

February 18, 2000

Rabbi Edwards

Parashat Tetzaveh

Tracy and I live next door to a boa constrictor. It's over six feet long. Sometimes the fellow it lives with brings him outside on the front lawn to sunbathe. Something snakes seem to enjoy. My mother has a phobia about snakes (it's her only real phobia, I'm happy to say). She connects it to the pet snake her brother had when they were kids. The snake got run over by a car - she saw it squished in the road, saw her big brother crying over it, something like that, somehow she's been unable to tolerate the sight of snakes ever since - live snakes, snakes on tv, photos of snakes, objects that look snakelike - all such things make her shudder and run from the room. If a particular TV channel ever promotes a program with ads that include a snake, she won't watch that channel until after the snake program airs and the ads cease. If she sees a TV ad or TV movie that looks like it might show a snake - something set in a jungle, for instance, she turns it off. My mother will go out of her way and then some to avoid seeing or thinking about snakes. I haven't told her about our next door neighbor.

Luckily I didn't inherit my mother's snake phobia. Although I find snakes interesting, I'm not especially attracted to them. I try, when I see my neighbor the snake, to be cordial, but I do find it a little hard to be warm, watching it drape itself around my very tall human neighbor (the one who lives with the snake, the one who likes the snake). And the night I saw all the humans who live next door outside "beating the bushes" looking for the boaŠwell, that was an unsettling eveningŠI didn't join in the search, except to look in a couple of closets when I got inside our house! They found the boa in the bushes.

My Uncle Bob, zikhrono livracha, had more than a pet snake when he was a kid. He had a pet goat too. When the goat had a cold, my mom claimed, Bob would sleep in the shed with it and wipe its nose during the night with his own handkerchief. My mother thought this excessive. My mom, though she let me have a couple of dogs during the course of my childhood, has never been a pet person.

Neither was my father. My father's father owned a horse, probably more than one horse, I'm not sure. My father's father, my grandfather, immigrated to the United States in the late 1800s and became a peddler. He travelled through the Iowa countryside riding in a horse and wagon and traded "junk" with the Iowa farmers. My dad said his father used to sleep in barns with his horse, not because farmers wouldn't let my father sleep in their houses, but because he liked his horse. I'm not sure what my grandmother had to say about this, but I think they were happily married - they had and raised four sons together.

My grandfather's horse was a work partner/ companion for him. Not a pet, exactly, but an appreciated co-worker. My uncle's goat was a pet. So was his snake.

Judaism doesn't have much to say about pets, although our tradition instructs us often about the treatment of animals. Judaism is clear that animals play many roles in our lives, and that respect is an important aspect of how we are to behave toward them.

I'm thinking about animals for a few reasons lately. It's coming up on the fourth anniversary since my dog Boon died, an animal I loved dearly and with whom I lived for fifteen years (so far longer than I've lived with Tracy - though we're catching up). Also, a number of you have had pet traumas recently, experiencing illnesses or deaths among your pets. And I also heard a couple of stories this week of the ways animals have reacted to the deaths of people or of other animals with whom they lived. Mostly what brought all this to the foreground is the death this week of our friend Carol Hodgson's horse, Jubi, a horse she has had for thirty years. Few of us have the opportunity of a

thirty-year relationship with an animal - though many of us who have loved animals in our lives can imagine the grief such a loss might bring about.

Although Judaism says be respectful of animals, it doesn't exactly give permission to love animals or to grieve the loss of them. Judaism doesn't have a St. Francis of Assisi or other character who had a special relationship with animals, though as we heard last week, legend has it that King Solomon could talk with animals.

In this week's Torah portion, Tetzaveh, God gives Moses frighteningly detailed instructions to pass on to Aaron and the other priests about how to sacrifice animals. Bulls and rams and lambs are all to be offered as part of the ordination of the priests. This morning I spoke with a rabbi friend of mine who serves two small congregations in a remote area of Virginia. She has received phone calls from very friendly neighbors from Christian churches asking if this or that church group could come watch the Jews offer their sacrifices. "Which sacrifices would those be?" she asks tentatively. "Animal sacrifices, like what's in the Bible," they say, "Jews follow the Bible, right? The sacrifices are described in such detail there, we thought it would be interesting to watch how you do it." My rabbi friend very much enjoys interfaith dialogue - she's perfect for her role there.

But in fact, as you probably know, Jews haven't offered animal sacrifices, or other food sacrifices for that matter, probably since not long after the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. Without an appropriate place to offer animal sacrifices, Jews ceased the sacrifices of bulls and rams and lambs and birds and proffered instead offerings of the heart - words, prayers. It was indeed a revolutionary change in the religion. Some say far more revolutionary than, for example, the birth and growth of the Reform Movement. In the Torah, in addition to whatever we have in the way of instructions about sacrificial offerings, we also have stories and instructions about the treatment of animals. One of my favorites is the story of Rebecca watering the camels belonging to Abraham's servant [Gen. 24:10-21]. It was her willingness to water ten camels that made Abraham's servant know she was the woman to betroth to Abraham's son, Isaac. Watering ten camels is no small feat, by the way, the notes in the JPS edition of Torah say each camel requires about 25 gallons of water (that's five of the bottles we put on the water cooler in the other room), and that it takes each camel about ten minutes to drink 25 gallons. Consider also that she was hauling the water from the well (not just opening a spigot on the water cooler!). Jacob, Moses and David were all shepherds, people who cared for animals. The Talmud specifically states that Moses was chosen for his mission because of his skill in caring for animals. [Tracey R. Rich, website Judaism 101, Treatment of Animals]. The 1st c. CE historian Josephus wrote in his Antiquities of the Jews: "Herod also got together a great quantity of wild beasts, and of lions in very great abundance, and of such other beasts as were either of uncommon strength or of such a sort as were rarely seen. These were trained either to fight one with another, or men who were condemned to death were to fight with them."

