

B”H
Yeshivat Benei N’vi'im

In Praise of Dogs

From Sefer Minhath Eliyahu (Sof Perek 14)

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95 years after the passing of the author.*

Paraphrased by Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok

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“And to all the children of Israel, no dog shall whet its tongue” (meaning to bark and howl) (Ex. 11:7).

Once a student of Rabbi Haninah Ben Dosa fasted 88 days. [He was asking a question to Heaven], why should dogs about which it is written, “and the dogs are arrogant” (Is. 56:11) have the same merit to recite the verse, “Come, lets us prostrate ourselves and bow, let us kneel before G-d our Maker” (Ps. 95:6).

Note: *In Perek Shirah, The Chapter of Song, each entity in creation is said to recite a verse of praise to G-d. The question of Rabbi Haninah’s student is that why do arrogant dogs merit to recite such a great verse of praise, apparantly in contradiction to their inherent nature. This story originally appears in Yalkut Yishaya. A full version of Perek Shirah, with commentary, appears in Siddur HaYa’abetz (vol. 1, pages 59-80). The commentary Zimrat HaAretz covers most of what is covered here as well as offers some deeper Kabbalistic meanings to this story.*

An angel from Heaven came and answered him and said, “Yishaya, how long will you fast over this thing. [The fact that dogs recite this verse] is an edict of the Holy One, blessed be He. [He] revealed His secret [only] to Habakkuk the prophet and not to any other creature, ever. However, being that you are the student of a great man, Heaven compelled me and sent me to you.” [The angel then said] “the dogs of which it is written, “and to all the children of Israel, no dog shall whet its tongue” (Ex. 11:7), merited because of this that they would be instrumental in preparing skins so that Torahs, tefillin and mezuzot can be written upon them. Regarding the question that you have asked, relent, for it is written, “the one who guards his mouth and tongue will be guarded from the troubles of the soul” (Pr. 21:23).

Note: *There was an old method and technique known to Torah scribes wherein which certain acids emanating from dogs were used as a cleaning agent to make animal parchment ready for being written on. The specific details are not necessary to describe here.*

Yet, it is difficult [to understand] how measure for measure because [the dogs] did not howl when Israel left Egypt that they should merit to be instrumental in preparing skins for Torah scrolls. However, it is well known that the purpose of the exodus from Egypt was for the sake of receiving the Torah. The [dogs] did not hinder [Israel] receiving [the Torah] in that they did not howl. Therefore, they merited being instrumental in preparing skins for Torah scrolls.

With this will be understood the saying of our Sages (Tan. 11b), “the sustenance of a scholar who fasts can be taken by a dog.” This is difficult [to understand], why a dog and not a cat? However, this is measure for measure. The dogs did not howl when Israel left Egypt, in order to receive the Torah. The one who fasts and [thereby] nullifies [the study] of Torah [by weakening his ability to learn], a dog will come and take vengeance on him. The dog will eat his food.

It is also known from our holy Sages of blessed memory that Hevel was Mashiah. If Kayin did not kill him, there would never have been any exiles. Another saying of our holy Sages of blessed memory (Hag. 5), that when Israel was exiled, they were exiled from the Torah. For the exile causes the nullification of Torah [study].

***Note:** According to the Ari'zal, Hevel, was later reincarnated as Moshe Rabbeynu. Moshe Rabbeynu will reincarnate and be Mashiah. Thus, Hevel is Mashiah. If Kayin had not killed him, Hevel could have brought redemption during his first lifetime.*

We have already said that the dogs assisted Israel in their receiving the Torah. [Therefore], the one who nullifies the [study] of Torah a dog will take revenge on him. Thus with Kayin, who nullified the Torah when he murdered Hevel who was Mashiah and caused the exile, which led to the nullification of the Torah, a dog needs to take vengeance on him.

Therefore, a dog was sent to guard Kayin. In this way, those who would see the dog with Kayin would know that no creature would be able to overcome him. [They] would say, why should we bother ourselves to kill Kayin. The dog is with him and he can kill Kayin whenever he wishes, for [the dog] was given this obligation. [Therefore], if he [the dog] who is obligated to kill [Kayin] does not kill him, why then should we care [to kill him]? We thus find that [G-d] gave [to Kayin] a sign along with the dog. [In this way], anyone that would find Kayin would not smite him. Seeing the dog with him, they would withdraw from him.

