

Yom Kippur Day 5776: Human Dignity and Shabbat

In Judaism, there is an open debate as to whether or not animals have souls, and none of our scholars believe that animals can be Jewish. That said, I am convinced that my childhood parakeet, Einstein, a tiny, sweet, exceedingly neurotic chartreuse bird, probably had a Jewish soul.

Whenever I would put on a tape of my childhood cantor chanting Torah, he would go nuts, signing, dancing, and generally going crazy. The only other time he reacted the same way was when I put on HOT 97, the rap and hip hop station of the New York metro area. I really don't know what that means. I guess he was a complex bird with an intersectional identity, but part of it was certainly Jewish. I got him when I was in sixth grade, and he died when I was a sophomore in college. When he passed away, I was in DC for the summer, and my parents planned a Jewish funeral for him in our backyard that included mourner's kaddish. I think it's what Einstein would have wanted, and I'm pretty sure God was ok with it. The relationship between animals and humans comes up many times in the corpus of Jewish text and law, in large part because how we relate to and treat our animals reflects our most deeply held values, and conditions us in the ways we interact with other human beings.

One of my favorite animals scenes in the Bible is from the Book of Jonah which we read every Yom Kippur. Thanks to Jonah's reluctant prophecy, the city of Nineveh has come to recognize the evil of its ways, and subsequently covers every human and every animal in sackcloth. When I was in rabbinical school, I used to imagine all of the different animals in sack cloth outfits: bunnies in sackcloth, squirrels in sackcloth, peacocks in sackcloth, parakeets in sackcloth, and the more pedestrian animals - cows, goats, etc. On one hand, the image of animals draped in sackcloth is supposed to indicate to the audience that the Book of Jonah is a biblical comedy. Through highlighting the exaggerated and the absurd, the reader is supposed to understand that Jonah is a farcical work. On the other hand, it shows that the entire community was in this project we call life together. We rejoice with our animals, we work with them, we repent with them, and most important, we rest with them.

This intimate relationship between animals and humans comes out most clearly in the Shabbat morning kiddush from Exodus 20, "Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is Shabbat for the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your manservant or your

maidservant, or your cattle, or the stranger within your gates. For [in] six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day.” For those of you who have been to Saturday morning services or Shabbat lunch, you’ve heard us chant those words in Hebrew several times. Even though they have become rote to many of us, we cannot overlook their revolutionary content. Of all the achievements of the Jewish people, the greatest of them all is the invention of the seven-day week, a week which centers around the Sabbath. On this day, every member of a household is not only allowed to rest, but required to rest -- both the free and the indentured, the human and the animal, male and female. At the core of how we organize time is the deep belief that all human beings must cease from labor. Shabbat is a time of radical rest and unqualified equality. It is *ma’ain olam habah*, a taste of the world to come, our version of heaven.

Now that we live in the modern world, have we outgrown the demand for complete rest and radical equality? When I pose the question to you in that way, I am sure that most of us would utterly reject such an assertion. However, it has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to realize those values outside of a Sabbath-observant community. One of the most

disturbing pieces I have come across recently was the recent [New York Times](#) expose about working conditions at the online behemoth, Amazon. The piece describes the culture in explicit detail: “At Amazon, workers are encouraged to tear apart one another’s ideas in meetings, toil long and late (emails arrive past midnight, followed by text messages asking why they were not answered), and held to standards that the company boasts are ‘unreasonably high.’” We also learned that the company fired individuals who struggled with tragedies that were all too human and beyond their control -- the woman with cancer, the woman who lost a stillborn child, the father who wants to know and spend time with his children. What was most fascinating and interesting to me as a rabbi, however, was the defense of the Amazon culture by one of its relatively new employees who [wrote](#), “During my 18 months at Amazon, I’ve never worked a single weekend when ***I didn’t want to***. No one ***tells me*** to work nights. No one ***makes me*** answer emails at night.” The operative words from this employee are “that I didn’t want to.” As though working ceaselessly is a sign of true freedom. In fact, his words evidence the company culture’s extreme control -- he cannot even conceive of his personal will as separate from the business goals of his employer.

It is unfair, in my opinion, to single out Amazon. It has become commonplace to answer emails late into the night, receive work-related texts at all hours of the day, and for certain employers and employees to become indignant if they don't receive an immediate response to every request and inquiry. To a certain extent, technological advancement has allowed this trend to become totally out of control. On the other hand, exploiting workers, being complicit in our own exploitation, and being addicted to the fruits of our labor is certainly not new. If they were, there would not be several verses in the Torah that deal with this topic and thousands of pages of ancient and medieval Jewish law that dictate every element of the employer-employee relationship. The unfortunate inclination to view animals, other people, and ourselves purely in terms of our labor value is ancient, if not embedded in our very humanity.

In Deuteronomy 25:4, we learn that it is forbidden to keep a muzzle on an ox during his feeding time. Our oxen need a few hours a day to eat freely and not be confined by work. Now let us ask ourselves: how many of us eat while working? How many of us think we are merely being efficient? In Exodus and Deuteronomy we learn that if we come across an animal with a burden too heavy, we must relieve the animal of its load, regardless

if we know or like the owner. How much do we load on ourselves and others, even when every rational person knows we are carrying simply too much? Don't we deserve at least as much rest and dignity as the Torah demands for animals? On a theoretical level, most of us would answer, "yes!," but there is little about our actual behavior that indicates we hold ourselves in such esteem.

