



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Bo

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January 24, 2015

Bo

**What Can Dogs Teach Us
About the Messiah?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

The dog is called a man’s best friend. And the dog – in his service to man – can teach us a lesson in serving our Creator.

In describing the tenth plague in Egypt, which came right before the redemption, the Torah uses a highly unusual phraseology and, in so doing, refers to the dog:

But to all the children of Israel, not one dog will sharpen its tongue...

What does the dog have to do with the Jews’ redemption from Egypt?

Furthermore, the Talmud states that the face of the last generation preceding the Final Redemption (and the coming of the Messiah) will resemble the face of a dog.

What does it all mean? The Maharsha’s innovative explanation provides keen insight into the issues involved here, revealing the secret of transforming the current exile into redemption.

A witty Chassidic interpretation by Rabbi Meir of Premishlan and a classic story about the Apter Rav will change the way you look at dogs forever.

WHAT CAN DOGS TEACH US ABOUT THE MESSIAH?

1. The Talking Dog (Joke)

Marty visits Dr. Saul, the veterinarian, and says, “My dog, Irving, has a problem.”

“What is that problem?” Dr. Saul asks.

“I will show you.”

Marty then points to the dog and commands: “Irving, Fetch!”

Irving begins to walk toward the door, then turns around and says, “So, why are you talking to me like that? You always order me around like I’m nothing. And you only call me when you want something. And then you make me sleep on the floor, with my arthritis. You give me this *oysgetrukene* food with all the salt and fat – so much schmaltz – and you tell me it’s a special diet. It tastes like an *oysgeklapte hoshana*! You should eat it yourself! And do you ever take me for a decent walk? No, it’s out of the house, a short *shpatzir*, and right back home. Maybe if I could stretch out a little, the sciatica wouldn’t kill me so much! I should roll over and play dead for real for all you care!”

Dr. Saul is amazed, “This is remarkable – a talking dog! And Yiddish too! What could possibly be the problem?”

Says Marty: “What could possibly be the problem?! My dog can’t hear! I said ‘Fetch’, not ‘Kvetch.’”

2. Learning from Creation

God created every single element of existence. As such, every single element of existence contains a lesson in serving our Creator.¹

¹ Everything God created He created for His honor (end of Pirkei Avot). As the Baal Shem Tov teaches, that everything we see and hear is by Divine Providence and contains a lesson in our divine service.

Mineral life has no free will – a mountain cannot decide to grow taller or study algebra. The same is true of vegetable life – round oranges cannot turn themselves into squares; tall palm trees cannot turn into short shrubs. And that also goes for animal life – animals cannot change their innate natures: a giraffe is a giraffe, not a lion; an elephant is an elephant, not a mongoose.

Human beings, on the other hand, are much more complex than animals. Humans are created in the Divine Image and are not so much ruled by their biology as by their spirits. Humans, more than what they are, are defined by what they can become. An ignoramus can become knowledgeable; a sinner can become a saint; an ugly person can transform himself or herself into a beauty.

With animals, what you see is what you get. With humans, what you see is not what you get. Therefore, the creatures of the animal kingdom can teach us about the nature of reality even more than human life can.

Because they are what they are, because there is no deceit in them, animals can teach us irrefutable truths. And, in so doing, they can help us gain keen insight into our own psychology and souls.

In this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Bo*, we find the word *kelev*, "dog," for the first time. Why is this word used and what can it teach us in serving our Creator?

3. The Smartest Dog (Joke)

A man visits a friend and is amazed to find him playing chess with his dog. He watches the game in astonishment for a while. "I can hardly believe my eyes!" he exclaims. "That's the smartest dog I've ever seen."

"Nah, he's not so smart," the friend replies. "I've beaten him three games out of five."

Now back to *Parshat Bo*...

4. Parshat Bo

Parshat Bo continues the ongoing description of Egyptian slavery and the ten plagues that transform the asphyxiating exile into infinitely deep gulps of free air. Exile is a chokehold on life; exodus is the freedom to oxygenate everything and anything we do with the divine breath of life.

Parshat Bo focuses on the final three of the ten plagues: the eighth, *arbeh*/locusts; the ninth, *choshech*/darkness; and the tenth, *makot bechorot*/the death of the Egyptian firstborn. In describing the final plague, it says:

There will be a great cry throughout the entire land of Egypt, such as there never has been and such as there shall never be again.²

Meaning that families will bewail the death of their firstborn, for no Egyptian will be immune of this plague. And they will be so afflicted by this horror that it will break their backs and twist their arms to change their enslaving ways and free the Jewish people.

