



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayechi

January 14, 2017

Vayechi

**Is Being Called “Donkey”
a Compliment?**



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

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ABSTRACT

Even without being compared to politicians, donkeys get a bum rap. People make fun of their stubbornness, which is sometimes equated with stupidity.

Yet, that’s being very unfair to a wondrous animal that can teach us much about our service to our Creator.

Indeed, in this week’s Torah reading, we read about how, and why, the donkey exemplifies Issachar, the tribe of Torah scholars.

Two donkey stories round out this sermon: the first related by Rabbi Yonasan Eibushutz, about putting a particular anti-Semite, Graf Gumprecht von Hartzlossergezelschaft, in his rightful place; the second by the Chatam Sofer, in which he explains to a certain Jew that he is making a donkey of himself by comparing the saintly Torah scholarship of the sages to mere “human” wisdom.

IS BEING CALLED "A DONKEY" A COMPLIMENT?

1. Chatam Sofer (Story)

Rabbi Moshe Schreiber, also known also as the Chatam Sofer, was a renowned rabbi at the turn of the 18th century in the city of Pressburg, an important city in the Kingdom of Hungary (today, Pressburg is known as Bratislava, and it is the capital of Slovakia). The Chatam Sofer was the founder and head of the great rabbinical academy at Pressburg, and was regarded as a foremost rabbi of his time. Questions of Jewish law were sent to him from all parts of the world and it was customary for him to answer them promptly.

A rabbi of a small town in Hungary once wrote to him on a point of law, and concluded his letter thus: "Although this question was fully discussed by our predecessors of olden times, I am doubtful whether we may fully rely upon their opinions, for after all, they were but men, earthly beings apt to err."

The Chatam Sofer did not reply to this letter. After a lapse of time, the correspondent became impatient, and went to Pressburg to discuss the matter in person. "May it please Your Grace," said he, when they met, "to tell me why you have not favored me with a reply to my inquiry, as I am aware that it is your custom to answer your correspondents promptly?"

"The reason is, that I do not care to have correspondence with donkeys," replied the great rabbi unexpectedly.

"What do you mean?" said the visitor in surprise.

"If our predecessors were as angels, we are as men; and if they were only as men, we are, in comparison, only as donkeys – do you not recall this passage from the Talmud ¹?" asked the Chatam Sofer.

¹ Shabbos 112b.

“What has that to do with me?” asked the other.

“Only this,” answered the Chatam Sofer, “you stated in your letter that our predecessors ‘were men, earthly beings apt to err’ – and if you hold so, then draw your conclusion from the Talmudic passage which I have just quoted to you.”²

2. Progressive Donkeys (Humor)

Graf Gumprecht von Hartzlossergezelschaft, who was an anti-Semite and leader of a so-called “Progressive” party in Prague, once taunted Rabbi Yonosson Eibschutz, the chief rabbi of the city, by saying: “How is it, holy rabbi, that fashions have changed with your Jews so much? Moses and his wife rode on a donkey from Midian to Egypt, and you say the Messiah will come riding in similar style, yet we never see a Jew nowadays ride any animal but a horse?”

“It is because we wish to refrain from offending anybody, that is all,” answered Rabbi Eibschutz. “It is not because we are too proud.”

“How is that?” asked the Graf.

“Well,” began the razor-sharp rabbi. “Now that the donkeys are organizing and calling themselves ‘Progressives,’ we have given up riding on donkeys in order to avoid the impression that we are mixing into politics.”³

3. Bum Rap

Even without being compared to politicians, donkeys get a bum rap. People make fun of their stubbornness, which is sometimes equated with stupidity.

² Humorous Tales of Latter Day Rabbis, p. 58.

³ Humorous Tales of Latter Day Rabbis, p. 100.

Yet, to be fair, donkeys also have another side to them. A donkey is a wondrous animal that can teach us so much about our service to our Creator.

Indeed, in this week’s Torah reading, we read about how, and why, the donkey exemplifies Issachar, the tribe of Torah scholars.

4. The Structure of Torah

Before we examine that comparison – couched in Jacob’s blessing to his son – a word about the structure of the Torah.