Many of us are convinced that we need to work all of the time because of the changing global economy, and the increased cost of living in the face of stagnant and falling wages -- all very legitimate fears. But also, we work all the time because we've convinced ourselves that we want to, that it's just one more email or one more phone call, that everything will fall apart if we give ourselves needed respite, or we tell ourselves that we're not doing anything else at the moment anyway. We work all the time because we're convinced that our worth is intrinsically linked to our labor and its rewards. [Study](#) after [study](#) has shown that Americans take the least vacation of any country in the world, but are no more productive or efficient. Humans, like animals, can only work so hard for so long without rest. No one can be brilliant and detail-oriented 24 hours a day. Yet, we submit to the temptation time and time again -- both for ourselves and for others.

And the temptation to view human life as merely a means to an end does not begin or end at the workplace. The other [story](#) this summer that disturbed me deeply was the sexual assault at Saint Paul's Academy, a prestigious New England prep school that prepares a global elite for future leadership. What is beyond dispute in this case is that there is a tradition at the school called the "senior salute" where older men pursue younger women at the school for a final tryst. The school provides a long list of luxuries that come to be seen as rights and entitlements -- fine food, manicured lawns, first-class education, and global travel. It seems that this culture of entitlement ultimately led many classes of men to believe that they deserved access to bodies of their classmates. One sentence from the story that has stuck with me is this: "The case has already raised uncomfortable questions about the connection between privilege and sexual assault, and between sexual assault in American colleges and in high schools." Rape happens and has happened everywhere, in every class, and at every stage of human history. However, what we now call "rape culture" flourishes in environments where individuals believe that the lives of others are merely means to their own fulfillment, pleasure, or exercise of power. At the root of much abuse and exploitation is the belief

that human life is a means to an end, a path to profit, pleasure, or power -- and not an end unto itself. At the core of our faith is the inviolable belief that all life is an end unto itself, an end that is sanctified through Divine Creation and transcendent equality. Our *halacha* and *minhagim* -- our laws and our traditions -- are how we animate this value in daily life, and safeguard ourselves and others against the constant temptation to betray that sacred Truth.

That is where the timeless wisdom in our canon, our traditions, and our way of life comes into play. Three thousand years ago, in Deuteronomy 21, the Torah stated that if a woman is captured during war, an Israelite man may not touch her for a month, and after that month, he may only lay a hand on her after she has wailed for her lost family, has shaved her head, hasn't clipped her fingernails, has not adorned herself in anyway. He must also feed, clothe, and provide shelter for her like any other family member. And if he no longer desires her after that month, which most men would not, he must set her free -- he cannot sell her or make her a slave. What is the idea behind this law? Women's bodies could not been seen as a path to instant gratification or a spoil of war. A man needs to live with a woman, see her as human, and let her live out her

deep grief before laying a hand on her. And the truth of the matter is, after that experience, Israelite men probably wouldn't taken women as spoils of war. The thrill isn't really there.

Halacha also protects us against our employers and ourselves. The laws of Shabbat are not suggestions, and they really are not a metaphor. They are laws, with the most extreme punishments available in Jewish law, that we must follow for our sake, and for the sake of safeguarding the ideas -- and holiness -- we seek to usher into the world as Jews. I have explained many times that "work" isn't prohibited on Shabbat, "m'lacha" is prohibited -- the 39 activities that were used to build the tabernacle, and their derivatives -- including their derivatives in modern form. That said, I know m'lacha is mistranslated as "work" time and time again, often because when a congregant wants to do something they protest, "But I don't consider _____ activity to be work!" Even if we use the term "work" to describe what is prohibited on Shabbat, what we know is that in our modern world, we have lost all conception of the lines between work, hobby, pleasure, play, and rest. In my opinion, it is better to rely on the restrictions of the tradition instead of our own judgment. Let's be real with each other on these realest of days -- if it includes a screen, if it takes your

eyes away from the gaze of another living thing, if it distracts you from acknowledging the miracle of life and the depth of another's dignity -- you probably shouldn't be using it on Shabbat. If you're being graded on it or paid for it, you probably shouldn't be doing it on Shabbat. And the beauty and wisdom of Jewish law is that Shabbat is not every day of the week. Labor is not evil, capitalism is not the devil we don't believe in. Havdallah, though different than Shabbat, is just as holy as lighting the Shabbat candles. Both work and rest have their place in a full and dignified Jewish life. But Shabbat, and every seven years, the Shemitah year, serve as reset button, a ritualized reminder to stop and remember what is really important. God created us all -- humans and animals. We were all brought into this world equally endowed with dignity. The greatest wonder to behold is never the work of our own hands, but what we all share by virtue of being brought into this world by our Common Creator.

On this high holy day, let us remember that we are greater than the sum of what we can achieve, and that the blessing of others in our lives is not tied to how they can benefit us. The joy of life, and core of our ethical system, is the inviolable belief that we are ends unto ourselves, equally entitled -- and compelled -- to dignity, rest, and compassion. Let us try to

remember and ritualize that belief at least one day a week, if not more so. Acting in accordance with that core Jewish value will illuminate and sweeten this upcoming year in many of the ways we deeply need and desire.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah - May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.