With regards to the saying referenced above there is more to understand. For what is the relationship [of dogs] to this song [from Perek Shirah], where it is stated [that dogs praise G-d by saying], “Come, let us prostrate ourselves and bow, let us kneel before G-d our Maker” (Ps. 95:6). However, it appears that this will be understood in light of the words of our holy Sages of blessed memory (Shabat 155b), that the Holy One, blessed be He saw that the sustenance for dogs is very small in that people are usually not merciful to them.

Therefore, [G-d created dogs in such a way] that their food would stay in their bellies for three days. In this way, dogs do not need to rely upon the goodness of any other creature. [They know that they receive their sustenance] exclusively from the Holy One, blessed be He alone. Therefore, do they say, “Come, let us prostrate ourselves and bow, let us kneel before G-d our Maker” (Ps. 95:6). [Before G-d our Maker] specifically, for being that the dogs are His creation and He is their Creator, He will have mercy upon them. Therefore, [the dogs] rely exclusively [upon G-d] for all their good. Thus, they bow before HaShem, their Maker.

Regarding the matter that said this secret was revealed to Habakkuk, reference this in Sefer Pirkei Shirah, in the song of the dogs, in Sha’ar Shimon. We can explain by means of commentary why this secret [song] of the dogs was revealed to Habakkuk the prophet. For the 613 commandments that Moshe Rabbeynu z”l gave us at Sinai, [were summed up] by Habakkuk (ref. Macot 24a). Habakkuk [summed up all the Torah] with one [commandment], as it says, “the righteous will live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4).

We have already stated that the dogs assisted Israel in receiving the Torah in that they did not howl at them upon their exodus from Egypt. We thus find that [the dogs] caused, with their assistance, that Israel should receive the 613 commandments. These 613 commandments were [summed up] by Habakkuk into one [commandment], which is [the commandment of] faith. Among all animals, there are none that have faith in the Holy One, blessed be He, more than dogs. This is because their food is [entirely] dependent upon the Holy One, blessed be He. No one creature is merciful to dogs, even as our Sages of blessed memory have said (Mikhilta D’Rashbi, 16).

[The faith that dogs have in HaShem can be compared to the] eating of the manna [in the wilderness]. The manna would descend everyday to show that [food and sustenance] was dependent [only] upon the Holy One, blessed be He. For if it were to descend on one day [and last] for many days, [the people] would not have had so much faith in the Holy One, blessed be He, [on a daily basis].

This is also [true] of the dog, in that he always looks to the Holy One, blessed be He, for his [daily] food. [The dog] continuously puts his faith in HaShem always. Being that a dog’s faith is continuously upon the Holy One, blessed be He and that they enabled Israel to receive the 613 commandments (that Habakkuk [summed up] into one), therefore, was the secret of the song of the dogs revealed to him (i.e., Habakkuk).

With [what we have just mentioned] we can understand what was referred to above about the scholar who observes [a voluntary] fast. Understand the saying of our Sages, may their memory be for a blessing, that any scholar whose insides are not as pure as his outsides (i.e. a hypocrite) is worthy to be thrown to the dogs. Why specifically to the dogs? This now is understandable in light of what we have discussed that the dogs assisted Israel in the exodus from Egypt and their receiving the Torah, as it says, “And to all the children of Israel, no dog shall whet its tongue” (Ex. 11:7).

The dogs assisted in the Torah being given [more] quickly [by not slowing Israel from leaving Egypt]. [Therefore], the one who is a hypocrite, who does not fulfill the Torah properly, as it was given at Mt. Sinai, is worthy that revenge come upon him from the [same] dogs who assisted in the giving of the Torah [in the first place].

With this will we understand our blessed Sages words in another place that every scholar who is a hypocrite is worse than a nevelah (dead meat). For the nevelah is the portion of the dogs as it says, “the flesh of an animal torn in the field, to the dog shall you throw it” (Ex. 22:30). So, the one who is a hypocrite, is worse than a nevelah, the food for dogs that goes into its belly. For the dog assisted in the giving of the Torah and the hypocrite puts Torah in his body, yet does not observe it.