

Ecology In the Divine Image Class Three Animal Souls

Jewish thought has generally regarded animals as spiritually inferior to humans, with notable exceptions we have looked at in the last couple of days. Yet animals have always been regarded as possessing souls as humans do, and there is an ambiguity in Jewish thought, which is reflected in stories of talking and teaching animals. Solomon, or the author of Qohelet, questions the assumption of inferiority:

“Who knows if the ru’ach of the children of Adam, if she rises upward, and of the beast, if she descends below, to earth? (Ecclesiastes/Qehelot 3:21)

As we saw yesterday, other voices warned humans of assuming their spiritual service was greater than animals. Throughout, though, animals were always seen as objects of ethical concern.

The Ramban (Nachmanides) wrote “[The first humans did not have permission to eat meat] because the ones who possess a moving soul (b’aley nefesh t’nu’ah) have a little of the superiority in their soul that makes them similar (nidmu) to the ones who possess a rational soul (ba’aley hanefesh hamaskelet) and in them there is choice/freedom/b’chirah concerning their good and their sustenance, and they flee from pain and death, and [so] scripture [as above] says, “Who knows....”

“How can the blood of this one that did not sin be shed by the hand of a sinner?” asks Sefer Chasidim. Many Jewish thinkers saw vegetarianism as the ideal, notably Rav Avraham Isaac Kook in recent times. Kabbalists also built on the belief that animals had souls to assert that reincarnation as animals was possible for human beings.

Jewish tradition also sees animals as moral agents and teachers. There are stories of Rabbi’s animals who kept Halacha or taught Torah lessons. Pirque D’ Rabbi Eliezer tells that when Cain killed Hevel, Adam and Chavah did not know what to do. One raven whose companion died said: I will teach Adam this is what to do. He set down his friend and dug in the earth before their eyes and buried him. Adam said: Like the raven, this is what I will do. R’ Seidenberg points out that the Raven thereby practices two mitzvot: burial of the dead and comforting a mourner. The medieval devotional text Perek Shira presents all animals (and other creations) as singing verses of Torah to God, and Kabbalists believed that all creatures send praise to God in their own way.

What experiences have you had of animals as ensouled, or as teachers?

Tomorrow we will look at Torah teachings on the ethical treatment of animals.