

Sermon/Drasha Parshas Ki Savo (Sept. 13, 2014): "Goodbye, Zander"
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ

Can dogs smile? If you've ever owned a dog, you know the answer to that question.

In the minds of most people, the equivalent of a dog's smiling is when he is wagging his tail. But there is actually one doggy facial expression that comes close to what we think of when humans smile. In a human-like canine smile, there are slightly opened jaws that reveal the dog's tongue lapping out over his front teeth. And often the eyes look like teardrops -- they take on a teardrop shape at the same time, as if being pulled upward slightly at the outer corners. It is a casual expression that is usually seen when the dog is relaxed, playing, or interacting socially, especially with people. The moment any anxiety or stress is introduced, the dog's mouth closes and you can no longer see the tongue.

If you've ever owned a dog, you know that dogs are also capable of laughing, and they typically do so when they are playing.

Canine laughter begins with the doggy equivalent of smiling but also includes a sound that is much like panting. Several years ago, animal behaviorist Patricia Simonet recorded those panting sounds while dogs played. On analyzing the recordings, she found that they involved a broader range of frequencies than does regular dog panting. In one experiment, Simonet noticed that puppies romped for joy when they heard recordings of these sounds; in another, she was able to show that these same sounds helped to calm dogs in an animal shelter.

There's much to learn from observing animals. The Talmud says one can learn good traits from all animals.

Had the Torah not been given, we could have learned modesty from the cat, honest labor and industriousness from the ant, fidelity from the dove, and consideration for ones mate from the rooster.

And as much as we can learn from observing animals from afar, there's even more to learn from actually owning animals as pets. One of the learning experiences of owning a pet comes when it is time to say goodbye. And for the Smason family, that time came last Monday, when we said goodbye to our dog, Zander.

Zander, a Siberian Husky, was a frisky 3-year-old when he came to our family. The family who had originally owned him had a child in their family that developed an allergy. At least, that's what our son Avrumi told us when he came home one night from his job at Sports Authority with the story that one of his co-workers "just had" to get rid of a wonderful dog. You know how these things go: *C'mon, Mom and Dad. The dog is housebroken. He's great with children. He's gentle. He's quiet. I'll take care of him! I'll walk him, and clean up after him!*

And Avrumi did a great job with all those things. Until about a year later, when he left for school. And guess who was left to take care of Zander? For the first seven years or so that we had him, Zander was a great dog. We had many special moments and lots of fun.

Sermon/Drasha Parshas Ki Savo (Sept. 13, 2014): "Goodbye, Zander"
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ

-- Zander was incredibly gentle and patient. He hardly barked and was fantastic around the kids, especially Yelli. She could pull him, poke him, yank on his tail, and he wouldn't bat an eye.

-- Zander never reacted unless you were a rabbit or squirrel. When Zander was in his prime, he chased (and occasionally caught) small animals -- which as you can imagine was a source of great excitement in the Smason household.

-- Our kids would go jogging with Zander. One snowy winter I think we even hitched him up to a sled, and he pulled some of the kids around. After all, he was a Husky.

-- Even I had fun with Zander. He was a big hit when I took him to the park. When kids would remark about his unusual eye coloration (one eye was brown, the other blue -- common among Siberian Huskies), I'd tell them, "the blue eye is for squirrels, the brown eye for rabbits." To Jewish children I'd explain, "the blue eye is for milcheigs (dairy), the brown eye for fleishigs (meat)."

But more important than the fun were the lessons we learned from our family pet. Let me share three lessons we learned from our years with Zander.

1) Sensitivity, Caring and Compassion

Those most active in caring for a pet are the ones who benefit the most. Love is an emotion, created through the act of giving. The Hebrew word for love, *ahava*, has at its root the word *hav*, which means 'give.' Love is a result of what we give to something, be it to an inanimate object, the pet we care for or certainly, to a person. Our experiences in life confirm that the more you give, the more you love. And that was true in so many ways with how various members of our family cared for Zander.

