

## Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### *Parashat Yayigash* – Shepherding: The Traditional Jewish Vocation

Flocks of sheep are the central theme in Yosef's introduction of his family to Pharaoh. Being shepherders saved the Jewish people from assimilation in Egypt, since Egypt worshipped sheep, Pharaoh would therefore happily relegate Yosef's shepherding family to the far-off land of Goshen. This explains why Yosef had carefully instructed his brothers to tell Pharaoh that they were shepherders, in order that he would distance them from the decadent centers of Egypt. "When Pharaoh calls you and asks, 'what is your occupation?' You shall answer, 'your servants have been breeders of livestock from the beginning until now, both we and our fathers' – so that you may stay in the region of Goshen. For all shepherders are abhorrent to Egyptians" (*Bereishit* 46:33-34). Rashi explains that shepherding was not a respected occupation in Egypt because sheep are considered gods to the Egyptians. "For the animal that the Egyptians worship the Hebrews eat." (*Targum Onkelus, Bereishit* 43:32). Egyptian mythology confirms this. The god Khnum was one of the principal and oldest gods of Egypt. Khnum's temple was located on the island of Elephantine, today known as Aswan. The Egyptians believed that Khnum was responsible for the level of the Nile. He was also portrayed as the creator of humanity. His image is of that of a man with a ram's head. Remains of mummified rams have been found in Khnum's temple. It seems to me that the Egyptian worship of the sheep is part of their general worship of the forces of nature. Their Nile worship, from which they received their sustenance, is well known. Perhaps, the eight times the word תְּצֹן/tzon – flocks is mentioned in this week's *parasha* teaches us the contrast between the Egyptian nature worship and the Jewish belief in Hashem's miracles. Eight corresponds to the reality beyond Nature, as Hashem created the world in seven days. This concept is highlighted by the fact that we read *Parashat Vayigash* in proximity to the holiday of Chanukah. Most of our forefathers were shepherds, since this occupation is conducive to cleaving to G-d by being close to nature and far away from urban distractions. Here in Bat Ayin we are returning to the vocation of our ancestors. Flocks of sheep and goats dot the pastoral landscape of Bat Ayin as our community includes several shepherders. Perhaps Jewish mothers should encourage their children to become shepherds rather than doctors and lawyers?

### Shepherding Conducive for Developing the Jewish Potential

"Your servants are shepherds, both we and our fathers" (*Bereishit* 47:3). The Torah clearly states that Avraham, Yitzchak, Ya'acov, Rachel, the twelve tribes, Moshe, Tziporah, her sisters, and King David were shepherds. Why did the majority of our Biblical leaders choose this occupation although it was disdained by the surrounding nations? Rav Yosef HaKohen z"l explains how the shepherd works mainly with living creatures, and the care he extends to them fosters in him human feelings of tenderness and empathy. The flock needs the shepherd's care, but does not owe its very existence to the human being. As a result, the shepherd is saved from the danger of attaching too much value to himself and to his property. The Egyptian leaders by contrast were



very shrewd in instilling in their people an implacable hatred for pastoral peoples (Rabbi R.S. Hirsch, *Bereishit* 4:2). Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook explains that the benefit of shepherding is the secluded lifestyle of the shepherd. While taking care of flocks, wandering through the hills and valleys, the shepherd separates from the noisy distractions of society, thus facilitating ample time for inner reflection. Therefore, our ancestors chose to be shepherds in order to experience an elevation of the soul and awe of the Creator through viewing His wondrous creations (*HaK'tav V'haKabbalah, Bereishit* 4:2).

### **Time for *Hitbodedut* – Alone in the Field**

The definition of a shepherd is a person who separates himself from the way of the world, and goes alone (*mitboded*) to places far from people, in order to avoid the distractions by the vain pursuits of this world. The field is a place of rest and serenity for him. There, his soul may awaken and become elevated to see the great wonders of Hashem and His creation. For this reason our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'acov, the tribes, Moshe and David chose to be shepherds (*HaK'tav V'haKabbalah, Bereishit* 4:2). During the era of Hevel, the son of Adam, when humanity was still sparse, all the places were suitable for *hitbodedut*. Nevertheless, scripture called *hitbodedut* in the name of shepherding for the sake of the generations that was to come after him. Shepherding is not a labor-intensive occupation. Unlike farming, this vocation does not require too much exertion or drain all one's energy; neither does it occupy one's mind excessively. The shepherd, therefore, has ample time to elevate his spirit to Divine and humane values, freeing his soul to soar in lofty concepts. Through shepherding, we can recognize the wonders of Hashem who brings humanity to true perfection.

