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תורה תנור

Zoo Torateinu

By Nosson Slifkin

Several years ago, I began researching, lecturing and writing about the interplay between Torah and the natural world. In the last class that I taught, I found it necessary to have an additional teacher present to write on the blackboard. I would have done it myself, but I was all tied up. To be specific, I was tied up by a twelve-foot python. It's rather annoying when that happens; the heavy coils are draped all around you and it's almost impossible to move.

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Is the zoo just for kids? When we apply a deeper understanding of Torah concepts, observing exotic animals becomes an educational experience for all.

I guess every job has its peeves.

But this is a job I love. One of the most beautiful places in Jerusalem is the Tisch Family Zoological Gardens, also known as the Biblical Zoo. It places special emphasis on displaying animals from the lands of the Bible – Syrian bears, leopards, oryx, to name a few. There is no better place to teach people about the message of Torah as expressed by the animal kingdom, which is why I started teaching there.

Huge Hippos in the Holy City

A few years ago, during a training course for volunteers at the zoo, the zoo's director stated that he was anxious to enhance the unique Biblical aspect of the zoo, and hoped to cater

to the diversity of Jerusalem's inhabitants. I submitted a proposal to develop a program for Biblical-zoological education at the zoo. Its premise was that the same God who created every living thing, implanting instincts and attributes in every creature, also wrote the Torah which refers to specific animals for specific reasons. The idea was simple: rather than just citing the relevant passage of the Bible that mentions a particular animal (as the zoo normally does), explain why the Torah uses that particular animal as a symbol.

For example, in addition to placing a notice on the hippopotamus enclosure citing the verse from *Job* that mentions the hippo, there should be an explanation of its significance; namely, that the tremendous power of the hippo is intended to humble Job regarding his queries about God. Another example is the Biblical perspective on the bear. The mother bear, bereft of her cubs, is consistently used in the Bible as a symbol of anger. One explanation for this is that bear cubs are so tiny at birth that the mother bear expends much more time raising and protecting them than do other animals with their young. As a result, she forges an especially close bond with them. This is why a mother bear is one of the angriest of all animals if her cubs are taken away – a true Jewish mother!

The concept was approved, and the Torah Zoo Tour was born. The program was originally developed as an outreach effort, taking student groups from outreach *yeshivot* on guided tours of the zoo combined with short *shivurim*. Sometimes new students have narrow perceptions of Orthodox Jews. I have yet to find a more powerful way of dispelling such notions than by giving a lecture wearing my hat, jacket, and a boa constrictor. Rabbis don't usually wear boa constrictors.

The advantage of such an outreach program is that it demonstrates how the Torah is no outdated relic, but rather a powerful system for appreciating and understanding the world around us. The zoologist sees the lion as *Panthera Leo*, the chemist sees it as a

collection of molecules, the environmentalist sees it as a niche in the food chain, but the Torah Jew has the enhanced perspective of seeing it as the *aryeh* — a manifestation of the attribute of *gevurah*, power (and not merely because the words share the same *gematria*). This understanding is doubly enhanced when we learn that according to *Chazal* true *gevurah* is the power of self-control, which is specifically a feature of the lion. Despite the lion's inherently aggressive nature, similar to all predators, it differs from other big cats in its ability to somewhat control this aggression and live in groups.

It soon became clear that such material is not only useful for outreach purposes; it is equally valuable for the religious community. We Jews have our own unique approach to the natural world, and few of us are taught about it. In addition, wouldn't a deeper understanding of every creature yield a deeper understanding of the Torah?¹

The Zoo Rabbi Heads West

San Diego is home to one of the finest zoos in the world, displaying several thousand creatures from pandas to komodo dragons. It also has a growing Jewish community. Recently, I was sent there on a mission, arranged by Rabbi Simcha Weiser, headmaster of the Soille San Diego Hebrew Day School, to take the local Jewish community to their beloved zoo and show it to them in a new light. By good fortune, the world-famous zoo is sister to the Jerusalem zoo and the Jewish community benefited from its extremely generous cooperation.

On my very first morning in San Diego, someone in *shul* asked me, "What brings you to San Diego?" I replied, "I've been brought here to do some educational work for the Jewish community at the zoo." He looked at me skeptically and argued, "But there is no Jewish community at the zoo!"

