



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Noah

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October 20, 2012

Noah

Endangered Species



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

What do Jews think about endangered species and preserving the environment?

The answer will surprise you. And it comes in this week's Torah portion.

One of the most overlooked aspects of the great flood related in this week's chapter is the fact that over 4,000 years ago Noah was commanded to gather and house pairs of animals in order to save them and repopulate a world destroyed by the raging waters – in effect, launching the first and greatest animal preservation effort ever. And one as relevant today as it was then.

But why? If God wanted to ensure the animals' survival, He could have found many other ways to protect them. Why the need to have Noah go through the trouble of gathering all the species, certainly an arduous and complicated process? Indeed, caring for and coexisting with the animals on board the ark was quite dangerous and actually ended up injuring Noah.

Yet, this great effort contains fascinating – and surprisingly very contemporary and timely – lessons about our interdependent relationships with the animal kingdom and the environment in which we live.

As we read the story of Noah and his ark once again, it is a time to consider the value of the animal kingdom and what it has to teach us.

From birds, bees, insects, camels and elephants, we receive a plethora of lessons – how to co-exist, make the best use of our talents, and be more ethical as human beings.

How often do we look far and wide for answers to our big dilemmas, when the answer may be right before our very eyes?

ENDANGERED SPECIES ARE WE PROTECTING OUR WORLD?

1. The Zoo (Optional)

A mother and baby camel were talking one day, when the baby camel asked, "Mom, why do I have these huge three-toed feet?"

The mother replied, "Well son, when we trek across the desert your toes will help you stay on top of the soft sand."

"OK," said the baby camel.

A few minutes later the young camel asked, "Mom? Why have I got these great long eyelashes?"

"They are there to keep the sand out of your eyes on our long trips through the desert."

"OK," said the baby camel.

After a short while, the young camel asked, "Mom? Why have I got these great big humps on my back?"

The mother, now a little impatient with the boy, replied, "They are there to help us store water for our long treks across the desert."

"Wow, that's really great. So we have huge feet to stop us from sinking in the sand, long eyelashes to keep the sand from our eyes and these great humps to store water. But Mom! What are we doing locked up in a cage in a zoo?"

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A kangaroo kept getting out of his enclosure at the zoo. Knowing that he could hop high, the zoo officials put up a ten-foot fence. He was out the next morning, just roaming around the zoo. A twenty-foot fence was put up. Again he got out. When the fence was forty feet high, a camel in the next enclosure asked the kangaroo, "How high do you think they'll go?" The kangaroo said, "About a thousand feet, unless somebody locks the gate at night!"

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One day the zookeeper noticed that the orangutan was reading two books -- the Bible and Darwin's Origin of Species. In surprise he asked the ape, "Why are you reading both those books"?

"Well," said the orangutan, "I just wanted to know if I was my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."

2. Save the Animals

Whatever we might think about zoos – whether they are fair to animals or not – we are offered a powerful study in contrast in this week's Torah reading, which documents how, instead of trapping and caging animals, Noah actually saved them all from the great flood.

Animals were certainly created to roam in their natural habitat, and not be confined and controlled by us humans. Indeed, the natural balance of the earth is dependent on animals living their lives in the wild following their pre-defined cycles (just as it is dependent on weather and vegetation).

Yet, once in history, we find that it was absolutely necessary for the animals to be contained – for the sake of their own survival.

Over 4,000 years ago¹ Noah was commanded to gather and house pairs of animals, in order to save them and repopulate a world destroyed by the raging waters – in effect, launching the first and greatest animal preservation effort ever. And one as relevant today as it was then.

² In the year 1656 from creation (2105 BCE).

