

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Re'eh

How Can We Learn from the Animals to Praise Hashem?

Is it Halachically Permitted to Visit the Zoo?

Every year during the latter part of August you'll see middle-aged and older couples pushing baby carriages and tightly holding the hands of bouncy toddlers while crossing the street. They will be hanging out at various parks and playgrounds struggling to handle girls with piggy tails in matching dresses, and boys of varying heights. You will meet them in the children's museums, at amusement parks, the aquarium, and the Zoo. That's where you could have met us last week with our feisty four-year-old granddaughter in tow. In Israel, nursery and elementary school go to the end of June, when working parents can find various summer camps that last until mid-August. During the last two weeks of August, until school starts in September, parents often turn to their parents for help taking care of their children. We, the grandparents, treasure this opportunity to spend meaningful time with our grandchildren while helping relieve our busy children. When I suggested visiting The Biblical Zoo, my husband was immediately on board. This will afford us the opportunity to recite the special lesser-known bracha, praising Hashem for creating strange and different creatures twice, once for the monkeys and once for the elephants. While there may be a slight controversy about going to a zoo, most Halachic authorities approve. The reason that a few Rabbis oppose visiting the zoo is that capturing and confining an animal can be considered a form of prohibited *tza'ar ba'alei chayim*, (causing pain to animals), especially to undomesticated animals that resist captivity. Yet most halachic authorities permit going to the zoo. They cite several well-known Rabbis who visited the Zoo to recite the appropriate bracha. Even according to the view that it is prohibited to build a zoo, once a zoo exists, it may be permitted to visit it (Rabbi Simon Jacobson). Rabbi Ovadia Yosef zt"l rules that one may visit a zoo to see Hashem's wondrous creations and recite the appropriate blessings upon them. It is said that the Terumat Ha'Deshen went to the zoo because he had never seen a lion. The Chida writes about his visits to several Zoos where he saw various interesting, confined animals, among them a beautiful one-hundred-year-old eagle (*Midbar Kedemot*, Letter Bet, and *Ma'agal Tov*). The Gaon of Muncasz writes: "I visited the zoo where I saw elephants, monkeys, snakes, alligators, and all sorts of astounding creatures. How great are Hashem's creations! I recited the '*Baruch Meshane Ha'Briyot*' blessing.

Praising Hashem for Creating Creatures that are Different

Rabbi Avraham Lipshitz asks, was it not permitted to go to the zoo, how would we ever recite the blessing *Meshaneh Ha'Briyot*? He clarifies we aren't obligated to go to the zoo to recite this blessing. Nevertheless, it is definitely a mitzvah to praise Hashem for His multifaceted creations. Thus, we trotted around in the zoo, trying to get our granddaughter to follow us - a challenge that would have been quite difficult if not for the help of our younger son and his wife who accompanied us. We noticed that most of the other zoo visitors were visibly Torah observant. When we finally arrived at the monkeys, we excitedly recited the bracha:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'שֵׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם מְשַׁנֵּה הַבְּרִיּוֹת:

Baruch Atah Hashem, E-lo-h-einu Melech ha'olam meshane ha'briyot.

Blessed are you Hashem our G-d who makes creatures different.

There are various Rabbinic opinions on whether we are permitted to say this blessing both on the

monkey and the elephant, we followed the ruling of Rav Melamed who writes: "A person who sees a monkey and an elephant together, recites one blessing over both. However, when they are in different locations, as is common in zoos, we recite a separate blessing over each one." So, we had more praise for Hashem in store when we finally arrived at the elephants.

There are also various views on whether the 'Meshane Ha'Briyot' blessing may only be said once in a lifetime or if we may recite this blessing every time, we see elephants and monkeys Rav Ovadia Yosef rules that we should only recite this blessing once a lifetime. The next time we see an elephant or monkey, we should only recite this blessing in our minds because of the doubt involved. Another option given is to recite the Bracha without **Shem UMalchut** if 30 days have passed. According to Rav Melamed, if thirty days have passed since we last praised Hashem for the monkey or elephant, we do recite the blessing again because when visiting a zoo, there is definitely a sense of amazement - the fact that people go there specifically to see the animals demonstrates their wonder at seeing them. Yet, if we have already visited the zoo within the last month, we do not recite the blessing over animals as when thirty days have not passed, our amazement at seeing them is diminished (*P'nei Halakha, Brachot 15:15*).

