
WEREWOLF BAR MITZVAH: JEWISH APPROACHES TO MYTHICAL CREATURES

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פרשת תרומה תשפ"ד

THE PROBLEM

(1) SEFER CHASSIDIM 1166 (R' YEHUDA HA-CHASSID, 1150-1217, GERMANY)

הנחש היה מהלך על שתיים וקצת דמות אדם עליו תדע שאותן שיודעין להפך אדם לזאב או לחתול ולחמור גלגל העין לא יתהפך וכן הנחש שנשתנה לא נשתנו העינים

The Serpent was walking on two and he had semblance slightly similar to that of a man. You should know that those who are able to turn a man into a wolf, a cat or a donkey - his eyeball does not change and so the serpent who underwent a change - his eyes did not change.

(2) BEREISHIT 49:27

(כז) בְּנִימִין זָאֵב יִטְרֹף בְּבֹקֶר יֹאכֵל עַד וְלָעֶרֶב יִחְלַק שָׁלָל.

(27) Binyamin is a ravening wolf; in the morning he eats his plundering, and in the evening he divides his spoils."

(3) RABBEINU EPHRAIM BEREISHIT 1:28 (1110-1175, GERMANY)

להוראה. צֵלָם באלב"ם ז א ב, לכך אותם בני אדם שמשנתני לזאב, נבראו מששת ימי בראשית, ואין חוזרין לקדמותן עד שאוכלים דם אדם או אשה. פרו ורבו גי'

Tzelem in "Albam" is *Ze'ev*. Therefore, those people who turn into wolves were created [that way] from the six days of Creation, and do not return to their original state until they eat the blood of a man or woman.

(4) RABBEINU EPHRAIM BEREISHIT 44:29

ביבמות יב) נשאת לראשון ומת לשני ומת אסורה לינשא. ד"א כי בנימין היה זאב יטרף וטורף בני אדם לעתים, וכשבא לו העת שנהפך לזאב שנא' (פר' ויחי) בנימין זאב יטרף. ובעוד שהיה אצל אביו נשען על הרופא וכאותו זכות לא היה נהפך לזאב, שכך אמר ועזב את אביו ומת, כלומר כשיפרד מאביו יהפך לזאב לעוברי דרכים והיה כל מוצאו יהרגו.

Benjamin was a ravenous wolf, who would occasionally maul people -- and when the time came for him to turn into a wolf, as it says, "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf" (Gen. 49:27), if he was with his father he could rely on a physician, and in that merit would not turn into a wolf. Thus it says, "and if he leaves his father he will die" (Gen. 44:22) -- that is to say, if he separates from his father he will turn into a wolf [and attack] people on the way, and anyone who encounters him will kill him.

(5) RABBEINU EPHRAIM BEREISHIT 49:27

כך הכהנים באים לעת ערב לטרוף מתנותיהם. זאב יורף בבקר גי' תרי"ג,
 שבנימין לא חטא. זאב אחד יש שקורין לוף גארו והוא בן אדם ומשתנה לזאב,
 וכשעה שמשתנה לזאב רגליו יוצאין מבין כתיפיו, כך בנימין בין כתיפיו שכן, וזה
 רפואתו של אותו זאב בשעה שנכנס לבית והאדם ירא ממנו יקח דשן הצבור באש
 וישליך אילך ואילך ולא ינוק, כך היו עושין במקדש בכל יום היו משליכין דשן
 אצל המזבח דכתי' (ויקרא ו ג) ושמו אצל המזבח, וכן הוא מנהג אדם שיהפך
 תולדתו לזאב, כי הזאב נולד בשניים, כלומר זה יהיה אוכל העולם. ד"א לכך נולד
 בשניים, לומר כמו שזה משונה כך יהיה משונה משאר בני אדם, וכן בנימין אכל
 את אמו שמתה ממנו דכתי' (לעיל לה יח) ויהי בצאת נפשה כי מתה ותקרא שמו
 בן אוני, ולכך אין לבהמה טהורה שינים למעלה, שהקב"ה עשה זכר נפלאותיו
 שבהמה טהורה אין לה שינים למעלה ויש לה שינים למטה, כלומר בריות שלמטה
 יש להם שינוי, ושלמעלה אין להם שינוי ואין צריך (לו) [לא] שנים ולא שני אחר.
 ופסוק זה מתחיל ב' בנימין ומסיים בל' של, לכך יש לישראל ל"ב שינים, ולפי
 שהשניים לשון שינוי, לכך הן נופלות לכל אדם וחורות וגדלות פעם שנייה, וכמו
 שנהפך האדם לזאב אפילו שהוא משתנה לאדם בכל שעה יש לו זנב, כך היתה
 רצועה יוצאת מחלקו של בנימין ונכנסת לתוך חלקו של יהודה ועליה היה בנין בית
 המקדש (ה).

