

The domestic cat is a beloved household pet worldwide. While there is no reference to the domestic cat in Tanach, the modern Hebrew name for a cat, Chatul/a, is derived from Tanach. It appears once as a verb, chatal in Yechezkel 16:4, meaning “to enwrap or swaddle” and once as a noun, chatulah, a “swaddling band” in Iyov 38:9. These names perhaps elude to a cat’s tendency to wrap its body around itself when it relaxes or sleeps [1]. In the Talmud it is called Chatul, though at times it is called Shunrah, which is a specific term derived from Persian. The Persian name suggests that the domestic cats of Syria and Europe were derived from there [2]. In fact, researchers examined DNA belonging to nearly 1,000 wildcats and domestic cats from across the Old World and found that all domestic cats today are descended from *Felis silvestris lybica*, a wildcat that would have lived in Persia during the time cats began to become domesticated (around 1700 BCE) [3].

By Talmudic times there were many tame cats. This is shown by the statement that a cat never leaves a home it has once chosen, and therefore it need not be watched (Shabbos 51b) [2]. However, a cat bit off the hand of a child (Bava Kama 80b) which led to a Talmudic discussion about dangerous cats, from which the conclusion was that white cats and their offspring are dangerous and black cats are not. Rabbi Steinsaltz, a contemporary teacher and philosopher [4], wrote that the distinction between dangerous and harmless cats is not dependent on their fur color, but rather on their ancestry. During the Talmudic period cats were not fully domesticated; white, or paler cats, were more closely descended from their wild ancestor *Felis silvestris lybica*, a silver furred wild cat, and therefore were more dangerous [5].

There are numerous more mentions of cats in the Talmud. Perhaps the most famous of which is that one should learn modesty from the cat (Eruvin 100b) since it will not relieve itself in front of others and always covers its wastes (Rashi) [6]. The destructive qualities of the cat are generally recognized, as well. With its five claws (Chullin 52b) it eats mice (Baba Kamah 80a), weasels (Sanhedrin 105a), hens, young birds, lambs, and kids (Chullin 53a), and, occasionally, even large birds (Kesuvos 41b) [2]. Cats also kill and eat snakes (Pesachim 112b) and are, therefore, said to be immune to snake poison (Shabbos 128b; Avodah Zarah 30b). Duck entrails are a delicacy for cats (Beitzah 3a; Shabbos 142b) [6]. A cat gives birth after 52 days (Bechoros 8a; Beraishis Rabba 20:4), though modern medical knowledge notes 55 days [1].

The Talmud connects cats and forgetfulness. The reason why the cat forgets its master, whereas the dog will always remember him, is stated to be because cats eat mice, which are eminently the cause of forgetfulness (Horayos 13a) [2]. Eating food from which a cat has eaten makes one forget his studies (Horayos 13b) [6]. This idea has lasted into modern times; for in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century Jewish boys were not even now allowed to stroke a cat lest they lose their powers of memory. The prohibition does not, however, extend to girls [2].

Cats notoriously play a part in folklore and superstition, and this is true in Judaism, as well. The Talmud recorded that to see demons one should burn the fetus of a black cat, which must be the eldest female offspring of a black cat that is also the eldest female offspring of a black cat, and sprinkle the ashes on one's eyes (Brachos 6a) [2]. The placenta of a black cat was once used in an exorcism (Brachos 6a) [6]. A woman's blood, offered to a cat, coupled with a potion, will deprive a man of his virility (Shabbos 75b). In the Middle Ages in some German provinces a cat was believed to be hidden in the bimah of shuls, pointing to the devil's presence there. This belief was held until quite recently. Jews were also accused of practicing magic and there are nursery rhymes which record that Jews could, and often did, turn themselves into cats [1]. In Russo-Jewish folklore, blood from the tail of a cat is regarded as a cure for skin rashes, while a cat put into a new cradle drives away evil spirits from the baby. Some Jewish superstitions are to place cats outside during a thunderstorm, a black cat in the house is propitious; a white one, unlucky, and when a house is built a black cat, among other domestic animals, is introduced into it for luck [2].

In regards to the halachic perspective on owning a cat as a pet, the general principle according to most authorities is that one may own a pet provided that the animal does not pose a danger to people or property [7]. Even more so, cats can kill mice (Baba Metziah 97a) and may, therefore, be bred and kept as pets because they keep the house clean (Baba Kamah 80a) [6]. In his book "Chayto Aretz", Rabbi Menachem Slay examined the propriety of owning pets purely for recreational purposes (i.e. the pet cat does not serve any practical purpose) and notes positive aspects of pet ownership such as acquiring an appreciation of the magnificence of God's creations. With appropriate care and attention to halachos that pertain to pet ownership, such as an animal's status on Shabbos, feeding animals before one eats, and the removal of reproductive organs [7], one can enjoy a pet cat with relative ease.

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References

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