

B”H
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The Leopard, Eagle, Deer and Lion

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***“Yehudah Ben Teima says,
be bold like a leopard, with ease like an eagle,
run like a deer and be valiant like a lion
to do the Will of your Father in Heaven.
He also said the bold-faced will go to Hell
and the shamed face will go to Heaven.”***
(Pirkei Avot 5:23)

The leopard, the eagle, the deer and the lion, these are the four animals of Ben Teima. What is interesting about Ben Teima’s statement here is that this is the only occasion in traditional Torah literature where reference is made to emulate animal behavior.

While in the Torah itself G-d does compare certain tribes of Israel to animals, nonetheless He does not say that we are to emulate their characteristics. Granted, the references to animals are of course symbolic, but the nature of the symbol is so unusual that it deserves special comment.

Many cultures around the world have used the emulation of animal characteristics to inspire human activity. One of the most predominant examples of this usage of animals has been in Chinese culture, specifically within the traditions of the martial arts, today popularly known as Kung Fu. While I do not believe that Ben Teima was here referring to King Fu, nonetheless a similarity still does exist.

In the Chinese Shaolin Kung Fu tradition, animals were watched and their movements emulated to form martial arts fighting styles. Apparently Ben Teima must have had some knowledge of these animals and had cultivated a great respect for their individual abilities.

Yet, rather than apply these attributes towards fighting one’s fellow man, Ben Teima suggests that the emulation of these animals be put into service for our greatest fight of all: the war against our inner evil inclination and our submission to the Will of G-d. Let us look at each of these animals and see what it is that Ben Teima is actually telling us.

A leopard is a mighty animal, very similar in strength to a lion. Yet, the characteristic to be emulated from a leopard is its “Az,” usually translated as boldness. Yet, “Az Panim” (bold-faced) is the term used to describe those who are going to Hell. So in one way we

are taught to emulate the boldness of the leopard and in another way, we are warned that those who are boldfaced shall inherit Hell. There is an apparent contradiction here.

This is resolved however by understanding in what context boldness is considered an attribute and in what context it is considered a vice. Boldness has its good side and its bad side. When one is bold in the service of G-d, this is good. When one is bold in opposition to G-d, one inherits Hell (both on Earth and in the afterlife).

Ben Teima's advice is that one is to be bold for G-d. Now, the word Az can also mean arrogant. Can one be positively arrogant in the service of G-d? The answer to this is a resounding yes! In the eyes of those who serve G-d to be Az is to be bold. In the eyes of those who rebel against G-d to be Az is to be arrogant.

G-d does not need us to set examples for our fellow faithful Torah observant Jews. He does require of us however to set examples of righteous action for the rebellious Jews who daily violate the covenant. In their eyes religious Jews are arrogant because we so strongly observe the Torah and cling to its ways regardless of personal loss or the disrespect we suffer.

Once one is bold as the leopard, one is to glide like an eagle to perform the service of the All Mighty. Boldness is a characteristic of the heart. To glide like an eagle is a character of action.

One is to serve the Creator with the ease of flight seen in an eagle. Unfortunately, for many religious Jews this ease of Divine service is unknown. This is because they are torn between the service of conflicting masters. When one seeks to live in accordance to secular ways among secular people, and at the same time stay faithful to the Covenant of Torah, this creates a conflict of unparalleled dimensions.

An eagle soars in the sky so gracefully because it is his nature to do so. A Jew can live a Torah life with ease and grace of movement only when in a Torah environment surrounded by like-minded Torah faithful souls. When a child of Torah seek their fortune in the secular world, this can be compared to an eagle trying to run on its legs as swiftly as it flies with its wings. An eagle's legs were not designed for running. A Jewish soul was not designed to serve G-d in foreign lands or in foreign cultures. To soar like an eagle, a Jew must reside in his natural habitat, in the Land of Israel, among other Torah faithful Jews.

Running like a deer can be compared to the soaring of an eagle. The eagle expresses ease of movement in the heavens. The deer expresses swiftness of movement upon the Earth. While the eagle expressed ease of movement, the deer expresses swiftness of movement.

One is to serve the All Mighty with swiftness of movement, as the deer is swift. Once one is bold and in one's proper environment one should seek to excel in excellence in Divine service. Like the deer one should act naturally and swiftly to do that which is right and natural for the Torah faithful Jew to do. The deer is never confused or torn

about which way to run. Therefore, the Torah faithful Jew should act naturally according to the spirit of Torah in his soul to swiftly fulfill his Torah nature.

