

The Charity Dilemma

Why did Eliezer drink before he satiated his camels? Isn't that contrary to Torah law? And what does it teach us about our charitable donations?

Feed Your Animals

American Jews practice a very interesting custom during the Tashlich service on Rosh Hashanah. They throw breadcrumbs to the fish when visiting a lake or river for this symbolic casting away of sins. I don't know who invented this custom—perhaps it came from the fact that people shake out their pockets of “sins” and would inadvertently shake out the crumbs too.

In any case, this custom is incorrect, as we'll soon see.

In the second portion of the Shema, we read “and I will provide grass in your field for your cattle, and [then] you will eat and be satisfied.” The Talmud (Tractate Brachos 40a) says, “From here we learn that one is forbidden to eat before he feeds his animals.”

Thus in the Shema, the single most important prayer in Judaism, said twice daily, the Torah tells us that before one eats, one needs to feed one's animals: cattle, pets, birds, fish or whatever.

There are many reasons why one must feed the animals before himself.

Tzaar Baalei Chaim: Three thousand years ago, long before there animal rights groups and movements to defend dogs and cats, the Torah established that it's forbidden to pain any living creature (except where it's needed for human consumption—and even then it must be slaughtered painlessly)—and if a person eats before he feeds his animal, he's liable to forget completely to feed it and possibly let it starve to death. Conversely, the Torah establishes, if one gets in the habit of always feeding his animal before he himself eats, he'll never forget.

Additionally, the Torah states, "You shall walk in His ways." The Talmud explains: "Just as He is merciful, so too must you be merciful"—meaning that just as G-d has compassion on whatever creature it may be—so too are we obligated to walk in His ways, to have compassion for animals and be concerned for them before we worry about ourselves.

Finally, there is a third and very interesting reason. On the verse in Psalms, "Man and beast does G-d redeem," the Midrash Rabbah (Bereishis 33) comments: "Man in the merit of beast does G-d redeem"—meaning, that Man is saved in the animals' merit.

Sometimes when Man sins and is not worthy of blessing from Above, G-d will bless the world in the animals' merit, since they have no free will and never act in opposition to G-d's will. Thus, from time to time, we are saved because of the animals—which is why it's only fitting to put the animals' meals before our own.

The Shabbat Problem

Now all this applies to the weekday—but on Shabbos it is a little different. The Halachah (Code of Jewish law I, 324:11) states that only dependent animals, meaning domesticated animals which don't eat and drink on their own in the wild, may be fed on Shabbos. But animals that live and eat in the wild are forbidden to be fed on Shabbos—even to cast food before them is forbidden by Halachah. Why?

Because on Shabbos, when the mitzvah is for one to rest, it is an unnecessary hassle. They will find their own food anyway.

It's understood from this that even on Yom Tov, which is like Shabbos as far as resting is concerned (and even more so), that when one goes to Tashlich, you can't throw bread to the fish because fish don't depend on you. They were there yesterday, they'll be there tomorrow, and they don't need your bread today.

But with every rule, there's always the exception to the rule.

There is one animal you're allowed feed on Shabbos and Yom Tov, even if it's not yours and doesn't depend on you for lunch. As a matter of fact, feeding this animal is a bit of mitzvah too. Can you guess which animal?

If you thought "Man's best friend," you thought right, because this animal is the dog.

The Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 155b) states that "the dog's sustenance is minimal," which Rashi explains to mean that "since no one pities the dog to give it much food," it's hard for

the dog to get much to eat on its own.

Not too long ago, we had a young man from Israel here who joked to me that he hopes to return in his next lifetime as a dog in an American Jewish home—"because dogs in America live better than a lot of people throughout the world," he explained.

Obviously, the Talmud I just quoted isn't referring to American dogs.

But for stray dogs that run from place to place, it is hard to find food. That's why the Talmud says that G-d created the dog with the ability to "retain its food in its stomach for three days," meaning that it doesn't get hungry that quickly, or that it can endure without food for much longer periods than other animals. (I don't want to debate this—I'm not a veterinarian and dogs are not my expertise. I'm only telling you what the Talmud actually writes.)

Therefore, states the Halachah, just as G-d pities the dogs, so should we—which is why it's "a bit of a mitzvah" to feed a dog, even on Shabbos.

In Life or Death Situations

That's for putting animals first. Our Torah portion this week, however, seems to teach us the opposite.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the Torah's first match—how Avraham summoned his butler Eliezer and charged him with an oath to travel far across the desert to Aram Naharayim and bring back a wife for his son Yitzchok. And so Eliezer went on his way, and upon arriving at his destination, he

turned to G-d with a prayer, saying, “The maiden to whom I say, ‘Tilt your jug that I might drink’ and she says, ‘Drink—and I will also give your camels to drink,’ she is the one You have determined for Your servant Yitzchok.”

Almost immediately, this is exactly what happened. Rivkah came along to the oasis and Eliezer asked her for a little water—and indeed, the Torah tells us, “she lowered her jug to her hand and gave him to drink, finished quenching him... and drew water for all his camels.”

Now, it’s clear from the story that Eliezer drank before the camels. It’s the opposite of what we’ve been saying until now—that you need to feed animals before people. But this isn’t the only place we find this.

We all know the story of Moshe hitting the rock. In the Torah portion of Chukas, we read how the Jewish Nation needed water and complained to Moshe and Aharon. G-d told Moshe to speak to the rock but Moshe hit it instead (resulting in his punishment of being barred from the Holy Land.) Ultimately, the Torah tells us, when water finally flowed from the rock, “the congregation and their flocks drank”— first “the congregation” and then “their flocks,” meaning again that people came before animals.

There are several explanations for this. Perhaps we can simply say that as long as a person has water, he or she is not in danger and therefore must certainly feed his or her animals first. But where one does not have water to drink, one’s life unquestionably comes before animals because it’s a life-and-death situation.

For example, one of the instructions on passenger aircraft is that in case of emergency, you need to put on your oxygen mask first and only then your kids' masks—because only after you stabilize your own situation can you help anyone else. If you put your kids' masks on first, you're likely to pass out.

That's why in these two cases—the story of Eliezer and the story of the parched Jews in the desert—the people definitely needed to drink first and the animals second.

The Imperative for Spiritual Impurity

What is the moral lesson here?

There is an age-old debate in the American Jewish community over what needs to be given to charity and what's more important: charitable institutions that deal with the physical side of Jewish life like old age homes and soup kitchens for the homeless, or institutions that deal with the Jewish nation's spiritual needs like Jewish schools, synagogues and youth movements.

I think the answer is simple. The majority of past generations in our people's history were simply poor—and if the community had not provided their needs, they would have been in immediate danger. Thus, material charity certainly comes first, because without the Jewish body there is no Jewish soul—or anything else Jewish, for that matter.

In our generation, however, we find ourselves, by G-d's grace, in the "Land of Prosperity." In America today, it is very rare for a person, even a homeless person, to die of hunger because he

simply didn't have anything to eat.

Conversely, the spiritual situation in America is far more serious. We clearly know that a Jewish kid who doesn't go to Hebrew School has an "excellent" chance of intermarrying and completely assimilating, especially if he comes from a family that's already intermarried—if he doesn't get a Jewish education, he'll surely be lost from the Jewish nation.

In other words, it's a situation of spiritual life and death, and the response is clear—saving lives come before everything. And when it comes to spiritual life and death, one must provide "water"—the Torah—to one's self before anyone or anything else.