, since its root is “*chai*” or “*chaim*”, which means life. They are instrumental in bringing lives into the world.) As a result, claimed the midwives, there was no way to arrive on time to put the baby boys to death.

Another interpretation is cited by *Rashi* from the *Talmud* - the *Gemara Sotah* 11B. The *Bnai Yisroel* are often compared to wild animals. Instead of meaning “midwives”, the word “*choyos*” denotes animals. *Rashi* points out that animals in the wild need no assistance giving birth. The midwives were teaching Paroh a lesson about the personality of the Jewish nation. These ladies do not need our help; they deliver their own young. “They are as animals!” This is an incredible compliment, as we will now discover.

Let us look into the actual *Gemara Sotah* 11B near the bottom. On his death bed, our father Yaacov blessed each and every one of his sons. Parallels to various animals were quite prevalent in his words. “Yehuda is a lion’s cub...” (*Vayechi* 49:9). *Rashi* on that *pasuk* [verse] explains that it was a hint to the great king, Dovid, a descendant of Yehuda. In the beginning, he was likened to a whelp, merely a young lion. This was when King Shaul still ruled. At that point, Dovid was merely the general for Shaul’s army. Ultimately, Dovid was the supreme ruler, analogous to a full-grown lion. We see that the tribe of Yehuda possessed traits of a lion.

“Dan shall be a serpent by the way, a viper in the path, that bites the horse’s heels, so that his rider shall fall backward” (*Vayechi* 49:17). *Rashi* remarks that a snake will at times behave this way, felling a rider without even touching him. To whom did Yaacov *Avinu* [Jacob our forefather] refer with these prophetic words? Shimshon performed a similar feat. In *Shoftim* [Judges] 16, this illustrious offspring of Dan destroyed about three thousand *Plishtim* [Philistines], our enemies, without touching one of them. They had brought him out to entertain them; this was their method of humiliating him in his captivity. He embraced the two central pillars upon which the structure stood, and then collapsed them. The building fell upon all those who had gathered there for their idolatrous celebration. Thus, the *shaivet* [tribe] of Dan had attributes of a snake.

“Naftali is a hind (female, red deer) let loose...” (*Vayechi* 49:21). *Rashi* explains that this refers to a part of Naftali’s territory in Canaan. The Ginosar Valley ripens its fruits very quickly, like a deer that runs swiftly. Or, Yaacov *Avinu* was hinting to the battle we fought against the Canaanite general *Sisra* (*Shoftim* [Judges] 4). Ten thousand soldiers from the tribe of Naftali (and Zevulun) participated, and they were dispatched promptly and enthusiastically. This exemplified the trait of a fast-running deer.

“Yissachar is a strong-boned donkey...” (*Vayechi* 49:14). *Rashi* clarifies that Yissachar’s dedication to Torah study earned him this metaphoric description. He carries the yoke of Torah, similar to a powerful animal upon which a heavy burden is loaded.

As for Yosef, the *Gemara* quotes a blessing of Moshe *Rabainu* [Moses our teacher]. “The first born of his ox, splendor is his, and his horns are like the horns of a wild ox...” (*V’zos Habracha* 33:17). As in the above examples, there are numerous interpretations for these magnificent, poetic verses. One (found in *Rashi* and elsewhere) is that it is a reference to Yehoshua Bin Nun, a “star” of the tribe of Efraim, son of Yosef. He was mighty like an ox, king of domesticated animals, and he conquered the kings of Canaan. Majesty was imparted directly from Moshe *Rabainu* to him. The word “*b’chor*” [first born] actually indicates greatness and kingly attributes. Moshe blessed Yehoshua with the attractive horns of the *R’AIM*, translated before as the wild ox. Rav Aryeh Kaplan (*Balak* 23:22) researched this animal and found various possibilities from the commentaries: Unicorn, rhinoceros, white antelope, bison, wild ox, or *aurochs* [an enormous, extinct breed of wild ox]. Thus, Yehoshua, descendant of Yosef’s son Efraim, possessed the strength of an ox and the beauty of the horns of the *R’AIM*.

“Binyamin is a wolf who will rip up (his prey)...” (*Vayechi* 49:27). Please see last week’s *d’var Torah* [lesson] for a detailed analysis of this, according to *Targum Unklus* cited by *Rashi*.

☞ Copies of the essay are available by clicking the following link, or online at TorahMax.com under: “Sefer Bereishis”, “Parshas Vayechi”, “[A Sheep in Wolf’s Clothing](#)” - R. Moshe Heigh.

Another way to explain it is also found in *Rashi*. Yaacov *Avinu*, in this *bracha* [blessing] to Binyamin, was predicting that Shaul *Hamelech* [King Saul], the powerful king, would descend from him. He ended up victorious over his surrounding enemies, resembling a wolf ripping up its prey. In addition, Mordechai and Esther eventually came from Binyamin. They divided up Haman’s spoils after his scheme to annihilate the Jews failed. This triumph was analogous to a wolf devouring his kill.

The above examples are brought by the *Gemara* to help us comprehend the response of the midwives to Paroh’s complaint. In numerous respects, the Jews are likened to animals, who need no medical attention while in labor. That is why we do not even get a chance to kill their babies! The quoted verses demonstrate this. One can add to the list Moshe’s blessing to the tribe of Gad. “He dwells as a lion...” (*V’zos Habracha* 33:20). *Rashi* reminds us that Gad resided on the eastern border of the land, and needed military strength to help protect *Bnai Yisroel*. “Dan is a lion’s cub...” (*V’zos Habracha* 33:22). Again, *Rashi* shows that Dan needed extra might because of his position as a defender of the land.

The *Gemara* ends off by saying: Even the tribes NOT compared to animals in these actual *psukim* [verses] are STILL part of this collective metaphor, based on a verse found elsewhere in Scripture. “What a lioness was your mother! She lay down among lions...” (*Yechezkel* [Ezekiel] 19:2). *Rashi* comments that there is solid evidence here that the entire nation is called a lioness. The exceptional qualities of animals can certainly be ascribed to the Jewish people. There are further illustrations of this throughout *Tanach*; it is not our goal to cite every single one.

We should always keep in mind that we need to learn from the POSITIVE behavior of animals. “Go to the ant, you lazy one, consider her ways, and be wise” (*Mishlai* [Proverbs] 6:6). How about the famous *Mishna* of Yehuda Ben Taima in *Avos* 5:20? “Be fierce like a leopard, light like an eagle, quick like a deer, and mighty like a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven.” There is much commentary on this, but the basic message is abundantly clear: Take examples from animals who are set in their ways. Emulate their splendid character traits, the ones that will enhance your service of Hashem. (Please do not copy their abominable deeds, though.)

Shifra (actually Yocheved, Moshe’s mother) and Pu’ah (actually Miriam, Moshe’s sister - *Rashi* 1:15) were two brilliant individuals. They feared Hashem above Paroh, and they also appreciated our similarity to animals in some regards. These two midwives set a standard of defiance, an unwillingness to submit to Paroh’s cruel demands. They articulated their position by describing *Bnai Yisroel* as animals. We have much to gain from their sagacious words.

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