Well, yes and no. Over the next three weeks, the Jews of San Diego learned that they have an outstanding,





Rabbi Slifkin (at right) greets a colleague in his field of Jewish education.

if unconventional, Jewish learning resource, just moments away. The zoo is so vast that a full tour was out of the question, so we based the first tour in the new Ituri Forest section of the Africa exhibit and entitled the program “Ituri Torah” — after the classical Jewish work of that name!

This was a tour aimed at adults. For example, two facing enclosures contained colobus monkeys and bonobo chimpanzees. “Colobus” means “mutilated” and refers to the fact that they do not have thumbs. This increases the efficiency of their hands as limbs for locomotion, enabling them to grasp and release branches quickly and easily. Bonobo chimpanzees, on the other hand, have thumbs that are almost as opposable as those of human beings, which enables the chimps to manipulate tools effectively, such as the twigs they peel and poke into termite mounds to extract a tasty snack. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that the word for “thumb” in the Torah, *bohen*, is related to the word *binah*, understanding, because the thumb enables the translation of intelligence into dexterous manipulation.

A different type of program had to be devised for the schoolchildren, and a three-day course was the result. The first day’s activities were held at the school. We rented some animal parts from the zoo: lion and bear paws, giraffe

and zebra hooves, llama and peccary skulls. The younger children loved handling these artifacts as they learned about the features of kosher animals and some of the insights behind these laws. With the older children, we engaged in discussions of the different types of interplay between Torah and the animal kingdom: identifying animals in the Torah; learning which animals possess various attributes; studying the laws of kosher animals; understanding stories in the Torah about animals; and clarifying man’s relationship with and responsibilities toward the animal kingdom.

The following day, several of the classes went to the zoo. In order to make the trip more engaging, they received lists of some animals that are mentioned in the Torah, such as the *tzvi*, *behemot*, *namer* and *shafan*, together with clues from the *Chumash*, *Gemara* and *Midrash* as to their identity. They studied the clues, observed the animals, and listened carefully to the Torah explanations that were given at each exhibit. They were then asked to give their best guess as to each animal’s identity. (For the curious reader: the correct answers are gazelle, hippopotamus, leopard and hyrax, respectively.) Although the school has both a strong Torah education and natural sciences curriculum, this was the first time the students learned to bring the two together.

The third day’s activities were back at the school. Students who had been on the zoo tour discussed their animal identifications as well as how to learn important lessons from and about the animal kingdom. For the other students, we rented some more animals to bring into the school for handling — giant tortoises, scorpions, and a Burmese python, among others. These children were probably too young to grasp the Torah thoughts that I shared with them, and their attention was undoubtedly distracted by the enormous python sliding around their feet. Nevertheless, they will probably never forget the experience and will remember being introduced to the natural world through a Jewish lens.

Animal Park, Jewish Spark

Full advantage was taken of San Diego’s magnificent resources. The Wild Animal Park, located in the countryside, is a 2,000 acre reserve for large herds of exotic animals, most of which can only be seen by taking a 50-minute, four-mile narrated monorail tour on the “Wgasa Bush Line Railway.” The Park generously allowed us to rent an entire train for our own group tour, during which we were able to use the loudspeaker system for a Biblical tour of the reserves. The Wild Animal Park is an extraordinary attempt to simulate the savannahs of Africa. As I have been to Africa, I was able to notice where the simulation failed — for example, the real Africa is full of Israelis — and also where it succeeded.

The Wild Animal Park resembles Africa in terms of the relative proportions of predators and prey: 3% to 97%. The number of species of prey animals also greatly exceeds that of predatory animals. In the greater survival success of prey animals, we can perhaps see a fulfillment of the principle of “God seeks the pursued” (*Kohélet* 3:15). The intent of the passage is primarily in reference to human beings, but it is a principle that applies on all levels, even to the system of the natural

world. In the proliferation of herbivorous animals, we see a fulfillment of the Biblical prophecy that “the meek shall inherit the earth” (*Tehillim* 37:11).