And truly foreigners were greatly surprised and delighted at the vast expenses of the shows, and at the great danger of the spectacles, but to the Jews it was a palpable breaking up of those customs for which they had so great a veneration." Unnecessary cruelty to animals is forbidden to Jews. As Tracey R. Rich writes in an essay on the subject of Judaism and the treatment of animals, "Judaism has always recognized the link between the way a person treats animals and the way a person treats human beings. A person who is cruel to a defenseless animal will undoubtedly be cruel to defenseless people, and a person who cares for the lowest of creatures will certainly care for other humans [his fellow man]." [Website Judaism 101 "Treatment of Animals"]

Of course, we can probably think of exceptions to this rule. The people who are obsessed with animals but care not a whit for the suffering of humans. The people who pour their "discretionary" money into

lavish treatment of their pets, but leave their tzedakah cans empty. Or those who give tzedakah ONLY to the SPCA or other organizations that take care of animals. It is possible to be a human being who has emotions and feelings only for animals, but such an inclination is not what Judaism teaches or encourages. And for all the examples of kindness and respect toward animals that we can find in Jewish tradition, what we don't find is any ancient assumption that Jews will keep pets or that a human might truly be bonded to a particular animal. Pets after all, pets as we know them, must be a relatively recent phenomenon, one that comes with a certain amount of luxury - with an economic status that can afford to treat an animal as a luxury, taking it to veterinarians for health care and feeding it more than table scraps. Rich's article continues with a useful summary of the treatment of animals: "Under Jewish law, animals have some of the same rights as humans do. Animals rest on Shabbat, as humans do. We are forbidden to muzzle an ox while it is working in the field, just as we must allow human workers to eat from the produce they are harvesting. "Several commandments demonstrate concern for the physical or psychological suffering of animals. We may not plow a field using animals of different species, because this would be a hardship to the animals. We are required to relieve an animal of its burden, even if we do not know its owner, or even if it is ownerless. We are not permitted to kill an animal in the same day as its young, and are specifically commanded to send away a mother bird when taking the eggs, because of the psychological distress this would cause the animal. In fact, the Torah specifically says that a person who sends away the mother bird will be rewarded with long life, precisely the same reward that is given for honoring mother and father. This should give some indication of the importance of this law. "We are permitted to violate Shabbat to some extent to rescue an animal in pain or at risk of death. In the Talmud, the rabbis further dictated that people may not purchase animals unless they have made provisions to feed it, and people must feed their animals before they feed themselves." [website] While such care of animals insists on respect, it might also suggest that such respect does not necessarily come automatically. I don't think parents are commanded, for example, to feed their children before they feed themselves. If you talk to people who grow up on farms, and kids who belong to 4H clubs, you'll often find a different attitude, more "practical" toward animals, even dogs and cats. They are part of their lives in a different way than our dogs, cats, horses, birds, boas are.

Our attachment to animals is a different kind of love. For some of us it is our central love. It can get dangerous - if we truly substitute animals for people, in our feelings and in our daily lives, we may be isolating ourselves too much from other people. But most of us I think, aren't in such danger - our love for animals is based on our simple and real needs and desires -- for companionship, for unconditional love, for friends that don't hold grudges, for friends who will allow us to take care of them and who will take notice of us when we hurt. We put ourselves out for them, we take them into our lives because they grow us.

One of the wonders of the shabbat candles, it is said, like the ner tamid, the eternal light that is described in this week's Torah portion, is that it is light for the sake of light, rather than practical light. They are not lights we need or God needs in order to see by. Rather, they are lights to linger in, to meditate by (as Jay Jacobs mentioned last Shabbat), lights that enfold us, embrace us in their peace and warmth. The flame of a candle can light another candle without its own light diminishing. So too does love grow love. The more love we give, the more there is in the world, and the more room there is for love in our own hearts. The giving of love to one creature does not diminish the amount of love we have to give. Instead, it grows our capacity to love.

Back when my dog died, Shari Katz, children's librarian extraordinaire, gave me two books by Cynthia Rylant, *Dog Heaven* and *Cat Heaven*. When any of you are in need of them, let me know (I regularly loan them out). I'm sorry, Carol, Rylant hasn't written *Horse Heaven* yet. But when she does it will no doubt include what the other books do - the certain knowledge that animals, like people, are creatures

of God, loved by their creator and by human beings for the ways they are like us, and even more for the ways they are different from us; for the ways we can connect to one another, know one another, without having to speak a word. From the time Noah and company went into the ark and came forth from it, God gave people and animals to one another, to dwell together. [God said, "I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living things that is with you - birds, cattle, and every wild beast - all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth" Gen. 9:8-10] No wonder then that initially, in those early days of our religion, it was animals we offered back to God - animals were the perfect gifts -- the purest, finest gifts we could offer to thank our Creator for the many blessings of our lives.

Shabbat Shalom