

Mishpatim: The Silence of the Dogs Talia Weisberg, Class of 2024

In last week's *parsha*, Yitro, we read about the awesome experience of the Revelation at Sinai, where God spoke the Ten Commandments to the Israelites. This week's *parsha*, Mishpatim, is much less dramatic. Although the *parsha* ends with Moshe ascending Mount Sinai to receive the full Torah from God, most of the *parsha* involves Moshe relaying various laws—53 in total!—to the people. One particularly curious law is found in Shemot 22:30:

V'anshei kodesh tihyun li u'vasar basadeh tireifa lo tokheilu lakelev tashlikhun o'to

You shall be holy people to Me: you must not eat flesh torn by beasts in the field; you shall cast it to a dog.

This is the second of two mentions of dogs in the Torah, both of which are found in the book of Shemot. The first reference to dogs came up a few chapters previously, in *parshat Bo*. When Moshe goes to Pharaoh to warn him about the final and worst plague, the Plague of the Firstborn, he says:

And there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again; but not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites, at man or beast—in order that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel (Ex. 11: 6-7).

The Midrash in Shemot Rabbah 31:9 understands these references to be connected, saying:

...“You must not eat flesh torn by beasts in the field; you shall cast it to a dog.” Why to a dog? The Holy Blessed One said: “You owe it to the dogs, for when I killed the Egyptian firstborn and the Egyptians were sitting all night and burying their dead, the dogs were barking at them, but they did not bark at Israel, as it is stated: “but not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites” (Ex. 11:7). Therefore, you owe it to the dogs, as it is stated: “You shall cast it to the dog” (Ex. 22:30)...

The Midrash tells us that because they kept calm and did not bark at the Jews during the tenth plague, dogs are rewarded in perpetuity with first rights to non-kosher meat.

During the Plague of the Firstborn, God went from house to house, killing the firstborns in every home whose lintel was not painted with the blood of the *Korban Pesach*. Even the firstborn of the Egyptian-owned cattle was killed. As the firstborns died and those who were left bewailed and buried their dead, the dogs in Egyptian homes barked throughout the night. Dogs are sensitive creatures with perception beyond human understanding; the Egyptian-owned dogs



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certainly knew exactly what was going on, and they were understandably spooked when they saw their owners and their fellow beasts being killed by the Divine presence.

While there was “a loud cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again,” as the Egyptians wept and their dogs howled, the dogs in Israelite homes remained silent (Ex. 11:6). The night of the plague of the firstborn was also the night of the *Korban Pesach*. As *Bnei Yisrael* celebrated the first Pesach, their canine companions curled up in peace, snoring gently, content and unafraid of the literal presence of God that was smiting the Egyptians who had tortured their Israelite owners for so many generations. After they finished with the *korban*, the Jews slept soundly in their beds, their children safe and warm, preparing for redemption, comforted by the knowledge that their enslavement would soon be over and they would be free.

By staying silent in comparison to their Egyptian counterparts, the dogs enabled *Bnei Yisrael* to accomplish their first mitzvah as a nation. Although the first commandment that the Jewish people received was the mandate to establish a calendar (Ex. 12:2), the first commandment that they physically did was the *Korban Pesach*. Dogs are thus rewarded not just because they let the Jews live in peace while the Egyptians mourned their dead, but because they facilitated the Jewish ritual. Ibn Ezra specifies that the command to give non-kosher meat to dogs is referring particularly to dogs who guard the flock from predators. While he is referring to a literal flock of sheep or goats, it is noteworthy that *Bnei Yisrael* are frequently referred to as the flock of Hashem. On the night of the *Korban Pesach*, the dogs protected our spiritual wellbeing and so we, in turn, care for them.

The *Korban Pesach* was the first act of redemption, the first time *Bnei Yisrael* came together as a people in the service of God. There is an exegetical principle of *ma'aseh avot siman l'banim*, meaning the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children. This posits that the actions we read about in the Torah are repeated in later generations. On the night of the *Korban Pesach*, Hashem showed us that we will prevail over our enemies, coalescing into a unified nation by doing as God commands. While our enemies' dogs howl, ours will remain silent.

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