

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MAN AND ANIMAL

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel June 10, 2018

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As a species, the human being clearly dominates the world and is superior to all animals. But if we try to analyze how and why man is superior to animals, it is not so easily explained.

For example, some might believe that man is physically stronger than all the animals. But that is clearly not so. In the case of mammals, the leopard is much stronger than man as it can pull seven times the force of an adult human being and preys on animals up to ten times its size. Pound for pound, the rhino beetle is the strongest animal in the world as it can carry 847 times its body weight (equal to a man lifting a 65 ton tank). Yet no one views these animals as dominant on the planet.

Some people mistakenly believe that the human being is the fastest animal on the planet. But that proposition is also clearly false. The fastest man can run 100 meters in less than 10 seconds. Even if this speed were sustainable, it is 26 miles per hour. The cheetah can travel over longer distances at 72 miles per hour. The fastest human swimmer can swim at a pace of 5 miles per hour over the course of 100 meters, while the air fish swims at 68 miles per hour. Similarly, the human record for a high jumper is less than 9 feet, which is less than 1 ½ times the size of a human. But a flea can jump 150 times its own height. Clearly, physical strength does not separate man from animal.

Some mammals have brains the size of human beings' brains. Many animals can communicate with each other, just as man communicates with his kind. In fact, the similarities between man and animal seem to be greater than any differences.

What, then, makes man superior to animals? How is the human being similar to animals and how is he different? What does Judaism believe about the similarities and difference between man and animal?

HOW MAN AND ANIMAL ARE THE SAME

If we look only at the words of Ecclesiastes¹, then Judaism seems to believe that there are absolutely no differences between man and animal, and that man, indeed, is not superior to the animals. The verse says, “For the fate of men and the fate of beasts – they all have the same fate. As one dies, so dies the other, and they all have the same spirit. Man has no superiority over the beast, for all is futile”. Thus, man and animal suffer the same fate in life and there are no differences between man and animal. If we examine the species of Homo sapiens and that of other animals, we do find many similarities between them.

We might think that man is unique in that he gives much attention and time to his family. Yet many animals also care about and protect their families (through the mothers, not the fathers). Man might be considered unique in that he builds in the world. But many animals also build structures, such as the beaver, who build dams. Ants build structures that, in comparison to their size, are many times higher than the tallest skyscrapers in the world.

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:19

There are certain basic qualities that are common to man and every animal, actually every living organism. These are spelled out in the Talmud². To survive, every living organism, plant and animal must ingest nourishment in order to grow and continue to live. Every living creature has this survival instinct. Similarly, all animals and plants, as well as humans, must produce offspring, or the species will perish. Finally, all organisms dispel waste that is not needed by the body. The Midrash³ adds one more obvious quality that is common to man and all animals: each creature is destined to eventually die. In speaking about mammals, one twentieth century rabbi⁴ describes the comparison between man and animal. He says that the general structure of the bodies of each species is similar. (Today we know that the anatomy of a rat is very similar to the anatomy of a human being, and hearts of pigs have been transplanted into humans). Mammals have many or all of the five senses that man has, and they usually have a male and female, with the female reproducing and caring for the young. One medieval commentary⁵ says that the mobility of many animals and human beings is similar. Animals and man usually choose what is (immediately) beneficial to them, and they both run from pain and death. Some animals can be so close in structure and actions to humans that the Code of Jewish law⁶ had to rule that ritual slaughter by a monkey is not valid for kosher meat, demonstrating that monkeys are certainly capable of performing ritual slaughter.

Clearly, there are many common denominators between man and animal. And yet, man is clearly different, despite the verse in Ecclesiastes mentioned above. How specifically is man different from animals? In which particular ways is the human special and in which is he the same as an animal?

MAN IS AN AMALGAM OF BOTH ANIMAL AND G-DLY COMPONENTS

Unlike the rest of creation, man is created in “the image of G-d”⁷. This makes him qualitatively different from all other creatures. The qualities that make him uniquely human will be discussed below. On the other hand, when the creation of man is described elsewhere⁸, it is clear man is made from two components: the earth as well as the soul he received from G-d. Both components make man what he is – his animal/earth side along with his G-dly side. And each side continually struggles for supremacy.

Perhaps this dual quality of man can best be seen in the two stories of Creation, in the first two chapters of Genesis. When man’s creation is first described⁹, the human being is the last creation of a continuum that begins on the first day of creation. On the sixth day, all the animals are created, and man is but the last of these creations. This demonstrates that man is an integral part of nature, part of the animal kingdom, the same as all other creations, as he has much in common with them. But in the next chapter, the Torah¹⁰ speaks about creation and mentions just one creature that G-d created – that is man. Thus, man seems to be unique, the very purpose of Creation itself, and its central focus. Both descriptions are correct, and man struggles daily with each part of his nature.

² Chagiga 16a

³ Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 8:11

⁴ Chazon Ish, Emunah Ubitachon 1:7

⁵ Ramban commentary on Genesis 1:29

⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 2:11

⁷ Genesis 1:27

⁸ Genesis 2:7

⁹ Genesis 1:24-27

¹⁰ Genesis 2:4-8

Two consecutive verses in Psalms¹¹ seem to point to this duality. The first verse says that man is “nothing,” so insignificant when compared to G-d. The very next verse says that man is a little lower than the angels, and the subsequent verses tell us that G-d gave man dominion over all the other creatures of the world. Thus, sometimes man is described as just another animal, nothing special. But sometimes he is special, holy and G-dly. The Midrash¹² highlights this duality and explains that when man is worthy, when he uses his “G-dly” component, he is called the “first” or the focus of G-d’s creation. If he is unworthy, using his animal side, G-d will remind him that he is last of the creations because even the mosquito was created before man, and in that sense is more important than man. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato¹³ describes this struggle that occurs within every human being, between man’s body and his animalistic urges, and man’s brain with its loftier spiritual urges.

