

Animals as Scholars

1) Pesikta Rabbati 14



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There was once a Jew who owned a cow with which he plowed his field. Then it came to pass that this Jew became impoverished and was forced to sell his cow to a non-Jew.

The new owner plowed with the cow throughout the week, but when he took her out to the field on Shabbat, she kneeled under the yoke and refused to do any work. He hit her with his whip, but she would not budge from her place.

So he came back to the Jew and said to him, "Take back your cow! All week I worked with her, but today I took her out to the field and she refuses to do anything... "

The Jew said to the cow's purchaser: "Come with me, and I will get her to plow." When they arrived at the field, the Jew spoke into the cow's ear. "Oh Cow, Cow! When you were in my domain, you rested on Shabbat. But now that my sins have caused me to sell you to this gentile, please, stand up and do the will of your master!"

Immediately the cow stood, prepared to work. Said the gentile to the Jew: "I'm not letting you go until you tell me what you did and what you said to her. Have you bewitched her?" The Jew told him what he said to the cow.

When this man heard this, he was shaken and amazed. He said to himself: "If this creature, which has neither language or intelligence, recognizes her Creator, should not I, whom Gd created in His image and likeness and imbued me with intelligence and understanding?"

So he went and converted to Judaism and merited to study Torah. He became known as Yochanan ben Torta ("Yochanan son of the Cow")

Pesikta Rabbati 14

2) Talmud, Berachot 61b



Once, the wicked government [of Rome] decreed that the Jewish people were forbidden to study Torah. Pappus ben Judah saw Rabbi Akiva convening gatherings in public and studying Torah [with them]. Said he to him: “Akiva, are you not afraid of the government?”

Said [Rabbi Akiva] to him: “I’ll give you a parable.

“A fox was walking along a river and saw fish rushing to and fro. Said he to them: ‘What are you fleeing?’

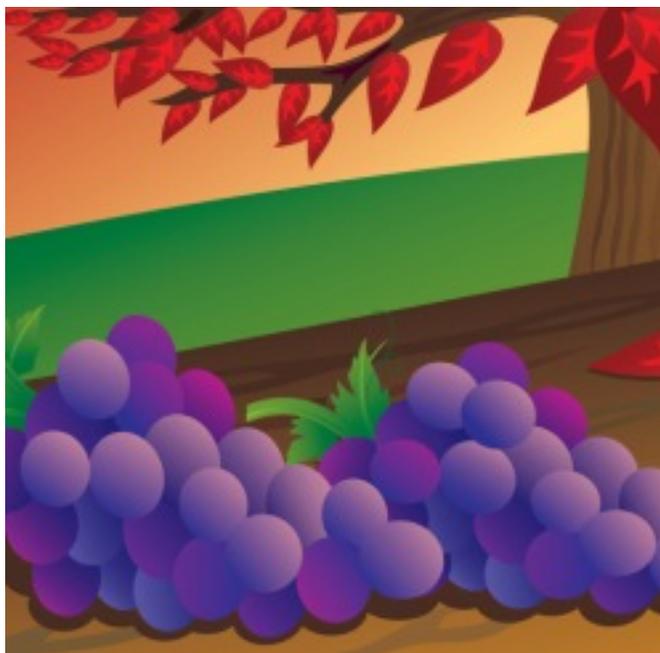
“Said they to him: ‘The nets that the humans spread for us.’

“Said he to them: ‘Why don’t you come out onto the dry land? We’ll live together, as my ancestors lived with your ancestors.’

“Said they to him: ‘Are you the one of whom it is said that you are the wisest of animals? You’re not wise, but foolish! If, in our environment of life we have cause for fear, how much more so in the environment of our death!’

“The same applies to us. If now, when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is said ([Deuteronomy 30:20](#)), ‘For it is your life and the lengthening of your days,’ such is our situation, how much more so if we neglect it . . .”

Talmud, Berachot 61b



A sly fox passed a lovely vineyard. A tall, thick fence surrounded the vineyard on all sides. As the fox circled around the fence, he found a small hole in the fence, barely large enough for him to push his head through. The fox could see what luscious grapes grew in the vineyard, and his mouth began to water. But the hole was too small for him. So what did the sly fox do? He fasted for three days, until he became so thin that he managed to slip through the hole.

Inside the vineyard, the fox began to eat to his heart’s content. He grew bigger and fatter than ever before. Then he wanted to get out of the vineyard. But alas! The hole was too small again. So what

did he do? He fasted for three days again, and then just about managed to slip through the hole and out again.

Turning his head towards the vineyard, the poor fox said: "Vineyard, O vineyard! How lovely you look, and how lovely are your fruits and vines. But what good are you to me? just as I came to you, so I leave you . . ."

And so, our sages say, it is also with this world. It is a beautiful world, but—in the words of King Solomon, the wisest of all men—just as man comes into this world emptyhanded, so he leaves it. Only the Torah he studied, the mitzvot he performed, and the good deeds he practiced are the real fruits which he can take with him.