



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“Wild Animals: Annihilate Them or Tame Them?”

To clearly convey my comments this week, I must introduce you to my “secondary” and “primary” sources and to a fascinating cast of prestigious characters.

My “secondary” source, which first put me on track, is the commentary on *Chumash* authored by Ramban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman. Ramban’s commentary is second only to Rashi’s, and I try to at least sample some of his work every week.

This week Ramban led me to my “primary” source, a passage in the *Midrash Halacha* (known as *Sifra* or *Torat Kohanim*) on the book of Leviticus, *Sefer Vayikra*.

This passage, of which Ramban gives us only a taste, contains a fascinating debate between two early Talmudic sages, Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai.

Once I noted Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai’s name, I had what we psychologists call

an “aha experience.” For just several days before we read this week’s Torah portion, we celebrated Lag B’Omer, a day devoted to the memory of this very fascinating sage.

I immediately felt blessed by the opportunity to connect Lag B’Omer to this week’s double *parsha*, *Behar/BeChukotai* (Leviticus 25:1-27:4).

But before sharing the passage in *Torat Kohanim* with you, I’d like to give you some background on the two wise opponents, Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon. For this I draw upon a fateful debate between Rabbi Shimon and some of his colleagues, Rabbi Yehuda in particular. The debate is recorded in Tractate *Shabbat*, page 33b. (Is it just a coincidence that this story of the hero of Lag B’Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer, is preserved on page 33 of the second tractate of the Babylonian Talmud?)

These rabbis, all students of Rabbi Akiva’s later years, survived to dwell under Roman rule. Rabbi Yehuda, who generally opened such discussions, began the conversation by praising the Romans: “How magnificent are their accomplishments! They’ve built marketplaces, bridges, bathhouses!”

Some of those present simply remained silent. But not Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai. He thundered: “Everything they’ve built

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has been for their own benefit. They built the marketplaces for sinful purposes, the bathhouses for their own pleasures, and the bridges to charge exorbitant tolls!”

The Romans soon learned about this conversation. They acknowledged Rabbi Yehuda as the primary speaker for all public occasions. But they condemned Rabbi Shimon to death, a fate he narrowly escaped by hiding in a cave for many years, a major formative event in his role as a spiritual guide to future Jewish generations.

Now let's examine an entirely different debate between these two protagonists, the one that is recorded in *Torat Kohanim*. It revolves around this verse in *Parshat Bechukotai*: “I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts [*alternative translation*: I will cause dangerous animals to cease in the land], and through that land no sword shall pass.” (Leviticus 26:6)

Upon the phrase about vicious beasts or dangerous animals, which my sixth grade Yiddish-speaking teacher translated as *vilder chayes*, the following dispute is recorded in *Torat Kohanim Bechukotai 2*:

“Rabbi Yehuda said, ‘He will remove them from the land,’ whereas Rabbi Shimon countered, ‘He will tame them so that they do no harm.’ Rabbi Shimon continued: ‘What is more praiseworthy to the Almighty? To do away with dangerous animals, or to let them survive but no longer be dangerous? Surely, let them be but tame them!’”

Rabbi Shimon goes on to reduce his dispute with Rabbi Yehuda to the meaning of the word *Vehishbati*. Apparently Rabbi Yehuda translated the term as related to *lehashbit*, “to annihilate” the dangerous *vilder chayes*.

On the other hand, Rabbi Shimon understood the root of *Vehishbati* to be *shabbat*, a time of rest and respite. “Annihilate” or “tame”—that is the question.

Now that I've shared my “primary” source with you, permit me to return to my secondary source, Ramban's commentary on the phrase in question. For starters, he concurs with Rabbi Shimon. He then proceeds to elaborate upon Rabbi Shimon's viewpoint.

Ramban, for whom the Land of Israel was a central component of his understanding of Torah and Judaism, maintains: “For the Land of Israel, when the time comes that the commandments are upheld, will be transformed back to the world of the Original Adam, when wild beasts and lesser creatures all refrained from attacking each other and from endangering humankind.”

Ramban reminds us of the verses of Genesis, when the Lord Himself proclaimed that “all the beasts of the earth, all the birds of the heavens, all earthly beings, all living creatures” will sustain themselves by the land's vegetation. In short, nature's original design at the time of creation will one day be reinstated.

In closing, Ramban draws upon the prophecy of Isaiah, who foresaw a time when: “Wolf will lie down beside lamb, the leopard will lie beside the young goat; calf, lion cub, fatted lamb together—a little child will tend them... A baby will play at the cobra's hole, and an infant's hand will explore the viper's nest. There will be no wrong or violence on all My holy mountain, for knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth as waters cover the ocean.”

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Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai's message calls to mind the response that Berurya gave to her husband Rabbi Meir, another of Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Yehuda's peers. It seems that some of his neighbors, real ruffians, were tormenting him to the point where he could no longer tolerate it. He notified Berurya that he would pray for the death of his tormentors. Her retort: "Instead of praying for their death, why not pray for them to repent and discontinue their intolerable behavior?"

This is but one of the many examples of how relevant Rabbi Shimon's message was for human relations as well as vicious animals. Taming is preferable to annihilation. Rehabilitation is superior to excluding a sinner from family or community.

I close by inviting you, dear reader, to consider other applications and extensions of Rabbi Shimon's advice. ■

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