

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason
Parshas Shoftim August 22, 2015

“Friendship: The Tail that Wags the Dog!”

Your canine companion slumbers by your side, but is he dreaming of you? Does he feel guilty about eating your pastrami sandwich? What is he trying to say with that annoying bark? After decades of research, neuroscientists have begun to give us access to the once-secret inner lives of 'Man's best friend.' At the forefront of this effort is Stanley Coren, a behaviorist from the University of British Columbia, who offers psychological motivations behind dogs' everyday behaviors. Here is Dr. Coren's scoop on Fido's tail wags:

Salutation A slight tail wag, each swing small, is usually seen during greetings and can be interpreted as a tentative “Hello there” or a hopeful “I’m here.”

Satisfaction A broad tail wag is a friendly “I’m not challenging or threatening you.” In many contexts it may also mean “I’m pleased,” and it is the closest thing to the popular conception of the “happiness” wag, especially if the tail seems to drag the dog’s hips.

Confusion A slow wag with tail at “half mast” is less social than most of the other tail signals. Slow wags with the tail in neither a particularly dominant (high) nor submissive (low) position signal insecurity or uncertainty about what to do next.

Fight or flight Small, high-speed tail movements that give the impression of vibrating are a sign that the dog is about to take action (run or fight, usually). If the tail is held high and vibrating, it signals what is most likely an active threat.

The companionship of animals can be nurturing -- but there's nothing like a real 'two-legged friend.' Ethics of Our Fathers (1:6) teaches, "... *acquire for yourself a friend*" We don't just "make" friends for ourselves; we must invest in and "acquire" them. Friendships are two-way affairs. We acquire friends through the payment of time, effort and emotions. Friendships are essential for developing ourselves as human beings and fulfilling our mission on this earth. There are big ships and small ships -- but the best ship of all is friendship.

Parshas Shoftim -- Deuteronomy 16:18 - 21:9

Moses proceeds to review the regulations necessary for a civilized society. Local judges and officers were to be appointed in every city, and justice was to be administered righteously and impartially. A bribe of even an insignificant sum is forbidden. The Sanhedrin -- the Jewish High Court of seventy one judges -- is to make Torah-based binding decisions on new situations to prevent the fragmentation of the Jewish people.

When the Jewish people request a king, the king was not to misuse his power to amass horses, maintain a harem nor accumulate great wealth. To order his priorities and not become haughty he should write a copy of the Torah and carry it with him. When the Jewish people had righteous kings such as David and Solomon, it was a blessing. When we had wicked kings such as Jereboam and Ahav, it was a curse.

The nation's conduct in war is mentioned. The Jewish people are told not to be afraid of the enemy, not to destroy any fruit trees in battle, and that they should first give the enemy a chance to make peace. The portion also forbids all forms of superstition and 'magic' practiced by the soothsayer. We have no need for such tricks because of our true prophets and faith in G-d. The Jewish people are promised by G-d that He will send prophets to guide them, and Moses explains how a genuine prophet may be distinguished from a false one.

Rabbinic Ruminations

“It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” -- Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Each day we make multiple decisions. Although we may not notice, many decisions are shaped by

subtle changes in our environment. Even choices that feel deliberate and conscious can be swayed by unnoticed cues. Take Social Security, for example. Its benefits are available to any U.S. citizen who is at least 62 years old. But the earlier that people claim, the fewer benefits they receive in the long run. People who wait until they reach full retirement age receive the maximum amount. Delaying is usually the best option for people who are in good health and can therefore expect to live longer. Yet most Americans claim early -- almost half claim as soon as possible -- which often leads to financial problems later on. Are there subtle factors at work that influence this important choice?

This year a team of researchers evaluated how biases might affect a choice when to receive Social Security benefits. Participants nearing retirement were gathered and split into two groups. Those in one group generated favorable reasons why they should claim early, then considered why they might want to claim late. The other group performed the same tasks in reverse. Researchers found that when participants first considered the merits of claiming later, they more easily generated reasons for why it was a better idea than claiming early. As a result, they delayed claiming by about nine months on average, compared with participants who focused on claiming earlier first. This modest shift can mean the difference of tens of thousands of dollars for the beneficiary.

The influence of a good neighbor or righteous person is unmistakable. The Torah teaches: "Happy is the righteous man, and happy is his neighbor." When you walk into a store that sells flowers or perfume, even without a purchase you come out smelling nice. It's been said that a neighbor is like a book; if it's good, it can't last too long. If it's bad, you can't get rid of it too early. Choose your friends and neighbors carefully. The spiritual health of you and your family depend upon them.

Quote of the Week

I've found that prayers work best ... when you have big players.-- ***Knute Rockne, Notre Dame Football Coach***

Joke of the Week

A rabbi and a priest met at the town's annual 4th of July picnic. Old friends, they began their usual banter.

"This baked ham is really delicious," the priest teased the rabbi. "You really ought to try it. I know it's against your religion, but I can't understand why such a wonderful food should be forbidden! You don't know what you're missing. You just haven't lived until you've tried Mrs. Hall's prized Virginia Baked Ham. Tell me, Rabbi, when are you going to break down and try it?"

The rabbi looked at the priest with a big grin, and said, "At your wedding."