3. Unprecedented Initiative

Let us review a summary of this unprecedented initiative, which is outlined in relatively great detail in the Torah:

From all life, from all flesh, bring two of each kind into the ark to live with you. They shall be male and female. From each separate species of bird, from each separate species of livestock, and from each separate species of land animals, bring in two of each kind to live with you.²

Take with you all the food that will be eaten, and keep it in storage. It shall be food for you and for them [the animals].³

And then the Torah relates how the animals actually entered the ark:

They [came] along with every separate kind of beast, every separate kind of livestock, every separate kind of land animal, and every separate kind of flying creature – every bird [and] every winged animal. Of all flesh that has in it a breath of life, they came to Noah, to the ark, two by two. The clean animals, the animals which were not clean, the birds, and all that walked the earth, came two by two to Noah, to the ark. They were male and female, as God had commanded Noah.⁴

4. Why Noah?

But the question is this: Why? Why was Noah commanded go to so much trouble to save and care for all the animals? If God wanted to ensure their survival, He could have found many other ways to protect them. Why the need to have Noah himself gather all the species, as well as feed and care for them, certainly an arduous and complicated process? And even if there is some reason that Noah had to save them, why the need to preserve this episode for posterity and relate it to us?

² Genesis 6:19-20, 7:2-3

³ Genesis 6:21.

⁴ Genesis 7:8-9, 7:14-16.

Indeed, the Midrash tells us of the hassles that Noah endured in caring for these animals:

The whole twelve months that Noah was in the ark, neither he nor his family tasted sleep because they were responsible for feeding the animals, beasts, and birds ... Now some ate in the second hour of the night and some in the third hour of the day, hence you know that Noah did not taste a bit of sleep ... One time, when Noah was late in feeding the lion, the lion mauled him, and he went away limping.⁵

Elsewhere, the Talmud relates more details, quoting Noah's son, Shem:

We had much trouble in the ark. The animals which usually feed by day we fed by day, and those which normally feed at night we fed by night. But my father didn't know what was the food of the chameleon. One day he was sitting and cutting up a pomegranate, when a worm dropped out of it, which the chameleon ate. From then on, he mashed up bran and waited till it became wormy [so the chameleon had something to eat.]⁶

5. Why All This Bother?

Why all this bother?

To teach one of several vital lessons. First, that we humans have a responsibility not just to protect our own lives, but also of the world and the creatures around us. We were charged with the mission of refining and elevating the entire eco-system to preserve the sanctity of every fiber of existence.

⁵ Tanchuma, Noah 9. 14. See also Bereishit Rabbah 29:4: "And Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8)." How far [did God's grace to Noah extend]? To the point that he knew which animal was to be fed in the second hour of the day and which beast was to be fed in the third hour of the night.

⁶ Sanhedrin 108b.

And second, to teach us about our symbiotic and interdependent relationship with the animal world and the environment in which we live in general.⁷

This is underscored in the ensuing verses, in which God, following the flood, charges and entrusts Noah and his family – and the future human race – with the responsibility of caring for and elevating the world. God commands Noah to leave the ark (together with his family) and to take along all the animals that were on it with him.⁸ After Noah brings a thanksgiving offering, God promises never to destroy the world again, and charges Noah – and his descendants – with this calling:

God blessed Noah and his children. He said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. There shall be a fear and dread of you instilled in all the wild beasts of the earth, and all the birds of the sky, in all that will walk the land, and in all the fish of the sea. *I have placed them in your hands.*”⁹

In short: All the creatures of the earth are placed under our care!

6. God Remembered (Optional)

This also explains why the Torah emphasizes, “And God *remembered* Noah and *all the beasts and all the animals* which were with him in the ark...”¹⁰ And also why God includes the animals and every living creature in the rainbow covenant, never again to bring a flood that would destroy earth and its creatures.¹¹

⁷ As demonstrated by Noah leaving the ark limping due to the injury he incurred by the hungry lion he neglected to feed in time.

⁸ Genesis 8:15-19: “Leave the ark... Take out with you every living creature from all flesh: birds, livestock, and all land animals that walk the earth. Let them swarm on the land. They shall breed and multiply on the earth. Every beast, every land animal, and every bird - all that walk the land - left the ark by families.”

⁹ Genesis 9:1-2.

¹⁰ Genesis 8:1.

¹¹ Genesis 9:10-11.

Why did God care about the animals so much? Because of their importance in the scheme of things.