There is a type of wolf that is called *loup-garou* (werewolf), which is a person that changes into a wolf. When it changes into a wolf, his feet emerge from between his shoulders. So too with Benjamin—"he dwells between the shoulders" (Deuteronomy 33:12). The solution for [dealing with] this wolf is that when it enters a house, and a person is frightened by it, he should take a firebrand and thrust it around, and he will not be harmed. So they would do in the Temple; each day, they would throw the ashes by the altar, as it is written, "and you shall place it by the altar" (Leviticus 6:3); and so is the norm with this person whose offspring turn into wolves, for a werewolf is born with teeth, which indicates that it is out to consume the world. Another explanation: a werewolf is born with teeth, to show that just as this is unusual, so too he will be different from other people. And likewise, Benjamin ate his mother, who died on his accord, as it is written, "And it was as her soul left her, for she was dying, and she called his name 'the son of my affliction'" (Genesis 35:18). As a result, ritually pure animals do not have upper teeth, for the Holy Blessed One "created a remembrance of His wonders" (Ps. 111:4): that pure animals do not have upper teeth, but do have lower teeth, to indicate that lower creatures are subject to change [shinui], while [the creatures] above are not subject to change... This verse (i.e. Gen. 49:27) begins with [the letter] bet, Binyamin ["Benjamin"], and ends with lamed, shalal ["spoils"]. Therefore Jews have 32 teeth [the alphanumerical equivalent of lamed-bet]. Since teeth [shinayim] recall change [shinui], they fall out of every person and grow in a second time. And just as a person who turns into a wolf has a tail at all times, even when he is in human form, so too a strip [of land] linked the allotment of Benjamin with the allotment of Judah, upon which the Temple was built.

(6) IYOV 5:23

(כג) פי עם אבני השדה בְּרִיתָהּ וְחַיֵּית הַשָּׂדֶה הַשְּׁלָמָה לָּהּ.

(23) For you shall be in league with the stones of the field; and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with you.

(7) RASHI IYOV 5:23

אבני השדה – מין אדם הן.

וחיית השדה – הוא שנקרא גרושה בלעז וזו היא חית השדה ממש ובלשון משנה תורת כהנים נקראים אדני השדה.

(23) the stones of the field – They are: 6) a type of man.

and the beasts of the field – That is what is known as grouse(?) in Old French, and this is actually a beast of the field. In the language of the Mishnah in Torath Kohanim, they are called "adnei hasadeh."

(8) DR. JEREMY BROWN, *TALMUDOLOGY, "CHAGIGAH 3B - WEREWOLVES, LYCANTHROPY, AND MENTAL ILLNESS"*

In order to translate the old French word גרוש"ה (which should be read as *garove*), we turn to *Otzar halo'azim*, a dictionary of Rashi's old French. Under entry #4208 we read the following:

אדם-זאב" (מתייחסת לאנדרזש על בני-אדם, שהפכו לזאבים.