One of the most fascinating elements of the Torah is the way verses are structured. Why does the Torah choose certain words instead of others? Indeed, the entire body of Judaism is derived from these sentence constructions, and the divine logic behind them. The Talmud is committed to excavating the depths and unraveling the possibilities of the written word.

Every letter in the Torah is intentionally weighted and added (or not added) by the Divine to convey a sophisticated multilayered system of meaning. If the Torah says something in one way instead of another, using one letter or word instead of another, turning a phrase like this and not like that, applying a specific metaphor instead of another, it is because the Torah wants to teach us something.

Indeed, when a verse is not readily logical on the obvious and literal level, it is because the Torah wants to convey a lesson or provide an insight with the seemingly more complex and less-straightforward syntax.

Which leads us to *Parshat Vayechi*, the final Torah chapter in the Book of Genesis.

5. Parshat Vayechi

In the next book of the Torah, the Book of Exodus, we will read about the beginning of Egyptian slavery. And this last portion of Genesis prepares us for the Egyptian exile. It does so by defining each one of the twelve tribes’ roles in turning darkness into light, exile into redemption. Here we read how Jacob, before his passing, blessed each one of his twelve sons identifying their unique mission in manifesting the divine vision in this physical world.

The poetic – and often cryptic – language Jacob used in blessing his children has layers upon layers of meaning. There is the literal meaning of Jacob’s blessings, as well as the homiletic, figurative, metaphorical, psychological, emotional, soulful, and spiritual interpretations of each of these blessings. Every word in the Torah can be seen through a variety of prisms, and sometimes the verses that are the least readily understood on the literal level, compel us to dig to understand the true and deeper meaning of the words.

Jacob’s blessing to Issachar is a case in point:

Issachar is a bony donkey, lying between the boundaries. He saw the resting place – that it is good, and the land – that it is pleasant, and he bent his shoulder to bear the burden, he became an indentured laborer.⁴

The simple meaning of the verse – one underscored by the Midrash⁵ – seems to be that the donkey is a metaphor for bearing the burden of the Torah. Just as a donkey bears the burden of its yoke, Issachar bears the burden of the yoke of Torah.

But immediately, some questions arise:

1. Couldn’t Jacob have found another, more refined animal which also bears burdens – such as a horse for example – to make the same point?

⁴ Genesis 49:14-15, according to Rashi ad loc. The commentaries find various ways to read these verses, see for example Targum, Ibn Ezra, Saadia Gaon, Radak, Genesis Rabba 98:17, 99:11; Nidda 31a; et al.

⁵ Genesis Rabba 99:11; cf. 98:17.

2. A donkey is a non-kosher animal. Why would Jacob compare his son, especially one that is the epitome of Torah scholarship, to a non-kosher creature?
3. What unique characteristics does a donkey possess to warrant such a comparison?
4. (Optional) Why a *bony* donkey, what does the added reference to “bones” teach us?
5. And finally, would you bless your child to bear burdens and be a laborer? Would you rather not wish for them to have no burdens, or for their burdens to be eased?

6. Issachar/Zebulon Partnership

It is well known that, later in Jewish history, Issachar became the tribe of Torah scholars. His brother tribe, Zebulon, was the tribe of merchants. Together, Issachar and Zebulon struck a soulfully symbiotic relationship where Zebulon’s business acumen and success would support Issachar financially and physically, so that Issachar could study Torah; and Issachar’s Torah scholarship and academic prowess would support Zebulon spiritually and scholastically.

This we learn from the Book of Deuteronomy where Moses states: *Rejoice, Zebulon, in your departure, and Issachar, in your tents.*⁶

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, explains: “The tribes of Zebulon and Issachar entered into a partnership: the Zebulonites would dwell at the seashore and go out in ships, to trade and make profit. They would thereby provide food for the Issacharites, who would sit and occupy themselves with the study of Torah. Consequently, Moses mentioned Zebulon before Issachar, because Issachar’s Torah came through Zebulon.”

⁶Deuteronomy 33:18.

And Rashi adds that the chief justices of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, were descendants of Issachar.