As the Midrash explains:

The Lord is good to all [creatures], and His mercies are over all, because they are *all* His works ... The Lord is good to all, and He gives of His mercy to all creatures [so that they can be merciful to others].¹²

What is even more amazing is that God shows this mercy even while He is in the process of destroying the world and its creatures due to their utter corruption!¹³

Charged to emulate God, Noah was commanded to save and care for all the animals, to feed them at exactly the right hour of the day or night,¹⁴ even if it meant being deprived of sleep.

The command to Noah is to all of us: We humans too are charged to care for and show kindness to all creatures with the greatest sensitivity.

At every step of the way, we are expected to help others and that includes animals. Under Torah law, we must be concerned for animal and environmental welfare:

¹² *Bereishit Rabbah* 33:3. The Midrash offers another reason for the care that God shows to His creatures: "If He remembered Noah, why also the animals? May the name of the Holy One be blessed, who never deprives any creature of its reward. If even a mouse has preserved its family [i.e. species] it deserves to receive a reward." (Midrash Tanchuma, Noah 11).

¹³ As the Midrash explains: "It says, 'A righteous one knows the soul of his animal' (Proverbs 12:10). The righteous one of the world [God] even understands the soul of his animal [i.e. the animals in the ark], even when he is angry." (*Tanchuma*, Noah 10).

¹⁴ Not only was Noah sensitive to the feeding times of all the different creatures, but also to their specific tastes, as the Midrash explains: "He took pressed figs with him... He took in branches for the elephants, *chatsubah* for the deer, and *z'khukhit* for the ostriches." (*Bereishit Rabbah* 31:14)

- We cannot eat until we have fed our animals.
- We are not allowed to be cruel to animals.
- We cannot hunt animals for sport.
- If we see an animal in distress, we must help it.
- We may not cut down the fruit trees of your enemy, even in wartime.
- We must let the land have a rest every seven years and, during this sabbatical year, we cannot plow it or harvest it.¹⁵

7. Zombie Bees

So lesson number one from this week's powerful Torah reading is the great responsibility we humans have for the world around us and all its organisms, which were placed under our care and protection, so that we may elevate and transform our entire universe into a divine home.

Lesson two is to contemplate on the amazing interdependence we have with the animal kingdom and the entire natural order, as well as their interdependence with each other – all reflecting on the Divine Master Designer who created this nothing less than astonishing choreography.

Here is one example which I recently came upon.

Biologist David Barash, author of *Homo Mysterious: Evolutionary Puzzles of Human Nature*, writes in the *New York Times* about the phenomenon of the zombie bees.¹⁶

¹⁵ Exodus 23:5: "When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from lifting it, you must nevertheless lift it up..." Leviticus 25:2: "When you come to the land that I am giving you, the land must be given a rest period ... for six years you may plant your fields ... but the seventh year is a ... year of rest for the land." Deuteronomy 22:10: "You shall not plow with an ox and donkey together." Deuteronomy 20:19-20: "When in your war against a city you have to besiege it for a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees ... You may eat of them but you must not cut them down." Also see: *Noda B'Yehudah*, chapter 10; *Sefer HaHinuch*, *Mitzvah* 506 and 529; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings, 6:8-10.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 2012: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/opinion/sunday/whos-in-charge-inside-your-head.html?_r=1&hp

Yes, zombie bees.

Bees that show abnormal behavior like flying at night (almost unheard-of in healthy bees), moving erratically and then dying.

These zom-bees are victims of a parasitic fly, which somehow lays its eggs in the bees heads. While the fly eggs hatch and consume the bee's brains from within, they induce this demented "night flight of the living dead."¹⁷

Yuck!

Observes Professor Barash: "These events, although bizarre, aren't all that unusual in the animal world." He then cites many more examples, including this fascinating one of a worm which "does time inside a snail, then an ant, followed by a sheep":

Ensconced within an ant, some of the resourceful worms migrate to their host's brain, where they manage to rewire its neurons, essentially hijacking its body. The manipulated ant, in response to [the worm's] demands, then climbs to the top of a blade of grass and waits patiently and conspicuously until it is consumed by a grazing sheep. Once in its desired happy breeding ground, the worm releases its eggs, which depart with a healthy helping of sheep poop, only to be consumed once more by snails, which eventually excrete the immature worms for another generation of unlucky ants to consume.