On the other hand, one effort by the Park to closer simulate the wilds of Africa actually achieved the reverse. A model of a buffalo carcass, with a troop of vultures sitting on it, was an excellent launching point for explaining why *Perek Shirah* (the ancient text that lists the lessons to learn from the natural world) attaches the blessing of “*Baruch hatov vehameitiv*” to the wild animals. This blessing was instituted in *Birkat Hamazon* on the occasion of Rome finally allowing the victims of the massacre at *Beitar* to be given a respectable burial. But honor for the deceased is also granted by God to the animals of the wild. The natural system works in such a way that a dead animal disappears within days. After an animal dies, the detritus left by scavengers fertilizes the ground, causing plant growth to rise up and cover whatever remains of the deceased animal, which is why one almost never sees a dead animal in the wild. The fake buffalo carcass, constructed to provide realism, actually detracts from it! Through *Perek Shira*, this phenomenon of the natural world takes on new significance.

When we stop to consider the vast animal kingdom, many questions may come to mind: Why was such an array of animals created? What is their role in the world? Of what significance are they to us? A careful examination of the animal kingdom from a Torah perspective provides us with the ability to view the animals as living, breathing manifestations of the Torah. When we take a trip to the zoo with these concepts in mind, both adults and children can gain deeper insights into the natural world and experience the thrill of witnessing these fascinating creatures. **JA**

1 With cooperation of the Biblical Zoo, some of the program's material discussed in this article was recently published under the title, *In Noah's Footsteps: Biblical Perspectives on the Zoo*.

What's The Truth About...Giraffe Meat!

Ari Z. Zifotofsky takes on a commonly-held misconception about an intriguing animal of the wild.

Misconception: Although the giraffe is a kosher animal, it is not slaughtered because it is not known where on the neck to perform the *shechitah* (ritual slaughter).

Fact: The *makom shechitah* (region of the neck in which ritual slaughter is valid) on a giraffe is precisely defined by *halachah*, just as it is for all animals, and the only impediments to *shechting* giraffe are cost and practical considerations. (They are among the most difficult animals to restrain.)

Background: This misconception is very widespread and is shared by young and old alike. Children learn it in kindergarten, and senior citizens have told it to me in *shul*.

Before questioning how to perform the *shechitah*, it is necessary to ascertain that the giraffe (*giraffa camelopardalis*) — the biggest ruminant and the tallest mammal — is indeed kosher. The physical indicia of a kosher mammal are that it be a ruminant and have split hooves (*Leviticus* 11:2-8 and *Deuteronomy* 14:4-8). A visit to your local zoo will reveal this striped giant standing on split hooves and chewing its cud. There is also an historical record of the giraffe being accepted as kosher. The *zemer*, listed among the ten types of kosher animals in *Deuteronomy* (14:5), is identified as the giraffe by Rav Saadia Gaon, Rabbenu Yona, Radak, the Septuagint, and many others.

Regarding the *makom shechitah*, the Talmud (*Chullin* 27a) probes for the Biblical source that slaughtering must be performed at the neck, and concludes that it is a tradition, a law given to Moses at Sinai. This would indicate that the entire neck is valid for *shechitah*. In most animals, one does not think about how to define the neck, because it is a relatively small area. In the case of the giraffe, one might contemplate whether the whole neck really is valid and wonder about the exact location of the acceptable zone. But there is no need to equivocate; the specific anatomic boundaries (cited in *Chullin* 45a; *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 20:1-2) for the ritual slaughter of all animals apply to the giraffe as well. For a pigeon, the valid region is a few inches long; for a cow, over 12 inches; and for a giraffe, close to six feet. A *kashrut* expert once quipped that “anyone who does not know where to *shecht* a giraffe either knows nothing about the laws of *shechitah* or could not hit the side of a barn with a baseball.”

When I asked Rabbi Yosef Kafich ז”ל, a leading rabbi and scholar in the Israeli Yemenite community, if there are any halachic impediments to *shechting* giraffe, his tongue-in-cheek response was that the only problem might be that “at \$10,000 per kilo, it would be *ba'al tashchit* (a waste!)”

Rabbi Zivotofsky contributes Legal-ease, a column devoted to researching misconceptions, regularly featured in Jewish Action. He has prepared a detailed essay on the laws pertaining to shechting giraffe. To obtain a copy, contact Jewish Action: 11 Broadway, NY, NY 10004 or email: friedland@ou.org.