Further, the Talmud⁷ states: “Fundamentally, a person should give himself to Torah like an ox to his yoke and a donkey to his burden.”

7. The Burden of Torah

Torah can be compared to a yoke that is placed upon an animal; to this yoke a plow can be attached to prepare the earth for planting. This is indeed the image of an ox. Torah can also be compared to a load that the animal carries (like a passenger, for example). This is indeed, the image of a horse.

But Jacob was seeking to convey a different image, and this is why he chose, in particular, to compare Issachar to a donkey.

When an ox stops working to rest, its yoke is removed. When a horse stops to rest, its load is also removed. But a donkey, as the verse articulates, rests with its burden on its back. *And he bent his shoulder to bear the burden...*

We could think of the Torah like a yoke, which is difficult to bear but necessary if one wants plow the field of life and make it bloom. But then when one is at rest, the Torah may be too overbearing, too uncomfortable and must be removed. Rest then requires suspension of Torah, so to speak. The same is true if we compare the Torah to a load, which is removed when then the horse stops to rest and eat and drink.

But the donkey bears its burden, and even when it finds a resting place, it does not unload the burden, rather it bends its shoulder and bears the burden even when at rest.

Being an “indentured laborer” is a curse if you are indentured to a meaningless and fleeting labor. But when you are indentured to an eternal and divine labor – Torah study – it is the greatest of blessings.

⁷ Avodah Zarah 5b. See Tzafnat Pane’ach to Genesis 49:14; cf. Bava Kama 17a.

And when that burden is a load of diamonds of G-dly wisdom, it is no burden at all. You want to carry it, even when you are at rest. For when you leave the yeshiva, the house of study, that load of diamonds continues to illuminate all facets of one's life.

Offer someone a reward of 100 pounds of stones if they are able to carry the stones from one location to another. Everyone would decline the offer. Offer the same person a reward of 100 pounds of diamonds for the same effort of carrying the diamonds over the same distance – and everyone would welcome the offer, and even ask for 200 pounds of diamonds!

Why? 100 pounds of diamonds don't weigh less than 100 pounds of stones! The difference is: Stones (which have no value) are a burden in the eyes of the carrier. The value of the diamonds totally overshadows the effort exerted in carrying them, making them feel like they are not a burden.

8. Practically Speaking: Lessons From Donkeys

So, as we can see, the donkey offers us important lessons for our lives today. Here is a selection to take to heart and take home:

1. An easy, undemanding life isn't always a good thing. And a burden isn't always a bad thing. It all depends on the type of burden we're talking about. We may want to unload physical hardships, but we never want to unload spiritual commitments. For, like, diamonds, they are actually blessings, not burdens.

Conventional wisdom may suggest that the more we unburden ourselves the more pleasant life will be. The truth is the exact opposite: when we have a burden to bear, we are important. When we don't, we are insignificant. A blessing is not to be unloaded; a blessing is a right and holy burden, not a superficial or meaningless one. Rather than looking to unload, may we all learn to see that our Torah load is made up of diamonds of divine wisdom and recognize it for the blessing it is.

2. Torah demands much of us. Torah can appear heavy; it weighs a lot. Life would be lighter – though less bright – without Torah, but life would also be lighter and less heavy without family, parents, spouses, children, community. It would also be empty, lonely, and depressing.

Torah's demands on us are actually a great blessing. We demand and expect things only from those we believe have the ability to fulfill those expectations and demands. The greater the potential, the more the demands.

3. Throughout history – ever since the exile of Egypt – up until a generation or two ago, our grandparents and their grandparents before them, lived most of the time in perpetual struggle and oppression from enemies around them. Today we are blessed to live in freedom, even in prosperity.

Yet, freedom poses another challenge: The challenge of becoming apathetic and indifferent. To seek out a life of ease and comfort, and becoming complacent in the process.

The comparison of Yissachar the scholar to a donkey teaches us, that even as we have been unburdened from the oppression of our ancestors, we must never lose the burdens of our commitment to our traditions – to Torah and to G-d – which our predecessors sacrificed their lives for. On the contrary: the freer we are of physical burdens, the more time and energy we have to deepen our dedication to Torah and Judaism.

