
High Holiday Lessons Learned from Livestock

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What is the deal with Jews and sheep?

Hevel, the better and seemingly more religious son of Adam, is a shepherd. Then we have Yaakov Avinu, who did wonderful things with genetics in acquiring a huge herd of cattle. Yaakov's children arrive in front of Pharaoh and declare, "*We are all shepherds who have emigrated to Egypt to raise cattle in the wake of the famine in the Land of Canaan.*" Moshe follows suit and even meets his *bashert* at the local sheep's watering hole. And, of course, it was only due to a stray sheep that he ever encountered the Burning Bush. We can say, quite literally, that the Jewish people owe our very existence to that one cute, little animal.

The sheep imagery has come to include the Jewish people who are referred to as, "*Tzon Yisrael* – the Israelite flock," and we refer to Hashem as "Ro'ee – my Shepherd."

There is a story about a contest that took place in England over 100 years ago at the turn of the 20th century. One of the most common types of contests in England was one in which individuals competed for who could recite a work of poetry in the most compelling, compassionate and articulate way. In this particular competition, after many people had been eliminated, five finalists remained. The work of poetry that they had to recite was one of the greatest masterpieces of world literature, Psalm 23, written by King David, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want..."

One young man stood amongst the group. With a soft and crisp English accent, he recited Psalm 23 with great devotion. He completed the Psalm and the entire crowd rose from their seats and

burst into applause. He was awarded the first prize for his recitation. As he was accepting his honor, there was an older Jewish man, with a long white beard, sitting in the back of the crowd. He raised his hand and said "Gentlemen. May I please have an opportunity to recite this Psalm?"

The old man stood up and began to recite the Psalm. For the first few moments, as he was reciting the Psalm in his heavily accented, broken English, everyone looked around the room awkwardly. Why would this man want to recite the Psalm? He could barely read! He continued without any improvement as the people were fidgeting in their seats. By the conclusion of the recitation, however, the entire crowd was in tears. The initial winner came forward and said, "Sir, YOU deserve this prize!" The elderly gentleman turned to the young man and said "No thank you. I was not doing this for any sort of honor". Then the young man said, "I have a question for you. Why was everybody cheering when I finished reciting the Psalm, and they cried after your recitation?" And the old man turned to the winner and said, "Young man, your English was beautiful, but I know the Shepherd....I have a relationship with the Shepherd".

We Jews have a relationship with our shepherd, and the imagery is quite apt in describing our relationship with God. Of course, the sheep and flock imagery is a major part of the High Holiday liturgy. One of the most moving examples of this imagery can be found in *U'Nesaneh Tokef*:

וכל באי עולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון. כבקרית
רועה עדרו, מעביר צאנו תחת שבטו, כן תעביר ותספור
ותמנה, ותפקוד נפש כל חי..

All mankind will pass before you like *bnei maron* – which we translate as sheep. Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, making sheep pass under his staff, so shall You cause to pass, count calculate, and consider the soul of all the living...

The source of this imagery is the *Mishnah* in *Maseches Rosh Hashanah* (16a):

בראש השנה כל באי עולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון

The Gemara, however, is not really sure what *ki'vnei maron* refers to. It asks:

מאי כבני מרון?

What are “*bnei Maron*?” Three answers are offered:

1. Reish Lakish says that *Bnei Maron* refer to, “*Ma'alos Beis Maron*,” which Rashi describes as an ascending path that is only wide enough for one person to climb at a time. So, too, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, all of humanity pass before God single- file as you would ascend a narrow staircase.
2. Rav Yehuda says in the name of Shmuel that *Bnei Maron* are like the “*Chayalos shel Beis David*.” **Rashi** comments that, according to this explanation, the *Bnei Maron* are the lads of the master, and they line up the way soldiers in King David’s army would march in formation. God examines each of us this season as a king would inspect his soldiers as they march off to battle.
3. In Bavel, *Bnei Maron* was translated as “*Amarna*.” Rashi explains that this

refers to sheep that pass before the shepherd one at a time in order to be counted. This is the classic sheep metaphor we are so familiar with for the High Holidays.

All of us are compared to climbing a stairway, soldiers, and sheep. Three explanations that seem to convey the same point: namely, that Hashem judges each of us individually on Rosh Hashanah. We’re all classified based on our own individual merits. Why, then, are three interpretations necessary?

These three images represent distinct ways in which to view ourselves. They represent three different aspects of who we are and who we want to be during these *yamim noraim*.

“*Bnai Maron*” refers to a staircase that could only be climbed single-file. This year, did we climb our individual stairways? Have we challenged ourselves to do more or settled for the status quo? Are we moving up, standing still, or sliding down? Imagine two people on a ladder. One is close to the top, and one is at the bottom. Which one is higher? It seems like a ridiculously obvious question. The one on top is higher! But it really depends on which direction each is going. We need to ask ourselves: “Have I grown as a Jew, as a parent, a son or daughter, a spouse - during the course of this past year compared to the year before? How will I ensure continued growth in the New Year? As we stand *k'bnei maron*, on our staircase, and ask ourselves which way we are going.

K'bnei maron also means, “*Like the legions of King David’s army*.” Each of us is a soldier. As a child I belonged to a youth group called *Tzivos Hashem*, the Army of God. Back then, I never made it past private. But in life, we’re all fighters. There are causes that are dear to our hearts. There are issues in which we strongly believe. As we conclude one year and begin a new one, we have to ask, “What did I go to the mat for this past year? What battles did I choose? Did I win? Did I lose? Do I volunteer

and participate in causes that I find to be worthwhile?" We are judged whether we fought the good fight remaining true to our principles and challenged to identify what is most important to us.

Lastly "*K'bnei Maron*" was explained in Babylon as sheep. A shepherd must account for each and every sheep. Sheep are generally allowed to graze over huge expanses of land. At the end of the day, the shepherd must gather his flock up and count the sheep, one by one. This is especially crucial for those shepherds who do not own their flocks and are working for someone else. It takes a special kind of person to be a shepherd. One must be patient, caring, and meticulous. That is why our greatest Biblical heroes began their careers as shepherds. The Midrash recounts that it was Moshe's compassion towards a lost sheep that demonstrated that he was the right person to lead the Jewish People.

I would like to suggest a postscript to that story. After Moshe hoisted the tired lamb onto his back and returned it to the flock, that particular sheep stood out from all of the others for a long time. This sheep had a connection with Moshe forged at that special moment at the Burning Bush. Over time, each sheep becomes precious to the shepherd- each one reminds him of an incident or story.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are compared to sheep being counted to impress upon us the fact that Hashem loves each and every one of us. Each Jew counts. And that is why each Jew passes before Hashem.

By identifying ourselves as "*K'Bnei maron*," our Rabbis have taught us three important lessons. We must remember that our life is like a staircase and we must always strive to climb higher and be better. We need to choose our battles, and at times take a stand on issues that matter. We can draw strength and motivation for these two actions by reminding ourselves of the simple yet profound truth - that Hashem loves us and is rooting for us to succeed. As we

stand on the threshold of Rosh Hashanah, let us not be afraid to honestly ask ourselves where we stand and what we have accomplished. Let us embrace the idea that, as a Shepard to his flock, God loves us. And with this, welcome the opportunity to greet a New Year.