

Hunting—Not for Nice Jewish Boys

Should Jews be hunters? What is the Torah's attitude towards hunting and towards animal cruelty in general?

Nimrod and Esau's Legacy

Does Judaism allow hunting as a sport? Is a Jew allowed to kill animals just for fun?

Who in Torah was a hunter?

We find two hunters in the Torah. They were the kind of men nobody would want to get involved with.

The first was Nimrod, as clearly stated in the verse, "He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; therefore it is said, 'Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord.'"

The second was Esau. As in the verse, "Esau was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field." In fact, the Midrash states that Esau killed Nimrod and in effect took his place, carrying on Nimrod's hunting legacy. Now, I have yet to meet any parents who named a son for either Esau or Nimrod. Nobody wants their child to perpetuate the legacy of those two men.

A Shabbat for Animals

Still, there is more to the Jewish opinion about hunting than bad

role models. Torah forbids inflicting pain on animals. When Bilaam beat his donkey for going off the road, the angel of G-d that was blocking the donkey's path reprimanded him, saying, "Why have you beaten your donkey!" Clearly the Torah forbids it. In fact, Bilaam died by the sword as a "measure for measure" punishment for threatening his donkey, "If only I had a sword I would slaughter you right now!"

We also find an indication of just how kind the Torah expects us to be to our animals in the Shema. The Rabbis decreed that a Jew is forbidden to eat before having fed his animals, for the verse says, "And I shall give grass in your fields for your animals and you shall eat and be satisfied." In the verse, G-d feeds the animals first, and we are commanded to follow His example.

We really don't need to look very far to learn how G-d expects us to treat animals. In this week's portion, in the Ten Commandments, we read, "And the seventh day shall be Shabbat... You shall not do any work, you and your sons... and your animals." We are commanded to allow even our animals to rest on Shabbat. But the real surprise comes in next week's parsha, "Six days you shall work and on the seventh day you shall cease in order that your ox and your donkey shall rest." This means that the purpose of Shabbat rest is so the animals can rest!

Torah does permit causing pain to animals if it is for the benefit of man. For example, if we need the meat or the skin of the animal. Another example might be if the animal can be used in the defense of man as a shield perhaps, or for medical experiments. No matter what the use, if it is being used to fill a

legitimate human need, Torah permits it. The reason is, because the animal was created to serve man, the crown jewel of creation, and man was created to serve his Creator.

However, even in cases where man has a legitimate reason to use an animal, he must make sure to cause the animal as little pain as possible. Therefore, Shechita, ritual slaughtering, is such a delicate process. The slit must be made in the throat of the animal, with a perfectly smooth, extremely sharp knife. If the knife is dull or has even a single kink, the animal is rendered non-kosher.

This concept goes even deeper. Once, Rabbi Yehudah was passing by the slaughterhouse in Ziporri when a calf ran out of the shop towards him and buried its head in the Rabbi's cloak as to say, "Save me!"

Rabbi Yehudah told the calf, "Go back inside, for this is the purpose for which you were created."

Because Rabbi Yehudah showed no compassion, it was decreed that he should be punished with sore teeth. He suffered from this ailment for thirteen years until, one day, his housekeeper was giving the house a thorough scrub down when she suddenly saw a nest with baby mice inside. She wanted to throw them out of the house but Rabbi Yehudah stopped her and said, "Isn't it true that G-d is merciful on all of his creations?"

At that very moment the pain in the Rabbi's teeth subsided.

The Jewish Character Trait

There is an interesting lesson to be derived from this story. As the Alter Rebbe writes in his Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, “Only when an animal is agitating someone or if there is a person who needs that animal for healing or other purposes (even to pluck a feather from a live duck when there is no other available) is it permissible to cause the animal pain or death, although most would still refrain from such action for it may bring to callousness.”

Even though it was permissible to slaughter that calf and indeed that was the purpose of its being created, still a conscientious person should not have reacted so callously. It is inevitable that after callously taking countless lives of those one is permitted to take he will grow callous towards life itself. This rule holds especially true for a Jew, for “mercy” is one of the Jews’ identifying character traits. However, if there is a real need for the animal such as a medical experiment, even a conscientious should not refrain from using the animals for this is the greatest act of mercy - it could save countless lives!

In this week’s parsha we read how G-d chooses the Jewish nation, “And you shall be for me a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation.” The Rebbe explains that the concept of hunting is one of the differentiating symbols between the world and G-d’s chosen nation. The nations of the world consider hunting a great honor and it gains the respect of others if one can achieve a kill in only one shot, with minimal effort. After having spent fifteen to twenty years on learning how to take the lives of animals for no good reason, he has become quite adept at it

and his friends will applaud him for this skill. But for a Jew, taking an animal's life for no reason is forbidden by the Torah! Even to kill an insect for no reason is to transgress Jewish Law!

G-d created man and gave him the gift of intelligence in order that man should be able to build up the world. Therefore, the mission of the Jew in this world is to bring justice and morality to the world, which is why Jews don't have it in their makeup to hunt for pleasure. Destruction is not a Jewish strongpoint. A Jew would rather a round of golf than killing for fun.

Our sages have described the reward for such behavior: "When you show mercy to others, others will show mercy to you."