



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת בראשית תשס"ט 5769 Parshas Bereishis

MAN AND BEAST... AND ANGEL

Generally speaking, predatory animals are very insensitive creatures, to say the least. Take a wolf, for example. It will pounce upon a young deer and begin to make a meal out of it. The poor wretch may be writhing and moaning in pain, but the wolf is unfazed. He callously goes about his flesh-eating business, impervious to the cries of its prey.

As we shall see, this quality is not limited to the animal kingdom. All too often, it is even found in man himself.

THE DARKER SIDE

This idea is borne out by the Mishnah in Avos (3:2), which states:

רבי חנינא סגן הכהנים אומר, הוי מתפלל בשלומה של מלכות, שאלמלא מוראה, איש את רעהו חיים בלעו.

“R’ Chanina S’gan Hakohanim says: Pray for the welfare of the government. If not for the fear of government, people would swallow each other alive.”

On its most elementary level, the Mishnah seems to be underscoring the importance of a stable government. Whatever one might want to say about a particular form of government or a specific ruling body, it does fulfill an essential function: keeping people in check. When anarchy reigns, and there is no authority to whom one must answer, people’s worst instincts come to the fore. Pillaging, crime, and general chaos become the order of the day. Only when a fear of retribution prevails can order be maintained.

However, a closer look reveals that an even deeper lesson is contained herein. The Mishnah did not state that the absence of a fear of government would cause people to simply turn against one another or harm their fellow. The description was very specific: *they will swallow each other alive*. R’ Yeruchem Levovitz explains (*Da’as Chochmah U’mussar, vol. 1, sec. 12*) that this is the same attribute found in carnivorous animals as described above: to inflict torment on another for personal benefit, even while the victim is still alive and experiencing pain. The Crusaders, the Cossacks, the Nazis – none were deterred or bothered by the intolerable persecution they visited even upon little children. On the contrary, they reveled in it.

How could human beings sink to such levels of depravity, exceeding even wild beasts in their viciousness?

The answer may lie in a familiar phrase in this week’s *parshah*.

Before creating man, Hashem uttered the words “*Na’aseh Odom*,” “Let Us make man” (*Bereishis 1:26*). The commentators grapple with the fact that the plural form is used in this statement. Seemingly, it is entirely out of place. Let *Us* make man? There is only one Hashem, of course! Who is “Us?”

Rashi quotes a well-known explanation from *Chazal*, who recognize that a remarkable ethical lesson is being imparted here. Obviously, Hashem could – and did – create man and everything else single-handedly. However, He wished to demonstrate the importance of humility, where even those who are great should take counsel from their underlings. Therefore, Hashem “conferred” with the angels prior to fashioning man, and it was

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to them that he addressed the statement "Let Us make man."

There is, however, an alternate explanation offered elsewhere by *Chazal*, which sheds light on man's potentially destructive nature as mentioned above. R' Elchonon Wasserman (*Kovetz Ma'amarim*) quotes the Zohar, which states that the "Let Us make man" directive was addressed to the creatures of the world. Hashem was instructing all of Creation to "give of themselves" toward the greater project of the creation of man. In other words, the innate characteristics and properties of the various creatures of the world made up the "ingredients" of the creature known as man.

It should now be easier to understand how it is possible for individuals and nations to sink to the nethermost levels of wickedness and sheer violence, as we have witnessed throughout the ages. Not that such behavior is excusable, of

course, but at least we can trace the source. As R' Elchonon explains, within every individual is a "piece" of lion, wolf, snake, etc. Left uncurbed, a person could become the most vicious and destructive creature in the world.

THE BIG CHOICE

If we were to stop at this point, the picture would look bleak indeed. It almost appears as if man is perfectly positioned to behave like a ferocious monster.

But, of course, this is only half of the story. For Hashem has imbued the opposite component within each person as well – namely, the *neshamah*, the G-dly spirit that is the true essence of every individual.

"Hashem has made man to be straight; it is *they* who have sought out various designs" (*Koheles* 7:29). As the Ramban at the end of this week's *parshah* explains (*Bereishis* 6:3), if a person capitalizes on the spiritual potential of his soul, he can rise to the level of the angels. It is only when he allows himself to be led by the animalistic inclinations of his physical attributes that he becomes distracted from the proper path. By doing so, he ends up taking the "down" escalator, instead of going "up."

Most recently, the Nazis (may their memory be erased) demonstrated to the world to what levels man can descend if he merely follows his innate "killer" instincts. For the most part, an entire continent's-worth of people were transformed into walking, bloodthirsty demons. Throughout the centuries, however, the Jewish people have shown the world how things appear on the opposite end of the spectrum. A Vilna Gaon, a Chofetz Chaim – this is what a person can become by developing his spiritual energies. As we continue to follow in the path of Torah and *mitzvos*, we too, can provide an example of the angelic creatures which man can resemble, if he so chooses.

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