But, while this devastation will be visited upon the Egyptians, what will happen in the Israelite community?

But to all the children of Israel, not one dog will sharpen³ its tongue against either man or beast, in order that you shall know that the Lord will make a distinction between the Egyptians and between Israel.⁴

The Torah clearly states that while this anguish and pain is occurring to the Egyptian families, the Jewish families will be so at peace that not even a dog will “sharpen its tongue,” that is, “bark.”

A cursory reading of this Torah passage suggests that the phraseology employed here is rather unusual. Why could the Torah not simply say that, while a great cry will resound throughout all of Egypt,

² Exodus 11:7.

³ Yecheerat, literally means “to sharpen,” or “whet” (Rashi) or “wag” (Ibn Janach; Radak, Sherashim). Different commentaries translate it in slightly different ways: “to whine” (Targum Yonathan; Rosh; Chizzkuni); “growl at” (Targum; Ibn Ezra); “bark at” or “bite” (Ibn Ezra; Ralbag). Cf. Joshua 10:21.

⁴ Exodus 11:7.

the children of Israel will be completely at peace? Wouldn't that get the message across? Why did the Torah feel compelled to introduce an animal, the dog, and let alone, a non-kosher one, into this verse?

As with everything in the Torah (whose goal is to instruct and inspire) there must be a personal and relevant message conveyed by this unique description. What may that lesson be?

5. A Dog-Faced Generation

Perhaps we may shed some light on this unique phrase by referencing the Talmud's description of the human condition in the End of Days, specifically the era of exile directly preceding the time of the Final Redemption. The Talmud calls this time *ikvata d'meshicha*, "on the heels of the Messiah," and describes it like this:

[Then] the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog, and truth will be absent, as it says [in the Book of Isaiah], *And truth is absent, and he who turns away from evil is considered mad...*⁵

Elsewhere, the Talmud repeats this assessment, stating yet again that in the Messianic era, "the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog."⁶

What does this mean?

The Talmud hints at an explanation two pages earlier⁷ where it rifles through a list of different generational characteristics and relates that, after the destruction of the Temple, when arrogant people multiplied, the daughters of Israel began to marry arrogant men. (Some say "arrogant men" is a redundancy.)

⁵ Sanhedrin 97a, quoting Isaiah 59:15 which ends *...and the Lord saw and was displeased for there is no justice.*

⁶ Sotah 49b.

⁷ Sotah 47b.

How could this be? Says the Talmud, “Because our generation sees only faces.” Meaning, we have stopped searching for a person’s inner character and we only judge the book by its cover – we only judge the person by the external appearance, but not by the inner depth, not by the true heart.⁸

And that brings us to the very essence of what a dog is.

6. The Maharsha Explains: *Kelev = Kol Lev*

Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Halevi Eidels, the great 16th century Torah scholar and Talmudist known as the Maharsha, explains the idea of a dog in a very innovative way, one that has profound psychological implications.

A dog, in Hebrew, is called *kelev*. *Kelev*, the Maharsha says, can be read as *kol lev*, “all heart.” A dog is all heart and is faithful to its master, without pretense or calculations. A dog is what a dog is. Period.

Based on this meaning, the Maharsha explains the Talmud’s saying, “the face of the generation [preceding the Messiah] will be like the face of a *kelev*,” as follows:

The final era of exile will be like the *face* of the heart, but not like the heart itself. The face of that generation will show outward love, but the heart will not be really in it – though love will appear on the face, that love will be absent from the heart. And this is what it says in the Talmud: “... our generation sees only faces...” only externals, only outward appearances.⁹

⁸ See Maharsha to Bava Basra 98a, explaining that their arrogance was in their pretense, pretending to be pious when they were not. The women say that externally – on the face of it – these gentlemen looked pious and did not realize that at the heart of the matter they were anything but. This is a fascinating definition of arrogance.

⁹ *Chidushei Halachos* to Sanhedrin 97a.

In that time, truth will be lacking, and we will only see the face of the heart (*kelev* or *kol lev*), but not the heart itself. It will be all about faces and facades – packaging and impressions – but not about the whole true heart. And anyone who does not bow to the peer-pressures of evil will be considered mad.

That time – the final era before the coming of the Messiah – is now. In describing the pretense of that time, the Maharsha was talking about us and our pretentious time!

7. Exile and Redemption: Then and Now

Exile, especially the deepest, darkest moments of exile, is defined and caused by seeing only the outer façade and face of the world – *pnei kelev* – but not its *kol lev*, not its whole heart.

This is exactly how it was during the tenth and final plague, in the very last moments of Egyptian exile and right before the redemption. And this is true today as well.