8. Lenin's Question

Lenin famously asked: "Who, whom?" Meaning: "Who benefits at the expense of whom?"

But ultimately the whole world benefits when creatures exist in eco-balance. Sometimes this balance calls for apparent parasitism. At others for apparent mutualism, also known as symbiosis.

¹⁷See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apocephalus_borealis

For example, the rhinoceros is practically blind. But it manages to navigate thanks to a little tick bird, which travels on its back eating the insects that invade the rhino's skin. While up high, the bird squeeks and clucks alerting the rhino to impending danger. In Swahili the tick bird is named *askari wa kifaru*, meaning "guardian of the rhino."¹⁸

Another example is the relationship between the clownfish that dwells among the tentacles of magnificent sea anemones. The clownfish protects the anemone from anemone-eating fish, and in turn the stinging tentacles of the anemone protect the clownfish from its predators.¹⁹

9. Practical Application

In addition to our overall responsibility to – and our interconnectivity with – all creatures, we can learn many practical lessons from each individual creature and the unique structure and skills with which it was endowed by God – and we can apply these practical lessons to our personal lives.

How often do we look far and wide for answers to our big dilemmas, when the answer may be right before our very eyes ... as close as our pet cat purring on the sofa.

Indeed, by way of explaining a verse in the Book of Job -- "He teaches us from the animals of the land, and from the birds of the Heavens He makes us wise"²⁰ -- the Talmud states:

Had the Torah not been given to us, we would have learned how to be modest from the cat, not to steal from the ant, and not to engage in forbidden relations from the dove."²¹

¹⁸ <http://www.awf.org/content/wildlife/detail/rhinoceros>.

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heteractis_magnifica.

²⁰ Job 35:11.

²¹ *Eruvin* 100b.

Every living creature embodies a trait for us to emulate. This is not to say, of course, that the cat consciously practices modesty or that the ant understands the evil of theft. Rather, each animal, as the embodiment of a particular trait, is a living example from which we can learn.²²

For example, the opening of the Code of Jewish law (*Shulchan Aruch*) – taken from the *Ethics of the Fathers* – enjoins us: “Be as brazen as a leopard, as light as an eagle, as swift as a gazelle, and as mighty as a lion to fulfill the will of your Father in Heaven.”²³

The power of the lion surely cannot refer to the lion’s raw physical strength, and the sages are not recommending gym subscriptions or classes in bodybuilding. Rather, they are trying to get across the power of self-control.

Like all big cats, lions are predators and therefore have aggressive natures. An aggressive instinct makes it difficult for big cats to get along even with members of their own species, which is why tigers, leopards and pumas all lead solitary lives. It is only the lion that somehow controls this aggression and lives in groups. This is the power of the lion that we are enjoined to emulate.²⁴

10. Songs of Nature

Additional lessons come from the Midrash known as *Perek Shirah* (“A Chapter of Song”) which relates that all creatures sing a song to their Creator. It then quotes the songs – each song being an ethical or philosophical lesson that the creature has to teach us.

For example, the crane, a large bird similar to a stork, sings a verse from Psalms: “Praise God with the lyre, make music for Him with the ten-stringed harp.”²⁵

What does this mean?

²² Adapted from Zoo Torah, see: <http://www.zootorah.com/Content/education.html>

²³ *Pirkei Avot* 5:20.

²⁴ Adapted from Zoo Torah, see: <http://www.zootorah.com/Content/education.html>

²⁵ Psalms 33:2.

Well, unlike other birds, cranes have terrible voices. But although they cannot sing lyrically (like, say, canaries), they clatter their beaks together like maracas. They thereby allude to the theme of the verse, which speaks of praising God with musical instruments.