4208 איוב ה, כג
גרוכ"א garove
זאב ערבות
זו אחת הגרסאות, העדיפה לפי ברנדן. רש"י מצביע על חיה מפחידה. המלה הצרפחית (ממצא גרמני:

Moshe Catano, the author of this dictionary, tells us that the Rashi was using the old French word for a "man-wolf, which is refers to the legends of a man that turns into a wolf." So yes, Rashi seems to have believed in werewolves.

APPROACHES

LIVING WITH THE QUESTION

(9) R' NATAN SLIFKIN, *SACRED MONSTER: MYSTERIOUS AND MYTHICAL CREATURES OF SCRIPTURE, TALMUD, AND MIDRASH*, PP. 19-21

One could simply confess ignorance. We should not expect, with our limited knowledge and experience, to be able to resolve all difficulties in the Talmud. This author is still left with many questions and difficulties, not only concerning the topics in this volume, but also many others. Often, the most honest, accurate and suitable response is to simply admit and accept that one does not have the solution.

In today's era of instant gratification, people want to have answers to all their questions—preferably bite-sized, for easy consumption. Unfortunately, life does not work that way. No matter who we are, we never have all our questions answered. At such times, there is an important Yiddish expression to bear in mind: *Fun a kashya shtarbt mon nisht*—“From a question, a person doesn't die.” It conveys the advice that we should not be overly distressed when we do not find answers for all our questions.

Shas (the Talmud) is faith-based knowledge. When faced with the most difficult questions, we don't take the easy way out. We would rather wait for Eliyahu to come! Why settle for a makeshift answer, if we will be handed the reliable solution at a later date? *Teyku* is the answer! From the graves of these giants of wisdom and purity, Abaya and Rava, emerges the truth that can never be repudiated by the midgets of our generation.

Rabbi Mattisyahu Salomon, address at the 11th *Daf Yomi Siyum*,
transcript in *Mishpacha*, 3/9/05

(10) MAHARAL, BE'ER HA-GOLAH 7:7

ולכך אין ראוי להרחיק שום דבר המתנגד אל דעתו לאהבת החקירה והידיעה*. ובפרט אותו שלא כוון לקנתר, רק להגיד האמונה אשר אתו, אף אם הדברים הם נגד אמונתו ודתו, אין לומר אליו 'אל תדבר ותסתום דברי פיך', שאם כן לא יהיה בירור הדת. ואדרבא, דבר כמו זה אומרים 'תדבר ככל חפצך, וכל אשר אתה רוצה וחפץ לומר', ולא תאמר 'אם היה אפשר לי לדבר הייתי

מדבר יותר! כי אם עושה זה, שסותם את פיו שלא ידבר זה, הוא מורה על חולשת הדת, כמו שאמרנו. ולכך דבר זה הפך מה שחושבים קצת בני אדם; כי חושבים כאשר אין רשאי לדבר על הדת, הוא חזוק הדת ותוקף שלו. ואין זה כך, כי העלם דברי המתנגד בדת אין זה רק בטול וחולשת הדת, כאשר אומרים 'סגור פיך מלדבר'.

Therefore, it is not fitting for one to distance anything that contradicts one's own opinion, for love of analysis and knowledge. This is especially true for those who don't intend to aggravate but rather to speak their own beliefs. Even if these matters are against one's own belief and religion, one should not say to him "don't speak, shut these words from your mouth," for if you do, there won't be clarification of one's religion. Do the opposite with regard to these matters and say "speak everything you want, and everything you want and desire, you should speak, and don't say, 'if I could have spoken more, I would have.'" If you do this and shut his mouth so that he won't speak, this reflects upon the weakness of religion, as we said. This matter is the opposite of what some people think; they think that when you can't speak against religion, that strengthens religion and its power. But this is not so. Rather, hiding the words of the opponents of religion is only the nullification and weakness of religion, when one says, "close your mouth from speaking."

