

Rabbi Neil's
Not Entirely Serious Purim Sermon 5776 (2016)

Purim is a time of inversion, a time of things being different to what we might have imagined. There is a custom of getting so drunk that we cannot distinguish between the Hebrew phrases “Blessed be Mordechai” and “Cursed be Haman,” phrases which are identical in Jewish numerology. We dress in costumes because nothing is quite what it seems. So my sermon on Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat that precedes Purim, often challenges what you might usually believe about Judaism. If I confuse you, that’s the point.

In chapter 22 of the Book of Leviticus, which we start this week and which thankfully allows me a tenuous starting point for this sermon, we learn that it is forbidden to present any offering to God from an animal that has a blemish – anything blind, injured, scarred or that has been castrated (Lev. 22). As most commentators note, there is a clear similarity between these prohibitions and the prohibitions that render a priest unfit for service. Why might that be? You would be forgiven for thinking that it’s because God requires purity, but that would be a mistake based on listening to Rabbis who know what they’re talking about. This Rabbi, on the other hand, is going to explain a totally different reason.

The early medieval commentator Maimonides writes that “There is no distinction between the suffering of a human being and that of a beast, since feelings of maternal affection belong not to the intellectual faculty but to the emotional faculty, which is common to humans and animals alike.” What he’s talking about is the *yetzer hara*, that which is traditionally translated as the evil inclination but which is actually better translated away from the literal Hebrew to “the animal inclination.” Most commentators view animals as being inferior to human beings because, according to Jewish tradition, they lack free will. This comes from the second chapter of Genesis where the verb *vayyitzer* is used to describe God forming different elements of creation. When human beings are created, *vayyitzer* has two yuds, but when animals are created it has only one. The Rabbis suggest that each one stands for a *yetzer*, an inclination. Animals have one, humans have two. So the traditional perspective is that animals are inferior to human beings. But are they?

When we look at the laws concerning treatment of animals in Torah, we see something startling, especially if we quote it out of context. Torah clearly says that in battle we may take a person as spoil of war (Deut. 21). Humans

can be acquired with little thought for their feelings. We go from Leviticus 22 to Deuteronomy 22, almost as though we were led there by a tenuous link. Deuteronomy 22 tells us that if we're going to take the eggs of a mother bird then we should shoo her away. This is an extraordinary comparison, because I need it to be. When Torah talks of taking another human being into our possession, does it consider the feelings of the mother human? No. But when we take the young of a bird, which is its egg, *then* we need to consider her feelings. Maimonides suggests that the feelings of animals and people are the same, but this deliberate misreading of the text clearly points to the fact that animal feelings are GREATER than those of people.

Could it be that animals are in fact superior to human beings? How might such a case be made? We simply need to look at Ezekiel 23, which talks about women running after men "whose flesh was like the flesh of donkeys and whose emissions like those of horses." Seriously, it says that, look it up. Donkeys and horses are used as a positive basis for comparison. Is there ever a text about donkeys and horses where humans are used as a positive comparison? No, there is not. Of course there isn't. So, donkeys and horses are seen as superior to people, at least physically.

More than this, though, Chapter 6 of the Book of Proverbs tells us to go and watch the ant so that we can learn wisdom from it. Proverbs was written by King Solomon, the wisest man who ever existed. He could have said that we should observe him and learn from him. Never mind that he's long dead and we can't. But no, he says that we should go and learn from the ant. So, not only does the Bible use animals as something to aspire to physically, but also in terms of wisdom. More than even this, in the Talmud, Tractate Eruvin, page 100b, Rabbi Yochanan observes that had the Torah not been given, we could have learned modesty from the cat, honest labour from the ant, marital fidelity from the dove and good manners from the rooster. Again, it doesn't say we could learn these things from each other but from the creatures who are clearly superior to us in these regards.

So! According to this clearly biased reading of Jewish tradition, animals are greater than human beings in physicality, in wisdom and in morality. And Jewish tradition reinforces this. According to Rabbinic tradition, Moses is selected as the leader of the Israelites because he cares for one stray sheep. Never mind that he's already killed a human being with his bare hands. Torah cares more for the lost sheep than the human Egyptian. All the people in Jewish tradition who are villains are hunters of animals, villains like Esau,

for example. And when Rebecca is chosen as a wife for Isaac, it's because she offers to water Abraham's servant's camels.

AND let's not forget that Torah starts with the creation of the universe and then the plants and then the animals BEFORE the creation of human beings. SO, what we see is that people who care for animals are better in Jewish tradition because our tradition acknowledges that the animals preceded human beings because they are our superiors in terms of physicality, wisdom, and morality. It's not that animals are inferior because they only have one *yetzer*, only one inclination. It's that they are superior because they only need one whereas human beings need two – animals are more efficient in their *yetzer* usage. And with only one *yetzer*, they are still superior to us in physicality, wisdom and morality.

I know that you're skeptical, and you're absolutely right to be. BUT, to return to our original text regarding the acceptability of animal offerings and the priests, what we're really talking about here is *kedushah*, holiness. When it comes to approaching God, animals and humans seem to be treated the same. But there's a profound difference. A Torah scroll is holy. A megillah is holy. It has *kedushah*, it has a quality of holiness. And what kind of skin is a scroll made from? Not human skin, but animal skin. Why? Not because that would be illegal and gross. No! It's because the animals were created by God before human beings because God thought of them first. Because the animals are better than human beings in terms of physicality, wisdom and morality. Animal skin is used for a Torah scroll and for Megillat Ester because the animals are, in every important way, better than human beings. They are even holier than us so their skin can be used for holy scrolls. And THAT, my friends, is why on Purim we should try to be as much like the animals as possible, why we should dress up and make crazy sounds, because it is a mitzvah on Purim to act like a complete and total ass.