



Animals and Spirituality

Introduction

Most of us have already experienced spending time with animals as a way to relax, share love, or simply play. In a previous chapter (page 121), we looked at Jewish texts that encouraged us to spend time with animals in order to learn from and about them. In this section, we will consider how connecting with animals can support our individual and communal spiritual practices.

Vocabulary

HEBREW	TRANSLITERATED HEBREW	ENGLISH
נֶפֶשׁ	<i>nefesh</i>	soul, spirit, person
רוּחַ	<i>ru'ach</i>	wind, spirit

Activity 1:

Animal Witness & Embodying

Engaging in religious services can sometimes be confusing, boring, or make us restless. Spending time with animals can actually clue us in to the experience of deep presence that can often be difficult to achieve on our own. The following are a few options for spiritual practices that you can do in your home or outside. After trying one or two, you might try thinking back to them as a tool to connect during religious services you attend with your community.

Option A: Walking Meditation

- *Whether walking with a clear aim or simply to move their body, animals can teach us how to fully be in our body as we move about.*
- *Find a bird, such as a chicken or gull, or a dog you can walk with or follow.*
- *First, observe their body language as they walk. Consider—what is the focus of their vision or smell? What compels them to stop?*
- *Second, allow yourself to keep pace with them. Consider—does their pace differ as the surroundings change?*
- *Third, notice if the animals is noticing you. If appropriate, give the animal a treat and see how another round of walking together goes. Consider—does the animal continue on their own or with you?*
- *Practice walking without following the animal, alternating your focus on the sensations in your body—neck, shoulders, hips, knees, heels, balls of your feet. Do this for 5-10 minutes, not to get anywhere, just to be present with your body.*

Option B: Sitting Meditation

Simply sitting still, breathing and being present is a great skill for us to learn from animals.

- *Find a sleeping animal such as cat or guinea pig. Note: the goal for the human in this practice is not to fall asleep—rather to practice sitting quietly and breathing.*
- *Do a few stretches to relax your muscles before you'll need to be still. No need to do a formal round of stretching—just consider where in your body you need a little stretch.*
- *Sit nearby as not to disturb them.*

- Find a comfortable balanced sitting position. Make sure your feet and hands are in a specific place where you won't be tempted to move them.
- Observe the breathing pattern of the sleeping animal. Try counting a full 60 seconds—does the animal stretch or readjust while sleeping or stay completely still?
- Try repeating the pattern you observed—either a full 60 seconds of still silence or some combination of stillness and light stretching.
- Repeat the practice for a longer time period (with or without an animal present) until you can sit still for 5 minutes. You can try it with counting (in your mind), or by keeping a visualization of the sleeping animal as a way to stay present and still.

Option C: Embodying Animals

This activity is particularly for students using this workbook who do not have access to live animals during their project..

All animals have specific physical qualities that make them suited to their environment. These adaptations take hundreds or thousands of years to develop—animals less suited for their environment might not reproduce or might get killed off more easily. In the case of domesticated animals, humans selectively breed animals for certain qualities.

Choose an animal (from below) to “become.” Walk around as that being for 1-2 minutes to experience life and perception as your chosen animal, focusing on their special adaptation.



Deer - Ears: *Deer have a great sense of hearing. They have a lot of muscles attached to their ears which allow them to turn their ears in any direction, without moving their heads. They can hear higher frequencies of sound than humans.*



Cow - Tongue: *Cows actually tear grass with their tongue, not their teeth! Cows also use their tongues to lick their young, groom one another, and clean their own noses (yes, that's right). Their tongues are even long and agile enough to open gate latches.*



Eagle - Eyes: *If you swapped your eyes for an eagle's, you could see an ant crawling on the ground from the roof of a 10-story building. You could make out the expressions on basketball players' faces from the worst seats in the arena. Objects directly in your line of sight would appear magnified, and everything would be brilliantly colored.*

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Dog - Nose: *Dogs have a very acute sense of smell, in part because of a constantly wet nose. In any animal, before odor molecules can reach smell receptors, they must get through a layer of mucus—and some molecules are absorbed quicker than others. The odor molecules are then latched onto by nerve cells, which are much more abundant in dogs than in humans. You can make yourself have better smell differentiation by giving yourself a wet nose! Lick your hand and wipe it on the tip of your nose to see for yourself.*

What does it feel like to experience life—seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, and moving—like a different animal?