BAD TRANSLATIONS

(11) YESHAYAHU 14:29 WITH TRANSLATIONS

(כט) אל תשמחי פְּלִשֶׁת כְּלָךְ כִּי נִשְׁבַּר שֵׁבֶט מִכָּף כִּי מִשֶּׁרֶשׁ נִחַשׁ יֵצֵא צִפְעֵ וּפְרִיֹו שֶׁרֶף מְעוֹפֵף.



A medieval woodcut of a basilisk

Rejoice not, O Philistia, all of thee, Because the rod that smote thee is broken: For out of the serpent's root shall come forth a basilisk, And his fruit shall be a flying serpent. (JPS 1917)

Rejoice not thou, O Peleshet entire, because the rod of him that smote thee is broken: for out of the serpent's root shall come forth a viper, and his fruit shall be a venomous flying serpent. (Koren Jerusalem Bible)

Rejoice not, all Philistia, Because the staff of him that beat you is broken. For from the stock of a snake there sprouts an asp, A flying *seraph* branches out from it. (JPS 2023)

IT'S ALL A METAPHOR!

(12) BAVA BATRA 73B

וְאָמַר רַבֵּה בַר בַּר חֲנָה לְדִידֵי חֲזִינָא לִי הָהִיא אַקְרוּקְתָּא דְחֲזִינָא כִּי אַקְרָא דְהַגְרוּוּנָא וְאַקְרָא דְהַגְרוּוּנָא כַּמָּה הָוּנָא שְׁתִּין בְּתֵי אַתָּא תַנְיָא בְלַעַה אַתָּא פּוֹשְׁקִנְצָא וּבְלַעַה לְתַנְיָא וְסָלִיק יְתִיב בְּאֵילָנָא תָּא חֲזִי כַּמָּה נְפִישׁ חִילִיָּה דְאֵילָנָא אָמַר רַב פֶּפְא בַר שְׁמוּאֵל אֵי לָא הָוּאֵי הָתָם לָא הֵימְנִי.

And Rabba bar bar Ḥana said: I have seen a certain frog [*akrokta*] that was as large as the fort [*akra*] of Hagronya. And how large is the fort of Hagronya? It is as large as sixty houses. A snake came and swallowed the frog. A raven came and swallowed the snake, and flew up and sat in a tree. Come and see how great is the strength of the tree, which could bear the weight of that raven. Rav Pappa bar Shmuel said: If I had not been there and seen this, I would not believe it.

(13) RASHBAM BAVA BATRA 73A

כל הני עובדי דקא חשיב משום מה רבו מעשיך ה' ומהן להודיע מתן שכרן של צדיקים לעתיד לבא או לפרש מקראות האמורים בספר איוב המדברים בעופות גדולים ובהמות ודגים גדולים שכל שיחת תלמידי חכמים צריכה תלמוד.

All of these events that are mentioned [are mentioned] because “How great are Your creations, Hashem!”, and some are to inform us of the reward of the righteous in the future or to explain verses in Iyov which speak of great birds, beasts, and fish, because all of the conversation of *talmidei chachamim* requires study.

(14) R' NATAN SLIFKIN, *SACRED MONSTER: MYSTERIOUS AND MYTHICAL CREATURES OF SCRIPTURE, TALMUD, AND MIDRASH*, PP. 25-6

It therefore comes as no surprise to find that the Vilna Gaon expounded this story as relating an important message concerning Torah study. The perpetually-croaking frog represents the perpetually-studying scholar. It is the size of sixty houses, which represent the sixty tractates of the Mishnah. These are described as being encompassed in a single city, rather than being sixty separate entities; this alludes to the fear of Heaven that must encompass all of a scholar's learning. The snake that swallows the frog represents the trials of financial hardship that threaten to consume the Torah scholar. The raven represents the trust in God to provide sustenance, thereby overcoming the serpent. God grants help to the scholar in the form of a financial supporter, symbolized by the tree on which the raven sits. Rabbah bar bar Chanah commented on the tremendous accomplishment of this supporter. Rav Pappa bar Shmuel, who came from Babylon, where the wealthy were less helpful, commented that he would not have believed how helpful were the wealthy people of Israel, had he not seen it with his own eyes.⁴

