

Parshat Va'era: Corona Diary #20

Blurring the Lines Between Humans and Animals

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A little over a year ago a person consumed a bat and that meal changed the way we view our world. Watching the corona virus crossing over to the human realm from the natural world has forced us all to ponder the relationship between human beings and the natural world we inhabit. For the past few centuries, Nature seemed like little more than "background music" to the great march of human culture and science. Freed from the unforgiving influences of Nature, humanity advanced and progressed- often at dizzying speed. We harvested Nature for her resources just as we convinced ourselves that human ingenuity could outpace Nature. The 'vaccine revolution' of the past two centuries even allowed us to bring the microbial world to its heels; or so we thought until Nature shot back! How does this buckshot of Nature affect our views of the natural world.

The 10 makkot weren't just punishments for the Egyptians for their persecution or a "hammer shot" to crush Egyptian resolve and pave the way for the liberation of Jewish slaves. The 10 makkot were educational experiences lessening Egyptian, Jew and, ultimately, the entire world about the basics of religion. Obviously, the larger lesson surrounded God's ability to intervene in, and disrupt Nature. Aside from this primary lesson, the makkot also showcased many important messages about our relationship with Nature. It was primarily the 'middle makkot' of arov, dever and shechin which addressed our relationship with the broader world.

As he attempts to exploit the potential of Nature, Man struggles with threats from the animal kingdom. The second Makkah of 'tzefardei'a' already highlighted the dangers of sharing Nature with the animal kingdom: according to several positions these weren't amphibious frogs but, actually, were ferocious crocodiles. Egyptians were dependent upon the vitality of the Nile for their livelihood and national success. The Nile's fertility had catapulted Egypt to international prominence and had immunized them against the ravaging famines of sefer Breishit. However, rivers also host dangerous creatures and the Nile is no different. Under normal conditions God allows humans to harvest the benefits of rivers such as the Nile in safe and secure fashion. The makkah of tzefardei'a upset this balance, as hordes of crocodiles swarmed onto the dry land from the Nile. This Nile invasion reminded humans that our ability to harness Nature is fraught with danger, and taught humans to appreciate the steadying hand of God in preserving this delicate 'sharing" of Nature.

The makkah of arov however, was different from tzefardei'a: at this point the jungle invaded the city as hordes of vicious beasts trampled the human habitat. Arov reminded humanity of the delicate balance of the "frontier" the boundary where the human habitat brushes up against the animal kingdom. As Man is the pinnacle of creation, God desires that we carve protected human space from Nature. However, when humans behave immorally, they abdicate their lofty status and forfeit their right to secure boundaries from the jungle.

Dever, for its part, provided an additional message about humans and animals. Egyptians, along with many ancients, worshipped their livestock. Animals were worshipped for their mighty features such as strength, agility, cunning and speed – faculties which far surpass human abilities. Even Ya'akov was

aware of these qualities when he blessed Yehuda with the strength of a lion, Dan with the cunning of a snake etc. However, worshipping animals and coveting their animal features can also blur the differences between humans and animals; worshipping animal traits can animalize human beings and empty them of human traits such as moral will or conscience. Dever, through the contrast between the death of cattle and the sparing of humans, highlighted the dignity of human life and the expectations which accompany that station.

Maintaining this barrier during dever was itself an act of God. Humans are dependent upon their livestock for food, industry, transportation and military use. However, like humans, animals carry bacteria and viruses which are vital to their survival but dangerous to ours. Generally, God preserves these delicate "equilibriums" and upholds the microbial boundaries between animal germs and human microorganisms - allowing humans to live safely alongside their domesticated animals without risk of infection from animal diseases. The makkah of dever highlighted this fine balance; from a medical standpoint the contagion which exterminated hundreds of thousands of animals should have quickly spread to the humans living alongside their animals. Despite this vulnerability, God intentionally spared humans, to highlight the moral superiority and ethical conduct which he expects of humans. In part, this is why the makkah was called 'dever' which can also be read as 'davar' or speech. Humans, as opposed to animals, are endowed with cognitive speech and are expected to utilize their will and intellect to conduct moral lives. Additionally, this is why this makkah in particular is described as the "hand of God" implying Divine precision in killing livestock while sparing humans from infection. By unleashing a pandemic which should have logically spread to humans, God highlighted the dignity of

human life and the higher expectations he possesses for humans. We are not animals and are not meant to worship animal traits; if we animalize human experience we may incite the dissolution of boundaries between ourselves and the animal kingdom.

Arov blurred the physical boundary of humanity while dever reinforced the invisible microbial boundary. It seems as if, last December, these delicate boundaries between humans and animals were erased. At the least, this pandemic should help us better appreciate the Divine role in maintaining these boundaries and balances.

Unlike arov and dever, which stressed the interaction between animals and humans, the makkah of "shechin" was exclusively centered on the human community. A mysterious disease, launched by contact with "oven soot", was quickly transmitted leading to frantic quarantining. The Torah emphasizes that the Egyptian magicians could not "stand" in the presence of Moshe- because they had to be isolated to prevent mass infection. The Egyptians were facing major contagion and social distancing was insufficient- full lockdown was required.

This contagion showcases the fragility of human society- independent of our interaction with Nature. Despite the hardships of previous makkot, the Egyptians were never isolated from each other's company. Shechin launches a process which ultimately leads to the total collapse of Egyptian society: during barad Egyptians will shelter in their homes from heavenly hail, during choshech they will become socially paralyzed in blanketed darkness, and, ultimately, they will hide

in their homes from the angel of death during the night of bechorot.

Humans are not meant to live in isolation; we thrive in communal settings – be they familial, commercial, ethnic, religious or political. All these were quickly shut by "oven soot" the byproduct of human creativity and manufacture. We are victims of our own success. The past few decades have witnessed major changes in travel and without question our traveling lifestyles have unleashed economic benefits and cultural opportunities. However, without mass international travel it is unlikely that the corona virus would have spread this quickly, if at all. Once again our "communal life" has stalled, in part, because we overreached.

As we slowly climb out of this pandemic we have much to think about. In particular, we have been reminded of the delicate balance which God maintains between humans and Nature. We also sense the fragility of human communal life and how ironically, it is impacted by human advance. Much to think about over the next few months.