What's Different About Monkeys and Elephants?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף נח/ב תנו רבנן הרואה פיל קוף וקפוף אומר ברוך משנה את הבריות... "One who sees an elephant, a monkey, or a *Kipof* recites 'Meshane Ha'Briyot' (He Who makes creatures different)" (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 58b; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 225:8*). Since there are many species around the world with stark distinctions and unique features, why did the Sages specifically enact to recite blessings upon seeing these animals only? Our Sages decided to recite a blessing specifically on monkeys and elephants because their appearance arouses particular astonishment. More than any other creature, they possess a certain resemblance to humans. A monkey is similar to man in the shape of its body and the use of its hands. An elephant is unique among animals in that its skin is smooth and hairless, and it uses its trunk like a hand (Meiri, *Berachot 58b*). Rav Ovadia Yosef testifies that he heard from the great and pious kabbalist, Rabbi Meshulam, that Hashem punished the people of the Generation of the Dispersion by turning some of them into elephants and monkeys. Thus, since primates have some human features and elephants understand human language somewhat, we recite this blessing" (Based on the *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 109a*).

How does the Owl Differ from the Rest of the 24 non-Kosher Birds?

As we proceeded inside a dark zoo tunnel several pairs of big round eyes met ours. I've always been a bird lover, but my husband didn't tell us to recite the special blessing on the קפוף/*kipof* - 'owl,' (the third animal mentioned in *Berachot 58b*). The *Shulchan Aruch* didn't rule to recite the blessing over owls, thus no other Rabbi mentioned it. I assume this is because it wasn't 100% clear exactly which animal the קפוף/*kipof* refers to. Although according to Tosafot, *Chullin 63a*, Kipof refers to three different kinds of owls. Perhaps not everyone agreed with him. Owls are special and different, unlike regular birds, the eyes of these nocturnal birds face forward like people's (*Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 23a*).

ספר דברים פרק יד פסוק יא כל צפור טהרה תאכלו: (יב) וזה אשר לא תאכלו מהם הנשר והפֶּרֶס והעֲזִינִיה: (יג) והרֶאָה וְאֵת הָאֵיָהּ וְהַדִּיָּה לְמִינָהּ: (יד) וְאֵת כָּל עֶרֶב לְמִינֹ: (טו) וְאֵת בַּת הַיַּעֲנָה וְאֵת הַתְּחֹמֶס וְאֵת הַשְּׁחָף וְאֵת הַנֶּץ לְמִינָהּ: (טז) אֵת הַכּוֹס וְאֵת הַיִּנְשׁוּף וְהַתְּנַשְׁמֶת...

“You may eat every clean bird. But these are those from which you shall not eat: The eagle [or the griffin vulture], the ossifrage, the osprey; and the white vulture, and the black vulture, and the kite after its species; And every raven after its species; And the ostrich, and the owl, and the gull, and the hawk after its species; The falcon, and the ibis, and the bat...” (*Devarim* 14:11-16).

The owl is one of the 24 prohibited species of birds mentioned in *Parashat Re'eh*. I once heard that the Torah's mentioning of the names of all the 24 non-kosher birds proves that the Torah is Divine. It is known that the signs of kosher birds are that they lay eggs that are round like a ball on one side and elongated like an oval on the other, and the egg white surrounds the yolk. Which human being would ever be able to know with absolute certainty the exact list of 24 birds that don't share this identifying trait of kosher birds?

Praising Hashem for Beautiful Creatures

We saw many amazingly colorful beautiful birds, canaries, and parrots in the zoo, but none of them exchanged a word with us. Nevertheless, if the beauty of any of them evokes a feeling of admiration, another special lesser-known blessing may be recited. This is the blessing for seeing intensely beautiful trees, people, or animals:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שְׂכַחָה לּוֹ בְּעוֹלָמוֹ:

Baruch Atah Hashem, E-lo-h-einu Melech ha'olam shekacha lo b'olamo.

