



DEAR TORAH TIDBITS FAMILY

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A number of different threads in my life added up in order to create the experience that I had this past week. The first thread is my mother. She has always been extraordinarily passionate about thanking *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* for everything we have in this world. Her *davening* was and is always deeply meaningful. I know where this passion comes from. I am writing this column on the week of my grandfather's twenty-first *yahrzeit*, Yechezkel ben Avraham Yitzchak z"l, who was extremely careful about his *tefillah*. He arrived on time. He was often the first one to open the *shul*. He took care never to talk during *davening*. It is no surprise to me at all that my mother took *tefillah* upon herself in such a beautiful way.

For many years now, one of the things my mother says every single day is *Perek Shirah*, published by ArtScroll in English as *The Song of the Universe*. *Perek Shirah* is traditionally attributed to King David, and it moves through creation after creation, giving each one its own song of praise to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. The heavenly bodies, the wind and rain, the fruits and grains, the animals and even the most tiny insects, are all represented and have their own praise to Hashem, with verses from Psalms and elsewhere in Tanach as their words of praise. Then, the last passages speak of the great *segulot* that come to a person who says it every day, including a portion in the World to Come.

What ArtScroll did so beautifully was to place a photograph of each creation alongside its song. The picture truly makes it come alive

for the reader, and it's really lovely to look at.

There are different opinions among the commentaries as to what *Perek Shirah* actually means. Does it mean that this is what the animals would say if they had a mouth to say it? Perhaps it's related to the idea that every species has its angel appointed for it, and this is what the angel would say? Whatever the idea, it is a beautiful *tefillah*, and I *daven* that all of *Klal Yisrael* should merit everything it promises.

And that is the point that has stayed with me. When we pray, we think of our own needs and personal perspectives. But when we say *Perek Shirah*, we are suddenly asked to think universally. What would the wind say? What would the stars say? What would the elephant say? Through *Perek Shirah*, we come away with a greater sense of the greatness of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, and of how every single element of creation sees Him from a different angle.

The second thread goes back to Shilo. I learned in the Hesder yeshiva there and stayed on in Kollel afterward, and one of the greatest things about those years was the incredible group of guys. There were Israelis, and there was also a group of Canadians, mostly from Toronto and mostly from Yeshivat Or Chaim. The overseas program brought guys from Australia, both Melbourne and Sydney, and from South Africa, mainly Johannesburg and Cape Town with some from Durban. Many of them are still close friends of mine today. I get to see them when they come to visit, and quite a few have *Baruch Hashem made aliyah* and are living here.

Part of my job in those years was recruiting students for that program, flying to Australia and South Africa every year. Seeing the communities these boys came from changed how I understood them. Meeting their teachers, walking into their homes and their *shuls*, visiting their high schools, all of it gave me a much greater appreciation of how incredible those communities are, and of what it means for a boy from there to come to Israel for a year to learn and to grow, whether he ultimately stays here or returns to become a pillar of the community he came from.

I went to South Africa quite a few times. In Johannesburg I used to stay in the home of one of our students, Shaun Sacks, with his parents Ivor and Leslie, who welcomed me in the warmest and most incredible way. Other times I stayed in Glenhazel with Gideon Erster and his wonderful parents. And whenever I was there, I was asked the same question: are you making time to go on safari?

Honestly, I never really felt the need. Growing up in New York, I went to the Bronx Zoo, and after we made *aliyah* we went to the Biblical Zoo in Yerushalayim or to the safari in Ramat Gan. We saw the animals, what *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* created, and that felt like enough. But when people speak about something with that much excitement, you file it away and think, maybe one day.

Twenty-five years passed. I had not been in South Africa since 2001, and since nearly all of my overseas travel is for the OU and takes me to the United States and Canada, I never expected to go back.

Then, a few years ago, I was approached by someone connected to a foundation that supports youth here in Israel, an area we are working in very closely and very intensively at OU Israel. The man who runs the



foundation is not Jewish. He is a wonderful, deeply Zionist and passionate person, and he lives in South Africa just outside Durban. We have been speaking for two years, and over that period of time I have learned a lot more from him about what the foundation is doing. Eventually, he invited me to come out and meet him. He runs a private game

reserve, and we raised the possibility of bringing the reserve under OU kosher certification.

So this past week I traveled there together with Rabbi Yissachar Dov Krakowski, Rabbinic Administrator, OU Israel Kashrut. (Let me take the opportunity to wish Rabbi Krakowski a tremendous *Mazel Tov* -while he was with me in South Africa, he was planning his daughter's engagement party, and she became engaged literally hours after he landed back in Israel. May he and his wife see endless *Yiddishe nachas* from all of their children!) Rabbi Krakowski is always traveling, whether to South America for *shechita* or overseeing the various OU kosher plants here in Israel, and much more, and he does a remarkable job. I went in order to keep developing the relationship with the remarkable people running this foundation, and he went to look at whether a set of permanently kosher kitchens could provide for everyone who comes. Nothing is finalized yet, but it is looking very good and I am extremely hopeful that it will work out so that Orthodox Jews from around the world can enjoy a spectacular safari experience with delicious OU Kosher gourmet cuisine.

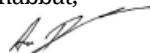
While we were there, they took us on a number of safari rides. And suddenly, with every one of our senses, so many verses of Tanach and so many lines of *Perek Shirah* came to life. Amos declared, "*Aryeh sha'ag mi lo yira* - a lion has roared, who will not be afraid?" Having a lion walk right next to you, hearing it roar from mere meters away, feeling the entire earth shake as it roars, you understand that verse with your whole body. We saw the rhinoceros right in front of us, the cheetah, the elephants, the buffalo, the zebras, the giraffes, the impala and the kudu.

I never imagined there could be such a difference between seeing a lion in the Biblical

Zoo in Yerushalayim and seeing a lion in nature. When there is glass or a fence between you and the animal, there's a clear divide. When David HaMelech saw a lion, writing his books with great inspiration, he was not looking at a lion in a zoo in Yerushalayim. He was hearing lions roaming, seeing them in front of him. Ever since that personal experience at the safari, every single time I recite *Perek Shirah* or mention an animal in learning or *davening*, it means something different to me now. And when I say the words "*Melech HaOlam*" - that Hashem is "King of the World," in all my *berachot*, I think of it in a whole new light. The lion may be called the king of the jungle, and every country has its king or its leader, but when you see it all with your own eyes, you understand in a completely different way that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is the King of all of it.

I also have found myself wondering whether the genuine warmth that South Africans so often exude has something to do with living Torah lives so close to Hashem's creation, with those African sunsets and those animals so near. I know many South Africans who have made *aliyah* and who are tremendous contributors to their communities and the State of Israel: passionate, warm, deeply connected to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* and deeply Zionist. That closeness to nature they grew up seeing clearly left its mark on them. May the State of Israel continue to benefit from South African *olim*, may many more come and join the beautiful South African community here, and may all of us feel connected to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* in the most intense way possible.

Wishing you all an uplifting and inspiring Shabbat,



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