### **Balance Meditative Reflection with Physical Work**

The Torah differs from the Eastern religions by emphasizing the importance of our connection and contribution to society, rather than encouraging separating from the world by going off on a mountain in solitary meditation. How do we balance a reclusive solitary lifestyle with connecting with society and elevating the universe? Being a shepherd provides the opportunity for inner meditative reflection while remaining connected to the physical reality. A shepherd does not live in an ivory tower, immersed in artificial philosophies detached from life. Rather, shepherding requires being concerned with the actual physical needs of the animals. The shepherd is constantly engaged in the real world, seeking good forage, water and shade for his flock. We learn from this that although the shepherd's contemplations may be sublime and lofty, they do not remove him from being involved in the physical work of this world.

### **Genuine Concern for the Wellbeing of the Flock**

"Ya'acov journeyed to Sukkot and built himself a house, and he made sukkot (booths of shelter) for his flocks; he therefore called the name of the place, Sukkot" (*Bereishit* 33:17). It seems strange that Ya'acov would name a place "Sukkot" just because he built there "סֻכּוֹת/sukkot" for his flocks. The Ohr HaChaim suggests that perhaps Ya'acov was the first person to build "sukkot" – booths of shelter – for his flocks, because of his compassion for the animals. Ya'acov, therefore,

named the place “Sukkot” in order to commemorate this historic innovation. This genuine concern for the wellbeing of the flock characterized Ya’acov throughout his life as he grew into his higher self as Yisrael. “Yisrael said to Yosef, Your brothers are pasturing in Shechem...Go now, look into the shalom of your brothers and the shalom of the sheep, and bring me back word” (*Bereishit* 37:13-14). Why did the sheep merit a special inquiry about their shalom? The Midrash explains that Yisrael inquired about the peace of the sheep because of a sense of gratitude to the sheep for all the benefits that he received from them. We can therefore learn from Yisrael’s words the following good trait: “A person should inquire about the shalom of anything that he benefited from” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 84:13). The Alter of Slobodka explains that Yisrael inquired about the welfare of the sheep in order to emulate the universal Divine compassion and concern. For a person who is truly compassionate will be concerned about the welfare of animals, since all of Hashem’s creation is important.

### Expressing Leadership Abilities by Caring for the Soft and Weak

When Moshe Rabbeinu was tending the flock of Yitro in the wilderness, a little kid ran away from him. He ran after the kid until it reached the oasis, Chasuah. Upon reaching Chasuah, it came upon a pool of water, and the kid stopped to drink. When Moshe reached it, he said, “I did not know that you were running because you were thirsty. You must be tired.” He placed the kid on his shoulder and began to walk. The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said: “You are compassionate in leading flocks belonging to mortals; I swear you will similarly shepherd My flock, Israel.” (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 2:2). The Midrash adds that before David became King of Israel, he was a shepherd who took care of his sheep with tenderness and compassion. For example, he would first allow the very young sheep to graze so that they could eat the softer grass; moreover, he was sensitive to the needs of each age group. As a result of his special sensitivity and compassion, David was chosen to shepherd the flock of Israel, as it is written, “He chose David, His servant, and took him from the sheep corrals. From behind the nursing ewes. He brought him, to shepherd Ya’acov, His people, and Israel, His inheritance” (*Tehillim* 78:70-71).

### To Shepherd Emunah

Hevel did not shepherd in order to become rich or to eat the flesh or drink the milk of the sheep, but only for the sake of drawing close to Hashem (*HaK’tav V’haKabbalah, Bereishit* 4:2). The Torah often compares a person who sanctifies and purifies himself for the worship of Hashem to a flock of sheep, as in Song of Songs, “Like a flock of sheep that came out of the washing, all perfect...” (*Shir HaShirim* 6:6). Rashi explains that the sheep is completely holy, its wool is for *techelet* (The blue string in the tzitzit), its flesh for a sacrifice, its horns for shofars, its intestines for violins, its skin for drums. The flock of sheep is to the eyes of the shepherd a great reminder of the behavior of his soul. He learns from it that a person must likewise sanctify his entire body: 248 limbs and 365 sinews for the service of Hashem to be a holy vessel. Whoever puts his thought and concept to this matter is called a shepherd, as it states, “shepherd emunah” (*Tehillim* 37:3).