

Relationships in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Bereishit: A Taste of the Tree of Life

What Does the Torah Say about Rectified Relationships with Animals?

Can Close Relationships with Animals Replace Human Relationships?

Proper relationships between people and animals have come up for me lately. That is, various potential students have wanted to not only enroll in the midrasha with their dog; moreover, they consider their dog an inseparable part of themselves, like a life partner.

One woman described how her dog comforted her after the loss of both parents at a young age and years of longing for a husband and child. After many years of pain, Jackie entered her life. "This doggie healed my heart and soul in a way no human can imagine," and she no longer feels the "unhealthy desire for a husband or child." "When I say 'we,' I mean it." She calls Jackie her 'baby' and believes the dog has 'a certain spark of Jewishness in her soul. She moreover declares, "She is Israeli and Me too," and she longs to build a Jewish life in Israel with her "baby" Jackie. Another woman described rescuing her dog from a house crowded with 120 dogs. She compared the rescue of "Zoey Bracha" to Moshe Rabbeinu searching for and carrying a lost sheep. She also pointed to a tattoo on the dog that "adds up to 18 – Chai" and described Zoey as her emotional support, complete with a badge and a psychiatrist's letter. She calls her Zoey a "perfect *mooksah* dog" because no one can touch her. She explained that the dog could remain in a knapsack or stroller – "Viewing only! no touching" – and she can be left in a bedroom as long as she feels safe. This woman wrote me that she hoped I might have "a change of heart" about allowing her to bring the dog to the midrasha.

Both women speak from real pain, and caring for a vulnerable animal can be a mitzvah. Yet it saddens me to see how disappointment in human relationships can lead someone to despair of finding human closeness and give an animal the place of a life partner. I also find it deeply troubling when care for animals becomes a substitute for human closeness, or when a dog is spoken of as a child, a spiritual companion, or the other half of "we."

Parashat Bereishit brings this question into focus: After Hashem brought the animals before Adam, why was none of them found to be an *ezer kenegdo* – a fitting companion for him? These are just examples of the many women I come across who make me wonder whether an animal is being given a place in their spiritual and emotional lives that the Torah asks us to reserve for human companionship.

Why Couldn't an Animal Be Adam's Companion?

ספר בראשית פרק ב פסוק ב

וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שְׁמוֹת לְכָל הַבְּהֵמָה וּלְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכָל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְלָאָדָם לֹא מָצָא עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:

"Adam gave names to all the cattle, to the birds of the heavens, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam, no *ezer kenegdo* – fitting companion – was found" (*Bereishit* 2:20).

Ramban explains that Hashem did not create Chava immediately. First, Adam needed to recognize for himself that among all the other creatures there was no appropriate partner for him. Only after encountering the animals and realizing that none could correspond to him did Adam yearn for a companion of his own kind. Thus, the encounter with the animals was actually part of preparing Adam to recognize his need for human companionship (Ramban, *Bereishit* 2:20).

This is striking because Adam's conclusion did not arise from failing to appreciate the animals. On the contrary, he understood them so profoundly that he was able to discern the essential nature of each creature and give it an appropriate name. Yet the more clearly Adam understood the animals, the more

clearly he recognized that none of them could be his other half.

Rav Hirsch adds that Adam could find no creature corresponding to him who could share in the great responsibility entrusted to the human being created in Hashem's image. An animal may offer affection, comfort, loyalty, and even emotional healing, but it cannot stand alongside a person as a fellow bearer of human spiritual and moral responsibility (Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, *Bereishit* 2:20).

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin notices that through contemplating the various animals and their distinctive qualities, Adam came to recognize the many different *middot* contained within himself. Yet the companion he needed was not simply someone who would mirror him. A woman would possess complementary *middot*, and precisely through being different from him – *kenegdo* – she could become his true other half. Human relationship therefore includes the challenge of encountering another person who does not always think, feel, or respond as we do. According to Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, that very difference can become a source of help and growth (*Ha'amek Davar*, *Bereishit* 2:20). Perhaps this is part of what makes replacing human companionship with an animal so problematic. A relationship with an animal may sometimes feel safer precisely because the animal does not confront us with the same complexity, differences, demands, and reciprocal responsibility as another human being. Yet some of what makes human relationships difficult may be precisely what enables us to grow.