4. A horse bears its burden only when it moves, only when it is meant to; when a horse rests it is relieved of its burden. Not so a donkey. A donkey, even when reposing, maintains its burden on its back; it never relieves itself of its purpose.

Some people may see Torah as something to bear in certain times, but not all the time. They may feel that they can relieve themselves of its burden at less-convenient times – when they have to rest or be occupied with "life." Torah, their logic goes, is for the study hall, the synagogue, the yeshiva, the Shabbat table, a sermon. But, they say,

"When I'm at work, when I'm eating dinner, when I'm commuting, when I'm talking to my spouse or children or parents, when I'm reading a book or paper, or watching a movie, on vacation, or surfing the web, when I'm sleeping, resting, reposing then, like a horse, surely I should relieve myself of the burden of Torah."

Says Jacob to Issachar: your blessing, the blessing of the Jew, is that you bear the yoke, the weighty blessing of Torah, of divine wisdom and sublime perspective, wherever you go. It is meant to be with you whatever path you take, whether learning, working, traveling, resting, eating, talking, listening - everywhere and anywhere you should carry the load of Torah. And be sure to carry it with pride.

Because you are one with your mission. Torah is "our life and our sustenance." Torah for a Jew is like being a fish in water. You cannot separate the two.⁸ Just as a fish cannot survive outside of water, just as we cannot unload the need to breathe, so too we cannot unload Torah from our lives.

5. The donkey's sole purpose is to bear loads. That is why the donkey is called a "beast of burden." The Jew's sole purpose is to bear the yoke of Torah, a higher and weightier calling.

6. And finally, why use a non-kosher animal, the donkey, to depict Torah scholarship? Why not, say, use an ox, also a beast of burden with a yoke, but a kosher animal? To teach us an essential lesson that Torah encompasses all of existence, not just the "kosher" world.

If the Torah used a kosher animal, like an ox, one might think that Torah is about building a "kosher ghetto," insulated from the rest of the world. By using using an example from a non-kosher animal, we learn that Torah study is about finding the positive in everything and ultimately revealing the divine even in the non-kosher.

Torah teaches us to discern between kosher and not kosher, between light and darkness, and to make the right decisions so that ultimately darkness is transformed into light.

⁸See Avodah Zara 3b. Brochos 61b.

9. Bony Gematria (Optional Conclusion)

Why did the Jacob bless Issachar to be, specifically, a *bony* donkey?

The Hebrew word for donkey is *chamor*, which the Torah here spells *chet*, *mem*, *resh*. The numerical value of these letters is as follows: *chet* = 8; *mem* = 40; *resh* = 200. Together, these three letters equal 248.

There are 613 mitzvot in the Torah: 365 of them are negative – the don'ts, such as don't kill, don't steal, don't eat pork, don't worship idols; and 248 of them are positive – the do's, such as do honor your parents, do keep Shabbat, do give charity.

We are taught that each one of the 248 positive commandments represents one of the 248 bones and limbs in the body.

The Midrash teaches that Jacob's blessing comparing Issachar to a bony donkey specifically was to demonstrate that Issachar's Torah is a comprehensive, thought out and revealed system, like that of a skeleton, a matrix of 248 bones and limbs that systematically allows for the implementation of the divine body of thought.

Indeed, the Hebrew word for bone, *etzem*, also means "essence." By constructing a comprehensive bone structure, we reveal the "essence" – the essence of our beings, the essence of our missions, the essence of the divine plan to transform this world into a divine garden.

Imagine: we learn all the above lessons from a... donkey. A donkey is often used in a derogatory and insulting context. But the Torah – in Jacob's blessing to Yisachar – sees the divine lessons in this creature.

May we all carry our responsibilities in a way that we only feel its gifts and blessings. May we study Torah in a way that permeates our entire beings and lives, and brings to life the comprehensive and conscious bone structure of existence, including all 248 positive mitzvot, so that we may – through our study and actions – reveal the *etzem*, the essence of existence forever and ever.

Shabbat Shalom!

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