What effect does the experience have on you physically? Emotionally?



Activity 2:

Animal Souls

Throughout history, rabbis and philosophers have asked the question: do animals have souls? While many Jewish scholarly views reject the idea that non-humans possess the same or similar spiritual part of being as us, we read a variety of texts that show a clear belief in the existence of animal souls.

As you read through the following Jewish texts, explore this question as well as what it means for an animal to have a soul. Then, answer the questions below.

“And Elohim remembered Noah and every wild animal and every domesticated animal with him in the ark...” (Gen. 8:1)
It’s written: ‘A righteous [person] knows the soul (nefesh) of his animal [Prov 12:10]’. The Righteous One of the Cosmos (God) even understands the soul of their animals, even when God is angry.

—Midrash Tanchuma Noach 10

”וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת-נֹחַ [וְאֵת כָּל-הַחַיָּה
וְאֵת-כָּל-הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ בַּתֵּבָה]”
זש”ה (משלי יב:י) ”יודע צדיק נפש
בְּהֵמָתוֹ” יודע צדיקו של עולם אפילו
נפש בהמות אפילו בשעת כעסו

So would Rebbi Sim’ai say: All creatures that were created from the heavens, their soul (nefesh) and their **body** are from the heavens, and all creatures that were created from the earth, their soul and their body are from the earth, except for this human, for his soul is from the heavens and his body is from the earth...

—Sifrei Devarim Piska 306

וכך היה רבי סימאי אומר כל הבריות
שנבראו מן השמים נפשם וגופן מן
השמים וכל בריות שנבראו מן הארץ
נפשם וגופם מן הארץ [חוץ מן האדם
הזה שנפשו מן השמים וגופו מן
הארץ]

*A righteous [person] knows
the nefesh of his animal...*

—Proverbs 12:10

יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו...

*Who knows, the ru'ach of the children
of Adam, if she rises upward, and the
ru'ach of the domesticated **animal**, if
she descends below, to the earth?*

—Ecclesiastes 3:21

מי יודע רוח בני האדם
העלה היא למעלה ורוח
הבהמה היורדת היא
למטה לארץ:

*According to you, what could it mean for an animal to have a soul or not have a soul?
If animals do have a soul, does that mean we should treat them any differently than if
they don't?*

Pick a text that best states a belief in animal souls. How does it express this?

Does recognizing animal souls support kindness to animals? If yes, how so?

Optional additional activity:

Using water colors, clay, collage, or another material, create a piece of art that represents one or more of the texts above.



Activity 3:

Praying with the Animals

Do animals have spiritual experiences? Several animal scientists and behavior experts have recorded accounts of animals demonstrating rituals like funerals for dead family and community members, and experiencing what seem like inspired moments of awe.

Read the text below. Then, using the steps suggested below, create your own animal “prayer.”

The famous primatologist, Dr. Jane Goodall, who has witnessed chimpanzees start to dance at the onset of a storm, has pondered:

“**Is it not possible that these performances are stimulated by feelings akin to wonder and awe? After a waterfall display the performer may sit on a rock, his eyes following the falling water. What is it, this water?**”

(2005. Primate spirituality. In The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature. edited by B. Taylor. Thoemmes Continuum, New York. Pp. 1303-1306)



Optional additional activity:

What would your favorite animal teach? In Perek Shirah, all sorts of animals—dogs, cats, snakes, and even stars, clouds, and other parts of the earth—speak some of the most dear parts of the Torah, and often it's very mysterious why exactly they might be saying them. Perhaps you'll have an idea why.

Visit <http://opensiddur.org/prayers-for/special-days/new-years-days/la-beheimot/perek-shira-chapter-of-song/> to see samples from this text.

Conclusion

Whether learning spiritual practice from spending time with animals is new for you or not, you are encouraged to take this idea to family and friends as a fresh way to honor and connect with animals. By considering the spiritual lives of animals, we can see the world through their eyes and better take the time to address their needs.