Like the deer, the Torah Jew is one with his environment; he avoids those who seek to trap him. The Torah faithful Jew, like the buck is majestic and aloof. He is seen from a distance but does not allow the stranger to approach. As the deer lives off the land and relies only on his Maker, so too the Jew must live off our Land relying only upon the All Mighty and not upon those whose would act kindly to us, all the while seeking to trap us and ensnare us.

To be valiant like a lion is the nature of the strong-hearted Torah faithful Jew. Not for naught is the lion the symbol of the House of David and of King Mashiah to come. The valiance of the lion goes hand in hand with the courage of the leopard. For the Torah faithful Jew must always remember that he/she is the king in the jungle of mankind.

The roar of Torah must never be a voice to be ridiculed or mocked. The voice of Torah is something that should be feared. The voice of Torah should place terror in the hearts of all who oppose it.

The valiant lion of Judah, of Israel, the very spirit of Mashiah should inhabit every Torah faithful Jew. With boldness and ease, with swiftness and valiance he/she should tear to shreds every enemy. The roar of the lion should strike fear in the hearts of all violators of the covenant of Torah causing them to flee from the Holy Land.

With impunity of action the lion-hearted Jew should walk over his entire domain, the entire Land of Israel, and devour his enemies wherever and whoever they be. The lion does not fear the voice of opposition. The lion acts with instinct for self-preservation. We must each allow the Lion of Judah, the spirit of king Mashiah to possess our souls and guide our actions, for this is the destiny of Israel.

In this world, those who fight the Torah and her servants are many. Being that they appear to have the upper hand because of the numerous numbers and financial and military strength, they are arrogant in their opposition to the Will of G-d and the Torah Laws of the All Mighty.

Therefore, Ben Teima comes to advise us, to prophesy to us, what will be their ultimate fate. The arrogant, bold-faced violators of G-d's covenant will only inherit the Hell that they have created for themselves. For Hell is not a place, where one can go. Hell is a state of mind, a state of confusion, wherein which live all those who are not guided by the wisdom of the Divine. Hell is a place of darkness, of torment, for mankind cannot live guided by his own wits, limited in scope and vision as they are. Therefore, Hell is on earth for all those who seek to rebel against their Creator.

The Hell of the afterlife is even worse. For in this world one can live a life of rebellion and forget his/her Divine master. Yet, in the afterlife such forgetfulness does not exist.

In the afterlife, the rebels will be faced with an eternity of their own making. In recompense, those who seek a life without Torah will face an afterlife without Torah.

The rebels will face an eternity of seeing and knowing the Truth, the Light and love of G-d and an eternity of knowing that they will forever never benefit from any of these. They will be forever cast out from His Divine Presence, never to benefit from the goodness that while on earth they fought so hard to destroy.

The rebels in their arrogance seek every opportunity to embarrass and disgrace the Torah faithful Jew. The rebels portray the Torah Jew as an extremist, as cultic, as dishonest, as stupid, as primitive, as an antique of no value, as a fossil whose rightful place is buried deep under the earth. Yet, Ben Teima again tells us that those who are shamed for the sake of Torah will benefit in the end. For the righteous will inherit Heaven, which in Hebrew, is the Garden of Eden, the original home of man, before our fall.

Those who are faithful to Torah are restored to the state of Man prior to the fall. This is the true image of Man, created in the Image of the All Mighty. A Torah faithful Jew, therefore, must live up to the Divine Image etched in his/her soul.

As Ben Teima says, the Torah Jew must be bold and move with ease, speed, and valiance to serve his Creator, and to sanctify His holy Name. For this is how we are to recognize a truly Torah faithful Jew, not by anything else other than by his/her character.

This is how a Jew is to be judged by G-d on that great and awesome day. The rebel too will then meet his/her destiny. Yet, as near at hand as that day be, it is still not yet here. We have time to take Ben Teima's words to heart, to act upon them, to roar like the Lion of Mashiah.

Let us learn from the animals. Without conflict or confusion they live only in accordance to their Divinely instilled natures. We too should seek to live in accordance with our Divinely instilled nature, to walk our natural path, to embrace and live by the Torah of the living All Mighty G-d. Only in this way will we be victorious against our many enemies, those within us, and those around us. Victory is our nature! Let us embrace the natural. Amen.