What was the Very First Mistake in the Garden that Caused Humanity's Downfall?

The Torah's account of the serpent follows immediately after the creation of Chava as Adam's unique human companion. Yet the serpent was not content to remain within its proper place in creation:

בראשית פרק ג פסוק א

וְהַנָּחֶשׁ הָיָה עָרוֹם מְכַל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל הָאִשָּׁה אֵף כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִכָּל עֵץ הַגָּן:

“Now the serpent was cunning, more than all the beasts of the field that Hashem G-d had made, and it said to the woman, ‘Did G-d indeed say, “You shall not eat of any of the trees of the garden?”’ (*Bereishit* 3:1).

Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains that when the serpent saw Adam and Chava together, it desired Chava (Rashi, *Bereishit* 3:1; *Bereishit Rabbah* 18:6). The Midrash goes even further. Hashem rebuked the serpent, “You sought to kill Adam and marry Chava” (*Bereishit Rabbah* 20:5). Thus, the very animal that could never become a human being's fitting companion sought to come between the first husband and wife and usurp Adam's place.

Chava's first mistake was engaging the serpent in conversation. Rather than leaving the serpent “to bark,” Chava allowed herself to be enticed by it. The serpent then realized that it had an opening: “Now that she has begun speaking with me, I will tempt her.” Rather than remaining a creature under human dominion, the serpent became a voice Chava listened to and responded to. By entering into dialogue with the serpent, Chava opened herself to its influence (*Sefer HaPeli'ah*, *Vayomer el ha'ishah af ki amar Elokim*).

The *Tikkunei Zohar* describes the serpent's method of communication as particularly deceptive: Its heart was filled with falsehood, while its mouth enticed Chava with words that sounded true (*Tikkunei Zohar*, *Tikkun* 59, 93a). This was not merely a conversation about eating a forbidden fruit. Through the serpent, distorted communication entered the most intimate human relationship. The serpent spoke deceptively to Chava; Chava ate and gave the fruit to Adam; and soon afterward Adam, who had just proclaimed Chava “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” blamed her before Hashem.

The serpent therefore succeeded, at least temporarily, in what it set out to accomplish: it created conflict between Adam and Chava. The first human relationship, created in perfect unity, became infected with deception, blame, and separation. The consequences of that rupture reach far beyond Gan Eden.

Do We Dare to Repair the Interpersonal Rift Initiated by the Serpent?

We are still living with the consequences of what happened in Gan Eden. The serpent introduced deception and distrust into the first human relationship, and Adam and Chava's original unity gave way to blame and separation. Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz teaches that the world has not yet reached the original intention of Creation "until the damage is repaired." When that *tikkun* takes place, the darkness will return to light, and the resulting light will be even greater than before the sin (*Shelah HaKadosh, Toldot Adam, Beit David*). This gives us hope that the rifts originating in Gan Eden are not irreversible. We are challenged to repair our relationships by overcoming the *yetzer hara* that divides us and learning to communicate honestly, forgive, and reconnect.

What Is the Proper Place for Animals in Human Life?

The Torah assigns animals an important place in human life, but not the place of human beings. When Hashem created humanity, He commanded, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, and every living creature that moves upon the earth" (*Bereishit* 1:28). Animals are to be cared for appropriately while serving the purposes for which Hashem created them. Dogs can guard our homes and communities against intruders and danger; cats can help keep snakes, scorpions, mice, and rats away; and countless animals contribute to human life and the balance of creation in their own ways. We can appreciate animals, protect them from suffering, and benefit from their special qualities without confusing their role with the uniquely human relationship.

This brings us full circle to the close relationships with animals with which we began. Animals can comfort us, bring us joy, and awaken our compassion, but they cannot replace the challenging work of human relationships. It may sometimes feel safer to give our heart to an animal than to risk disappointment, misunderstanding, and hurt from another person. Yet perhaps precisely there lies our *tikkun* (rectification). Rather than allowing painful human relationships to make us retreat from one another, we are called to heal the separation that began in Gan Eden – and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, take risks, and rediscover the human closeness for which we were created.

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