

## Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### *Parashat Bo* – The Self-Restrained Dog

Doesn't this title sound like an oxymora? We all know that dogs are everything but self-restrained. This is why, in this week's *parasha*, it was such a miracle that, "No dog wagged its tongue against the children of Israel," during the last plague in Egypt. A large percentage of my community, Bat Ayin have dogs. These super-friendly wholehearted animated creatures are known to be "man's best friend." In addition, dogs can be excellent watchdogs that help protect Jewish settlements from Arab infiltration. One of my students actually went to volunteer at a dog-training center in Itamar settlement, Shomron. These dogs are trained specifically to search for explosives, and prevent terrorist attacks. They learn to remember several hand and verbal commands. The barking of dogs can warn us against impending danger as well as scaring off unwanted intruders. When people live alone especially women and elders, the protection and companion of a dog can be very helpful. Nevertheless, for Jews to be dog-owners is a new phenomenon. I would say that only in the last century has it become gradually more popular for Jews to raise dogs. Although, in *Chareidi* (ultra-orthodox) circles this is less so, especially in Jerusalem. What could be some of the reasons many Chassidic Jews typically refrain from raising dogs? Making this week's *parasha* our starting point, we can further ask, why did the dogs hold themselves back from barking during the Exodus and what does this teach us about the nature of dogs?

#### The Dogs Distinguished Between the Israelites and the Egyptians

ספר שמות פרק יא (ז)

וְלֹכֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִחְרֹץ כָּלֵב לְשׁוֹנוֹ לְמֵאִישׁ וְעַד בְּהֵמָה לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּן אֲשֶׁר יִפְלֶה הָשֵׁם בֵּין מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל:  
 "But not a dog snarled at any of the children of Israel at man or beast; in order that you may know how that Hashem makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel: (*Shemot* 11:7).

As the Jews were leaving Egypt, the dogs are praised for keeping quiet so that the Jews could escape without drawing attention to themselves. No dog barked or bit even when the destroying angel came to smite their firstborn (Ibn Ezra). In spite of the fact that when the angel of death comes to a city, dogs usually bark (*Baba Kama* 60b), no dog wagged its tongue. The miracle is amplified by the fact that dogs usually bark when they see people holding rods. Yet, the dogs still didn't bark when they saw Israel with rods in their hands (The Riba). Rabbeinu Bachaya explains that dogs are connected to the power of judgment that was smiting all of Egypt. The main time of judgment is in the middle of the night. This is why the plague of the firstborn took place then. There are three watches of the night. The second night watch corresponds to the barking of the dogs (*Berachot* 3a), which is judgment. Scripture thus emphasizes the power of the great miracle: At that very hour when it was the dogs' time to bark, and they did bark at the Egyptians, "The dogs didn't wag their tongue at any of the children of Israel, in order that you may know how Hashem makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel." The dogs are rewarded to receive our non-kosher meat as it states, "...therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn of beasts in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs" (*Shemot* 22:30).

## The Wholehearted Dog – Man’s Best Friend

The Talmud recognizes that dogs are loyal to their masters. “Rabbi Elazar was asked by his disciples: “Why does a dog know its owner while a cat does not?” (*Horayot* 13a). The Maharal answers the Talmudic question by explaining that the dog has a soul (*nefesh*), as it states, “The dogs are *שׂוֹפְרֵי נֶפֶשׁ/azei nefesh* – “brazen of soul” (*Yesha’yahu* 56:11). This is why dogs have the ability to recognize their master. Furthermore, the dog is called *כֶּלֶב/kelev* in Hebrew, which comes from the words ‘*k’lev*,’ meaning “like the heart.” This is why dogs can be very loyal, as the English expression goes, “dog is man’s best friend.” Although not every dog is necessarily friendly by nature, there are stories of dogs becoming separated from their family and undertaking an incredible journey toward reunion. Dogs are used in therapy for Alzheimer’s disease and in clinical settings as comfort for the terminally ill. During the winter of 2008, five different families in North America were saved by their dogs when their homes caught fire (<http://animals.howstuffworks.com/pets/dog-best-friend.htm>).