As we stand today, in the final moments of exile and at the threshold of the Final Redemption, we see faces, facades, pretenses and appearances – the face of the heart but not the heart itself.

What better way to describe our modern times, where the sizzle is often more powerful than the steak. As Madison Avenue cynics say: It's not important what happened, but what people *perceive* happened. A text message can be more powerful than a sincere hug. A Facebook "friend" is more valuable than an intimate kindred spirit. "The face of the dog (heart)" indeed.

The face of the world says one thing, but its words are hollow; what it says is absent in its heart.

This is what it means: "The face of the generation will be like the face of a dog" – the world only sees the face it wants to see and totally ignores the heart that is hidden within. (Sure, on the face of it, the world bemoans the slaughter of Jews; but does the world really know and acknowledge what the heart of a Jew is all about?)

8. A Chassidic Interpretation

While the ostensible translation of the verse we have been discussing – *u'lechol Bnei Yisrael lo yecheratz kelev leshono* – is *But to all the children of Israel, not one dog will sharpen its tongue*, Chassidic thought adds a special twist on these words.

Reb Meir of Premishlan understands the word *yecheratz* (which others translate as “sharpen”) to mean “slit” or “split.” Thus Reb Meir Premishlaner reads the verse as negating dissonance:¹⁰

U'lechol Bnei Yisrael lo yecheratz - all Jews should not be split between their mouth and their heart, nor have a sharp divide between what they feel and what they say, between what their face shows and what their heart really feels. But only *kelev leshono* – their heart should be like their tongue, and their tongue like their heart for all things.

Exile mentality, Egyptian mentality, is duplicitous: to show love on your face but harbor hate in your heart – a generation whose face is like the face of a heart but not the heart itself. Thus, the tenth plague was a direct outgrowth and result of these unhealthy life choices, and the outcome was *a great cry throughout the entire land of Egypt*.

But to all the children of Israel not one dog will sharpen its tongue against either man or beast (because we will be of one seamless heart and showing the one and the same face, and the inevitable outcome then will be) *that you shall know that the Lord will make a distinction between the Egyptians and between Israel*.

And then all shall clearly see, with our physical eyes, who indeed is top dog.

9. The Apter Rav and His Horse

So we have learned a lot from the dog today, but we still have a lesson to learn from a horse.

¹⁰ See Divrei Meir, Bo (p. 8).

When the Apter Rav, the famous Abraham Joshua Heshel of Apt, was once traveling to visit his Chassidim, it happened that he encountered a steep hill. The Rabbi quickly descended from the wagon drawn by a rather mild horse, and ascended the hill afoot.

“O Holy Rabbi,” said his attendant, “why did you come down from the wagon and climb this steep hill afoot?”

“Because,” replied the Rabbi, “I am afraid the horse will call me to a *Din Torah* (the heavenly court); it will claim that I had no pity on it, making it draw me up the hill.”

“And if so,” said the attendant, “would you not win the case on the grounds that the horse was created to serve man?”

“Yes,” said the Rabbi, “there is no doubt that I would win; but I would rather walk up the hill a dozen times, than find myself in litigation with a horse!”¹¹

10. Conclusion

Animals were created to serve man, sometimes to help us ride through life, sometimes to teach us lessons in serving our Creator.

The animal is what the animal is. A horse is not someone you want to litigate with and neither is a dog. They are not hypocritical – they do not put on a face of pretense and they do not posture.

We can learn to be the same; to be consistent – as we are in our hearts, so should we be in our thoughts, speech and action.

While we face a challenge in these final moments before the Final Redemption in this regard, when it is all said and done, the face of existence, the external outer elements, will reflect completely and entirely the inner love and holiness of the true heart dedicated to God.

¹¹ See Tales Of Latter Day Rabbis, p. 27 (Neches, 1945).

This is the role of the Jew – *U'lechol Bnei Yisrael*, for all Children of Israel to *lo yecheratz*, never be split or divided, but *kelev leshono*, to have their tongue, their speech and their actions seamlessly reflect their heart.

What takeaway message does this offer each one of us, and one we should share with our family members:

The best way to battle the dichotomy and duplicity of our times is to embrace a path of symmetry and harmony – between our heart and our words.

Every day let us designate time to focus on being truthful. On integrity. On being honest – and learning how to express our inner hearts to the outside world. The see our material existence and all our mundane activities as nothing more than a platform for our inner souls expression, that our outer selves should be channels for expressing the divine in everything we come in contact with.

May this truly turn the era of *ikvata d'meshicha* (the heels of the Messiah) into *meshicha mamash* (the actual thing) – the actual redemption today. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!