Blessed are you Hashem our G-d so this is how it is in His world!

Although *Ra'avad* holds that the blessing over beautiful animals is recited only once in a lifetime, and his opinion was codified by the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chayim* 225:9), this specifically relates to an animal whose second sighting doesn't evoke a special sense of amazement. Most Rabbis agree that this blessing can be recited when thirty days or more have passed since the last sighting of a particularly beautiful creature. A visitor to the zoo should recite the blessing '*shekacha lo b'olamo*' over the first beautiful species he sees and have *kavana* (intention) to exempt all the other beautiful species with his blessing. This pertains to most people, who are not particularly impressed by all the gorgeous species. But someone greatly moved by seeing them, recites a blessing on each one individually. The blessing 'so this is how it is in His world!' conveys that true beauty is the most general expression of creation. It is how harmony and balance of the whole are expressed in a single feature. The appreciation of the totality of creation and its relation to the specific is manifested in beauty where it is not the detail that takes our breath away, but rather the insight into the transcendence of the whole. A sunset, the reflection of light in the waves of water, the graceful leaves in a tree can transport us beyond.... Creation as a whole intrudes on our consciousness, and we are overwhelmed: "So this is how it is in His world!" Beauty implies potential, the expression that lies within all creation (Based on Rabbi Matis Weinberg). Our four-year-old granddaughter was specifically impressed by a shiny turquoise parrot with red breast feathers, and a green back topped off by a shiny orange beak. Her trip to the zoo was certainly both entertaining and educational.

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Re'eh - Some Tips on How to Appreciate Hashem's Creatures

Perek Shirah, (A Chapter of Song), is an ancient text at least a thousand years old; some commentaries even attribute its authorship to King David! It teaches us that everything in the natural world praises Hashem with one of the verses of the Torah, many of which are *Tehillim*. If we

pay close attention to the sky, the earth, various animals, birds, insects, and plants, we may be able to catch a glimpse of their way of glorifying the Divine and join them in singing Hashem's praises. Let us learn from Nature to appreciate Hashem's creation and strengthen our connection with Him!

- **Pay Close Attention to Hashem's Creations Around You** – Each one has its own way of praising Hashem and teaching us a lesson. “Rabbi Yochanan said: Even if the Torah had not been given, we would nonetheless have learned modesty from the cat, [which covers its excrement], and that stealing is objectionable from the ant, [which does not take grain from another ant], and forbidden relations from the dove, which is faithful to its partner, and proper relations from the rooster, which first appeases the hen and then mates with it” (*Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin* 100b).
- **Study Nature's Song with Commentaries** – Learn about all the deep lessons Hashem in His greatness has imbued within nature. Appreciate the signs he sends us through the phenomenon of nature. If you are feeling drowsy or lazy, go out and pay attention to the ants, and get inspired by how hard and diligently they work. What's more, they can get incredible jobs done by working together in total unity as a team. Have you ever seen a group of ants moving an object bigger and heavier than hundreds of ants? Only by their dedicated teamwork do they succeed in carrying away a stick needed for their anthill or a yummy cookie for their pantry.
- **Go to the Zoo and Contemplate the Lessons of Various Animals** – What Can We Learn from the Elephant? – The elephant is saying: “How great are your works, G-d, Your thoughts are tremendously deep” (*Tehillim* 92:6). A little girl in the zoo refused to leave the elephants, “Come let's go already” pleaded her mother “Haven't you seen elephants lots of times on TV?” “Yes” replied the girl “but these are so big!” The elephant weighs up to seven tons and stands twelve feet tall. For such an enormous creature, elephants are astonishingly agile, capable of balancing on one foot alone. The elephant is the mightiest beast, and the most intelligent of the large animals, too. Despite all this, it is trainable to be submissive to human beings. The awesome elephant and its submission to human beings, causes us to direct our praise to G-d for creating such amazing creatures “How great are your works, G-d, Your thoughts are tremendously deep!” (Based on Nosson Slifkin, *Nature's Song* pp.)