The message is that we need not all be the same, but rather we all have our own unique talents and abilities which we should develop for serving God.²⁶

The elephant sings a verse from Psalms: “How great are Your deeds, O Lord, exceedingly profound are Your thoughts.”²⁷

The elephant is the largest land animal – a seven-ton, twelve-foot-high creature. Despite its enormous size it can gallop at great speeds. No other creature has anything like its boneless trunk made up of 100,000 muscles that makes this appendage at once flexible and powerful. One of the most intelligent of all animals, the elephant is trained to serve man in countless ways. Indeed, the elephant’s very existence bears testimony to the truth of its song – for is it not an example of God’s great deeds and profound thoughts?²⁸

The camel sings a verse from the Book of Jeremiah: “The Lord cries out from on high and sends out His voice from His holy abode. He is crying out over [the destruction of] His Temple.”²⁹

Before God acts, He always calls out to us first, to awaken our souls and allow us the chance to repent.³⁰ His prophets – and especially Jeremiah – spoke out forcefully urging the Jewish people must repent. They didn’t and were exiled from the Land of Israel. But even when that happened, God made them like camels, who can survive long periods in the harshest deserts.³¹

And this is what we have done and are still doing as people.

²⁶ Adapted from Zoo Torah, see: <http://www.zootorah.com/Content/education.html>

²⁷ Psalms 92:6.

²⁸ Adapted from *Perek Shirah: The Song of the Universe*, by Rabbi Nosson Scherman, p. 114.

²⁹ Jeremiah 25:30.

³⁰ Similar to the reason why God told Noah to build the ark which would take time, and why the flood began first as rain, in order to give the people a chance to repent (Rashi Genesis 6:14. 7:12).

³¹ Adapted from *Perek Shirah: The Song of the Universe*, by Rabbi Nosson Scherman, p. 102.

11. Many More Lessons (Optional)

There are many more lessons and examples:

Rattlesnakes, which gather in groups to sleep through the winter – sometimes up to 1,000 of them will coil up together to keep warm – teach us how communal unity can warm us up in a cold and hostile world.

The female green turtle sheds tears as she lays her eggs on the beach, to wash sand particles out of her eyes and rid her body of excess salt. So, too, our tears of joy upon the birth of our children cleanses our souls with humility and gratitude.

Ants are said to never cross a chalk line. So if you've got ants, draw a line on the floor with chalk or wherever the ants are coming in and see for yourself! They won't cross the line. Baking soda works, too! The lesson to us: We all should have a line – our white line of purity and innocence – which we should never cross...

And the list goes on and on and on. Wherever we look, at any given species, from the miniscule to the gigantic, or at the interaction between species, we find incredible precision and wisdom, offering us a glimpse into the infinite brilliance of the Cosmic Artist as well as endless lessons and insights into our own lives. For as our sages say, each human being is a “small universe,”³² a world in microcosm, and in addition to our symbiotic relationship with every other creature, we also include them all within us in some subtle form.³³

This is why the extraordinary coordination of nature – even of parasitic flies and zom-bees, rhinos and tick birds – resonates so in our hearts, and can teach us much. Something about the intricate, elegant, perfect balance of the animal kingdom touches us and teaches us about ourselves in new ways.

³² *Tanchuma Pekudei 3. Avot D'Rebbi Natan ch. 31.*

³³ “He placed the world into their hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

12. Conclusion

So ... as we read this week about the divine command to save all species of animals, this is an excellent time and opportunity to ponder – and discuss with our children – the lessons to be learned from our varied world – lessons that include learning from animals how to become better people. And above all, how to become more sensitive in watching over the gifts we were blessed with and ensuring that we all live up to the purpose for which we were all created – to manifest the divine plan in our existence.

From all the above we see how a seemingly tangential section of the Torah, which can easily be overlooked – the way Noah saves and cares for the “endangered species,” all the animals in his world which are about to perish – offers us invaluable lessons in our own responsibility to the world today.

Over four millennia ago Noah, by divine command, saved all the creatures of the world. Today, in 2012, we must ask ourselves: What are we doing to save and protect our planet? The challenge today is not just the physically endangered species, but the spiritually endangered ones. Are we doing all we can to fulfill our calling in refining, elevating and sublimating our material world?

May our efforts help usher in the Redemption, when the entire earth will be realigned and achieve its perfect balance as intended by its Creator ... when we will see a world of peace and harmony between human and human, between human and animal, between animal and animal, and we will all witness the miracles of nature that are promised for that time ... when “The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.”³⁴

Amen.

³⁴ Isaiah 11:6.