



## **MAMLECHET HACHAI: ANIMAL PUNISHMENT**

### **ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT THINGS FOR US TO UNDERSTAND IN THE TORAH IS THE PUNISHMENT OF ANIMALS.**

- Why should an animal be judged and punished like a human being?
- The Mishna, one of our great books that teaches the path we should follow in life, asks this question: “If man has sinned, in what way has the animal sinned” so as to be punished? (Sanhedrin 54a)
- The Mishna answers that sometimes an animal—possibly through no fault of its own—attracts a person to do the wrong thing.
- It’s like people who own vicious dogs and who are tempted to use their animals to frighten and lord it over other people to get their way.
- The Rabbis said that it’s wrong for the animal to go free while the person is punished.
- Can you think of any reason why they might have decided that if the man is punished, the dog should be too?

### **THE TORAH TEACHES US THAT JUST BEFORE THE PEOPLE WERE FREED FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT, GOD KILLED ALL THE FIRSTBORN OF EGYPT, INCLUDING THE FIRSTBORN OF THE CATTLE. (Exodus 12:29)**

- The Rabbis asked this question: Even if we assume that all the Egyptian’s firstborn deserved to die, what sins could the cattle be guilty of?
- Do you have any idea why God may have punished the cattle?
- The Rabbis teach that it was not because of anything the cattle did but because they were worshipped as gods by the Egyptians.
- Why might that be important?
- If the firstborn of the cattle survived the plague, the Egyptians might have thought even more so that the cattle were gods.

### **WE CAN SEE THAT SOMETIMES INNOCENT ANIMALS SUFFER PUNISHMENT.**

- Do you know of any other situations where someone who is innocent of doing anything wrong suffers because of someone else’s wrongdoing?

- Has that ever happened to you?
- We know that God created the world in a way such that, when we do wrong, we may cause innocent people to suffer or be punished.

### **HOW DID THE RABBIS UNDERSTAND THIS SITUATION, WHICH SEEMS TO BE UNFAIR AND UNJUST?**

- Judaism teaches us that all of nature is God's creation and that, whenever possible, we are to show respect and compassion to all living creatures.
- The very word in Hebrew for food that is not kosher, traditionally forbidden to a Jew, is *treif*, which means torn—because Torah forbids the cruel practice of eating a limb that was torn from a living animal, which was common in the ancient world.
- But the Torah also teaches us that the animals were created to *serve* humankind (Sanhedrin 108a), even though they have a living soul.

### **WHAT MIGHT WE THINK FROM ALL THIS?**

- It seems that God has created a world in which the needs and purposes of humankind are placed *above* those of animals.
- So, if we are to guide our own behavior in the image of God, although we will be *fair* to animals, we will put the needs of human beings first.



**Gather the People**

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