Zander had special bones he enjoyed gnawing on, and had his own 'bone basket.' Chani recognized that Zander became particularly distressed during thunderstorms, so at the first sign of thunder or lightening Zander was taken into one of our bedrooms or someone would hold him. Under calmer circumstances most of us were content to let our dog sleep on the floor. But Chani felt Zander would sleep better if he had his own cushioned bed.

Toward the end, Zander became blind and couldn't easily find his way out the back door to do his 'business.' Chani discovered that knocking on doorposts would help him find his way outside. In consultation with the Vet, Zander was given pain pills. And though his crying and whining became annoying to some, Chani explained to us: "He's scared. He just wants to be reassured."

When Zander died, those who cried the most were the ones who gave the most. Those who give the most, feel the most. The gift of our dog was that as a family we developed a greater capacity of sensitivity, caring, compassion and love.

Sermon/Drasha Parshas Ki Savo (Sept. 13, 2014): "Goodbye, Zander"
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ

2) Responsibility

With a young energetic dog (and some other pets), you have multiple opportunities to develop a healthy sense of responsibility through feeding, walking, and tending to other basic doggy needs. But the real test of commitment to your pet -- and the greatest opportunity to develop responsibility -- is when it becomes old and sick.

How do you know who is a real friend? When times are tough. As hard as it is to imagine, there are people who abandon pets. Then again, it makes sense, because there are people who abandon people. But those who rise to the occasion in the face of difficulties are high-caliber people. During our last years with Zander we had many difficulties as he declined. There was the expense, not inconsiderable. It got to the point where when Chani went to the vet, I just didn't ask.

But Chani would often say (giving me 'the look'): "What goes around comes around. He's a sentient being. And he's our responsibility."

You can tell a lot about a person by the way they treat their old, sick pet. The basis of life is understanding and meeting your responsibilities; to your animals, to people, in your relationships, to your community, and to Hashem.

3) Empathy

There are two types of people. Those who have owned a dog (or other similar pet), and those who haven't.

For most of my youth my family didn't have a dog, but I had always heard from others that a dog becomes "a member of the family." I would nod upon hearing that -- but I never really understood what people meant. Until this past week, when we lost Zander. I can now empathize (at least, to a greater degree) with others who have gone through the same thing.

Your dog becomes your companion. Your dog becomes your friend. In English we refer to a dog as being "man's best friend." This idea is reflected in the Hebrew name for a dog, *kelev*. *Kelev* means *k-lev*like a heart. Our house was emptier this past week, and became a lonelier place with our dog's passing. How much more so for others more dependent upon their pets!

The day following Zander's passing I was quite surprised to find a beautiful card from our neighbors (dog owners), in which they extended their sympathy and condolences. A few days later we received a card from our Vet, signed by all the vets in the office. Writing such a card to someone who lost a pet is something I would have never thought to do.

Experience is the best teacher. Owning a pet is a great teacher of empathy.

In conclusion, this week's Torah portion speaks of *Bikkurim*, the mitzvah for a Jewish farmer to

Sermon/Drasha Parshas Ki Savo (Sept. 13, 2014): "Goodbye, Zander"
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ

bring his first fruits. Bikkurim teaches us that everything that a person produces has special value to him. In last week's portion (Devarim 22:1-4) the Torah instructs us that if a person finds a lost object he is obligated to guard it and make an effort to return it to the original owner. A person's property has special value above and beyond monetary worth. Parents clearly have special feelings for their own children above their feelings for the children of others. But on a certain level the same applies to pets or animals that a farmer raises, even the produce that he grows. This is due to the toil and effort, he has invested in what he raised or produced. Similarly, an artist will have a special affection for his piece of art as he put a lot of effort into creating his painting or sculpture.

We had special feelings for our dog Zander. He's gone, but we have grown off how as a family, and as individuals. Our dog, a gift from Hashem, blessed our lives:

His presence taught us to become more compassionate, caring and loving, responsible and empathetic. And we certainly learned from those in our family who excelled in teaching those lesson through their own example in how they cared for Zander.