## The Responsibilities of Dog Breeders

In spite of the many benefits of keeping dogs, dog-owners are responsible to ensure that their dogs don’t cause damage to others. Here in Bat Ayin it has been a constant struggle for dog-owners to abide by the Torah law to keep their dog on a leash. Accordingly, we have a rule in our community that no loose dogs are allowed. Yet, it is still a challenge to keep dogs on a leash even when trying. Apparently, dogs know how to free themselves of their leash, or their owners have mercy on them and refuse to impede the freedom of their dog by tying it up, feeling this would be *tza’ar ba’alei chaim* (causing pain to animals) also forbidden by the Torah. The Torah is replete with teachings about the prohibition of keeping loose dogs. “Our Rabbis taught: No man should breed a dog unless it is kept on a chain. He may, however, breed it in a town adjoining the frontier where he should keep it chained during the daytime and loose it only at night” (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kama* 83a). It is prohibited to own a vicious dog. “He who breeds a vicious dog in his house keeps loving-kindness away from his house, the poor are afraid to call. Thus, he can show no loving-kindness to them, nor can he earn the love of G-d (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 63a-b). Even if the dog itself is not dangerous, the fear of dogs that many people have can be detrimental. The Talmud recounts a story of a woman who miscarried because of being traumatized by a dog. In this story, the immense fear that the woman experienced caused her to miscarry (*Baba Kama* 83a). Children are often petrified by barking dogs, which can cause them irreparable traumas. Rabbi Nachman ben Yitzchak said: He also casts off the fear of Heaven from himself, as it states, ‘He forsakes the fear of the Almighty’ (*Iyov* 6:14). A certain woman entered a house to bake. The dog barked at her, [whereupon] her child [in her stomach] moved [from its place]. [The householder said to her, ‘Fear not: his fangs and claws have been extracted.’ ‘Take your favors and throw them on the thorns,’ she retorted, ‘the child has already moved’ (*Shabbat* 63a-b). Since Torah living is very concerned with how our actions affect others, the *halacha* (Jewish law) teaches that it is prohibited to own a dog that could be *perceived* as dangerous, even if it’s not *actually* dangerous. This is because of the damage that the fear of dogs could cause people (*Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 409:3, *Shulchan Aruch Harav, Choshen Mishpat*). See the well-written article on the topic by Allison Josephs (<http://jewinthecity.com/2011/11/why-do-i-never-see-orthodox-jews-with-dogs-or-any-other-pets/#ixzz3NeemNVoh>)

## The Dog-Loving, Dog-Faced Generation of Mashiach

Although many Torah Jews in Western countries keep dogs as pets, you will not find a dog in a traditional Chassidic home, especially not in Jerusalem. The Torah does not recommend keeping dogs inside of the home, except for therapeutic purposes. The place of a watchdog is in a doghouse outside of the home where people live. Why blur the distinction between animal and human beings? Dogs easily mesh with us to such a degree as to affect our personality. People often keep dogs as companions for their children, and although the children benefit from taking the responsibility of caring for an animal, they may also learn animalistic behavior from bonding too closely with animals, something that dogs invite. Dogs are generally unrestrained and the nicest, friendliest dogs will come up and lick you all over your face with their dribbling drooling tongue, something which is neither sanitary nor conducive to *kedusha* (holiness). I remember staying at an orthodox Rabbi's home on one of my tours. The family-dog would eat leftovers right off the plates on the table licking the dishes that the family eat from with gusto. No wonder the children were unruly and disrespectful to their parents. The Talmud teaches that in the times leading up to Mashiach's arrival, "the youth will embarrass the elders... and the generation's face will be like that of a dog" (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97a*). Rashi explains that the faces of people will really look like the dogs. They will similarly not be embarrassed of one another (Rashi, *Sanhedrin 97a*). Alternatively, "פני/פ'nei – the face is the language of importance, like the importance of the dog, as our sages said, [the generation will be] completely heart and faithful to its master. Likewise, each person of the multitude of the people will become faithful to the Master of the universe, and he will have the importance of having a complete understanding heart" (Benayahu ben Yehoyada, *Sanhedrin 97a*). Perhaps the increase of dogs serving as Jewish pets is part of the process of bringing the Mashiach? May we learn and integrate only positive traits from the dog becoming more connected to our hearts and more faithful to Hashem – Master of the Universe!