



Canine Messages

The Baal Shem Tov taught that everything we see and hear can teach us a lesson in serving G-d. COVID has seen a rise in dog-ownership. What lesson can we learn from dogs and their relationships with humans?

A Dog's Story

September 2nd, we marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of WWII.

In honor of the occasion, a children's author was interviewed about his recent book, "Major: A Soldier Dog," where he told the story of a dog who fought alongside American soldiers during the war.

When the United States decided to join the war, it was clear that it was going to be a major undertaking with fighting going on two separate fronts, so army officials suggested that dogs be drafted to join the war effort.

This wasn't a new idea. Throughout history, armies have employed the use of dogs, and dogs have been instrumental in saving thousands of soldiers' lives. The problem was that when America entered the war, the military had no unit for dog training, nor any expertise in the field. They did not have a single dog to its name.

The army announced a campaign called "Dogs for Defense." They asked American citizens to donate their dogs to the war effort and promised to return them when the war was over.

That children's book focuses on a five-year-old child from South Dakota named Sid Moore, and his dog, Major. Sid's father suggested that he donate his dog to the project. Sid, today an elderly gentleman living in Ohio, relates how he still remembers how soldiers pulled up in front of his house with a large vehicle and barked, "Kid, you've got three minutes to say goodbye, we are in a hurry!"

The dog didn't want to go into the cage. When the soldiers tried to force him in, he resisted and bit one of them. Sid's father suggested to the soldiers that his son get into the crate and lure Major inside. Sid crouched into the crate, the dog followed him in, and Sid hugged him tight. A moment later, the soldiers yanked him out, slammed the door shut, and drove away in a hurry. Until today, Sid says, he feels the pain of that farewell.

Twenty thousand dogs were drafted into the war effort, and the army trained them in a variety of tasks; to locate mines, retrieve wounded soldiers, go out on spying missions, and many other jobs.

Five training camps were set up throughout the country, and each housed two thousand dogs at a time. After their training, they were sent to various places around the world where they joined the American soldiers.

Training Lessons

Over that initial period, the army learned the basics of dog-training. There were two important rules they discovered.

1. A dog could only take orders from one person. Too many people giving instructions was confusing; it needed to have one single owner.
2. Never train through fear or punishments. They learned that whenever a dog was in a state of fear, it stopped functioning properly and froze. But when it was trained through rewards, it would do anything for its owner.

At the end of the war, the surviving dogs were brought back to the shores of the United States to be returned to their owners, as the military had promised. But it turned out to be more complicated. Over the course of the war, the dogs had become aggressive and dangerous. They needed to be first retrained as 'normal' dogs that could live in a home environment. Also, many owners had died or changed addresses, and the army needed to make a huge effort to locate the owners and return the dogs to their homes.

Sid Moore was one of the people who received their dog back. He said that the dog didn't hold a grudge against him for sending him to the front; to the contrary, Major the dog was very excited to see him again and they had a very joyful reunion. It was Sid, in fact, who felt ashamed to face the dog, after sending him off to the war.

This new book was written from the perspective of the dog. They try to describe how the dog sees the experience of the war, and because a dog's strongest sense is his sense of smell, the book describes the entire experience from the perspective of his scent.

Loyalty at All Costs

The Rebbe would often quote the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov that everything a person sees or hears must teach him a lesson in serving Hashem.

During the COVID outbreak, we witnessed an interesting phenomenon. At the outset, people were afraid of pets; they feared that they would spread the virus. However, the tide soon shifted and there began a race to acquire new dogs. The shelters were quite literally emptied and all the dogs were bought up. It seems to be that in our day, people think that owning one dog is an obligation. Two dogs are optional, and three is showing off J

What lesson could we learn from dogs?

The first characteristic that we see in dogs is loyalty. Even when their owner sends them into battle against their will, they bear no grudge and return with the same love and affection.

Sometimes, people go through difficult times in life, regarding their health, livelihood or whatever, and they become bitter and angry. They ask, "Why did G-d do this to me? What did I do to deserve this?" This creates a negative attitude towards Judaism. Because you're angry, you won't put on Tefillin or come to Shul, and so on. You used to keep kosher, but now you are no longer willing to do so. Well, if there is one thing we can learn from dogs, it is about loyalty at any price.

Love & Fear

The second lesson can be learned from dog-training. On one hand, the dog needs to know who the boss is; he has one owner and he follows his instructions only. On the other hand, he needs to be trained through love, not through fear.

We all know the prayer of Avinu Malkeinu, "Our father, our king." That prayer symbolizes the two aspects of our relationship with G-d. On one hand, G-d is our merciful father with whom we share a loving, parent-child relationship. On the other hand, he is also our king, and as the subjects of the king, we are beholden to fulfill all his requests. It is a relationship based off fear.

In a marriage, a husband cannot just love his wife. There must also be an element of fear, or respect. Pure overflowing love will bring him to 'smother' her individuality; out of love, he will decide what is good for her - even against her will. It is crucial for him to have an element of awe, to respect her desires and to give her space.

Our connection with G-d works in a similar fashion. This year, Rosh Hashanah falls out on Shabbat, and we do not blow the Shofar during

services. Some Jews might be so infused with a love of the Rosh Hashanah and its traditions that they decided to blow the Shofar anyway. That is where fear comes in; no matter how much we want to do it, we must respect G-d's will. And therefore, my friends, you will need to return to Shul tomorrow to hear the Shofar.

However, the prayer of Avinu Malkeinu puts "Our Father" before "Our King." We put the love before the fear. Ultimately, a Jew wants to carry out G-d's will and to do Mitzvot because of the mutual love between them.

Throughout Jewish history, Jews have made great sacrifices in order to fulfill Mitzvot. Rabbi Aharon Chazan lived in the Former Soviet Union and he would walk for hours on Sukkot to recite the blessing over the Lulav and Esrog. The entire day would be spent walking for hours to shake the Lulav, and then walking back to celebrate the holiday with his family. This sacrifice – and many others like it – weren't a result of fear. They came from his intense love of G-d and Judaism.

In the United States, people often say that they observe Judaism out of guilt. This means serving G-d out of fear. It doesn't last, because we ultimately get sick and tired of feeling guilty. We need to educate our children to embrace Judaism out of love. This will bring enthusiasm into observance, and enthusiasm is contagious; it will carry on to future generations as well.

Jewish Intuition

The final lesson we can learn from dogs is from their amazing sense of smell.

We all know the feeling of something that "doesn't smell right." It might seem alright, but our intuition warns us that something is amiss.

We need to develop our Jewish sense of smell. Even when something seems 'kosher,' your Jewish intuition could 'smell' that something isn't

right, and that this behavior is inappropriate for a Jew or Judaism. A woman once came to a rabbi to ask if her newly slaughtered chicken was kosher. As the rabbi deliberated the question, his wife walked in and glanced at the chicken. "It might be kosher, but it stinks."

The sense of smell is our the most spiritual of our senses. It is connected to our soul. Therefore, the more we connect to our soul, the more we will develop our Jewish sense of smell.

The prophets say that Moshiach will be able to judge by his smell. He won't need to employ investigators and court proceedings; he will be able to smell the truth. He won't need witnesses and evidence, because his smell will already bring him to a conclusion.

My friends, when we will develop our Jewish sense of smell, we will hasten the coming of Moshiach, may he come very soon.