NATURE CHANGED

(15) AVODAH ZARAH 24B

(ופחותה מבית שלש שנים) מי קא ילדה (והתניא) פרה וחמור מבית שלש ודאי לפהו מפאן ואילך ספק

And can a cow that is **less than three years** old **give birth**? **But isn't it taught** in a *baraita*: With regard to **a cow or a donkey** purchased from a gentile when they were less **than three years** old, the first of their offspring born after the purchase is **certainly** reserved **for the priest**, who is entitled to the firstborn of a cow or donkey owned by a Jew. **From this point forward**, i.e., if they were older than three years at the time of the sale, it is **uncertain** whether or not the offspring is the firstborn. This indicates that an animal does not bear offspring within the first three years of its life.

(16) TOSFOT AVODAH ZARAH 24B

פרה וחמור בת שלש שנים ודאי לכהן – פי' דקודם שלש ודאי לא ילדה ויש לתמוה דהא מעשה בכל יום דפרה בת שתי שנים יולדת וי"ל דודאי עתה נשתנה העת מכמו שהיה בדורות הראשונים.

“[The offspring of] a cow and donkey [under] three years old certainly [go] to the Kohen” – meaning, before three years, it certainly has not given birth yet. One should be troubled by this: it is a daily occurrence that a two year old cow gives birth!? We must answer that nowadays, times have changed from how they were in earlier generations.

OUR SCIENCE IS WRONG

(17) BEKHOROT 7B

ת"ר דג טמא משריץ דג טהור מטיל ביצים כל המוליד מניק וכל המטיל ביצים מלקט חוץ מעטלף שאף על פי שמטיל ביצים מניק

The Sages taught that **a non-kosher fish spawns** its offspring, while **a kosher fish lays eggs**. **Any** animal **that gives birth** to its offspring **nurses** them, **and any** animal **that lays eggs gathers** food and feeds it to its young. This applies to all animals **except for a bat [atallef]**, as **although it lays eggs, it nurses** its young.

(18) SHEM HA-GEDOLIM, SEFARIM, OT HEH, 82

The arguments of the Raavad on the Rif on several tractates, which are cited in Tamim De'im from section 234 onwards. I have already written in volume 2 that he argued on the Rif more than this, and the Ramban responded to all of these objections and wrote a volume of objections on this. Only three tractates have been printed.

One who looks will see that the Ramban writes to the Raavad with very great reverence, because, besides for the greatness of the Raavad in Talmud, he merited revelation from Eliyahu HaNavi, and the Ramban knew the lofty level of the Raavad's holiness.

We are drawn from this to say that, behold, some of the great ones thought to deviate slightly from the words of our Sages for some reason, and this is because they were wise in their studies and sciences, and they had broad knowledge, and thought that our Sages were "Sages" alone. For this reason, they said, "behold, we also have wisdom and knowledge, even though they were wiser sages." However, they should have paid attention to the fact that our Sages had Divine inspiration, and Eliyahu HaNavi appeared to them often, and their souls were from a lofty place and was pure, and there is no comparison between them and our Sages. We must bow our heads to accept the truth from the masters of truth.

(פב) השגות הראב"ד על הרי"ף על קצת מסכתות, הובאו בספר תמים דעים מסי' רל"ד ואילך. וכבר כתבתי בח"ב דיתר על כן השיג על הרי"ף ועל הכל השיב הרמב"ן וחיבר ספר השגות ע"ז. ולא נדפס כ"א על ג' מסכתות.

והרואה יראה שמדבר הרמב"ן להראב"ד בכבוד גדול מאד, כי מלבד גדולת הראב"ד בתלמוד עוד בה שזכה לגלוי אליהו הנביא זכור לטוב, וידע הרמב"ן רום מעלת קדושת הראב"ד.

נמשך לזה אומר כי הנה היו מן הגדולים שעלה על דעתם לנטות קצת מדברי רז"ל בצד מה, והי' זה שהם היו חכמים בלימודיות וטבעיות ודעתם רחבה וסברו כי רז"ל היו חכמים לכד. וזה טעם שאמרו הלא גם בנו חכמה ודעת עם שהם חכמים יותר. אבל הי"ל לשום לבכם כי רז"ל היה להם רוח הקודש ואליהו זכור לטוב שכיח גביהו ונשמחם ממקום עליון והיא נקיה ואין יחס ביניהם לבין רז"ל. וצריכים אנו לכוף ראשנו לקבל האמת מבעלי האמת. וזה אמרתי שאפשר עד"ז כוונת הפסוק

SCIENCE IS RIGHT

(19) GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED 3:14

Do not ask of me to reconcile everything that they [the Sages] stated about science with the actual reality, for the science of those days was deficient, and they did not speak out of traditions from the prophets regarding these matters.

(20) PESACHIM 94B

חכמי ישראל אומרים ביום חמה מהלכת למטה מן הרקיע ובלילה למעלה מן הרקיע וחכמי אומות העולם אומרים ביום חמה מהלכת למטה מן הרקיע ובלילה למטה מן הקרקע א"ר ונראין דבריהן מדברינו שביום מעינות צונגין ובלילה רותחין.

The Jewish Sages say that **during the day the sun travels beneath the firmament** and is therefore visible, **and at night it travels above the firmament. And the sages of the nations of the world say that during the day the sun travels beneath the firmament, and at night it travels beneath the earth** and around to the other side of the world. **Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said: And the statement of the sages of the nations of the world appears to be more accurate than our statement.** A proof to this is **that during the day, springs that originate deep in the ground are cold, and during the night they are hot** compared to the air temperature, which supports the theory that these springs are warmed by the sun as it travels beneath the earth.

(21) SHITAH MEKUBETZET KETUBOT 13B

ואמר ר"ת ז"ל דאע"ג דנצחו חכמי אומות העולם לחכמי ישראל היינו נצחון בטענות אבל האמת הוא כחכמי ישראל והיינו דאמרינן בתפלה ובוקע חלוני רקיע.

Rabbeinu Tam said that even though the gentile sages bested the Jewish sages, that was only a rhetorical victory, but the truth was in accordance with the Jewish sages, as we say in prayer, "Who breaches the windows of the heaven."

(22) R' NATAN SLIFKIN, *SACRED MONSTER: MYSTERIOUS AND MYTHICAL CREATURES OF SCRIPTURE, TALMUD, AND MIDRASH*, PP. 34-5

One must also consider whether it was particularly important in the given context that the information be accurate. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal, 1707-1746) writes:

You should further know that many fundamental secrets were alluded to by the Sages by way of matters of nature or science... However the point is not the information about science or nature, but rather the secret that

they wanted to allude to with it. Thus it does not make a difference to the truth of this allusion whether the parable with which they clothed it is true or not.

Ramchal, *Maamar al haHagaddos*

FURTHER READING

<https://www.zootorah.com/RationalistJudaism/RabbeinuEphraimWerewolves.pdf>

<https://www.rationalistjudaism.com/p/was-rachel-imeinu-killed-by-werewolf>

<https://www.talmudology.com/jeremybrownmdgmailcom/2022/2/3/chagigah-3b-werewolves>

<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/367788.26?lang=bi>

https://books.google.com/books?id=_1fdxxS26RYC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false

OUTLINE

Goal: Students will understand the different approaches to dealing with the presence of mythical creatures in traditional literature.