HOW IS MAN UNIQUE?

Because man was given a spark of G-dliness (*Tzelem Elokim*), this causes him to be different from all other of G-d’s creations, and thus remains unique in several significant ways. We will describe nine of them here.

1. Only man feels shame and embarrassment. Every animal in the world was born naked and remains naked for its entire life. It never thinks of itself as naked, and is never clothed (unless it is in a circus or the pet of an overzealous owner). Adult man, on the other hand, feels embarrassed about his nakedness, from the time after the first sin of Adam and Eve, when G-d had to clothe them after they felt embarrassed.¹⁴ Man does not even think of animals as naked, but (most) naked people immediately call attention to themselves and are highly ashamed to be seen in public. In a similar manner, all animals feel no shame in relieving themselves in public or in front of other people. They are not embarrassed by this act. No sane human being would ever relieve himself or herself in public without feeling shame. According to the Midrash¹⁵, the feeling of shame was given by G-d to man in order to distinguish him from all other creations.
2. Man’s ability to communicate is unique. Although animals can often communicate nonverbally, and some animals can even be taught sign language, no animal can speak in the manner of man or express complex ideas. When man was created and became a unique “living being” after “G-d blew into his nostrils the soul of life” this unique living being, according to Onkelos’ commentary, is differentiated from animals by his ability to speak¹⁶. The Talmud and Midrash make note of this unique aspect of man.¹⁷ Man’s ability to speak also includes, by extension, his ability to write, to record his own history and analyze himself. No other creature is capable of any of these attributes.
3. Because man can think and make decisions for himself, he has free will. Animals are programmed from birth, and, thus, their choices are limited. Animals are not capable of moral choices, and thus receive no reward for “doing the right thing” or punishment for acting immorally. Every human being faces many moral choices each day. Even though the Torah “commands” man to commit many moral acts or commandments, at the very end of the Torah,

¹¹ Psalms 8:5-6

¹² Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 14:1

¹³ Derech Hashem 3:4

¹⁴ Genesis 2:25, 3:6-7. Why man did not feel embarrassed before the sin is a discussion beyond the scope of this essay.

¹⁵ Otzar Hamidrashim, “Maasim” 9

¹⁶ Genesis 2:7 and Onkelos commentary

¹⁷ Chagiga 16a, Midrash Tanchuma, Emor 15, Otzar Hamidrashim, “Maasim” 9

the Torah itself¹⁸ proclaims that man retains the right to reject G-d and these commandments, and choose between right and wrong. Of course, he will be rewarded or punished accordingly. This free choice and free will is described by Maimonides¹⁹ in detail. It matters not with what tendencies and personality traits a human is born with. He retains the ability to go on a moral or immoral path, regardless of his environment or past history.

4. Man has dignity. The verse²⁰ specifically states that man possesses dignity, while the beasts do not. Dignity, or self-respect or esteem is the flip side of shame. It is such an important concept, that the Talmud states²¹ that one is permitted to violate a (negative) Torah injunction in order to maintain a person's dignity. This is more than a suggestion or demonstration of the importance of maintaining a person's dignity. It is codified into Jewish law by Maimonides²² and the Shulchan Aruch²³.
5. Man seeks meaning. No animal questions why it exists or its purpose in life. Man constantly looks for meaning and purpose. Just as G-d is purposeful, man is purposeful as well. When describing man, the Talmud²⁴ calls him *Maave*, which, according to some, translates to "a seeker." Man seeks to go beyond himself and find purpose in his life and actions. An animal, on the other hand, does not question its purpose for existence.
6. Man is a creator. Just as G-d "worked" during the six days of Creation and then "rested" on the seventh, so, too, is man commanded to do so.²⁵ This is an acknowledgement that man also has the ability to create, and his creativity could be the essence of the "image of G-d" that was given to man. More than creating ideas and concepts, man also creates new things in the physical world every day. These creations that man brings to the world make life easier or free up time. Even the most intelligent animal cannot create the most basic of man's creations – fire. (This may be the reason that the first ritual of the week is the lighting of fire for Havdalah after Shabbat. Man does a creative human activity – forbidden on Shabbat – which is similar to G-d's first creation on the first day – i.e., the creation of light). In comparing man's qualities to those of angels, in contrast to those of animals, the Midrash²⁶ says that man can see straight ahead, but animals can only see from the side. Since this is not to be understood in a physical sense (many animals can physically see straight ahead), perhaps the meaning is that man can see things in the natural world and thus create, while animals do not have this quality.
7. Man can influence the spiritual realms. According to some opinions²⁷, man who is a spiritual being, can impact higher spiritual worlds. While this mystical idea is not universally accepted, prayer to G-d is something that is unique to man, and is commanded by G-d for man to do.²⁸

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 30:15-19

¹⁹ Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuva 5:1

²⁰ Psalms 49:21

²¹ Berachot 19a

²² Maimonides, Hilchot Shabbat 26:23

²³ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 13:3

²⁴ Bava Kama 3b

²⁵ Exodus 20:9-10

²⁶ Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 8:11

²⁷ Nefesh HaChaim, Gate 1:3

²⁸ Deuteronomy 11:13, Taanit 2a

Whether man can “change G-d’s mind” or change himself to influence G-d’s decisions (see the chapter entitled “Jewish Prayer”), man certainly has some influence on the spiritual worlds.

8. G-d has Divine Providence for each person. For animals, Divine Providence is only for an entire species. One of the basic beliefs of Judaism is that since man has a Divine spark, G-d has a relationship with each person, and He knows and cares about each human being. This is codified by Maimonides in his 13 Principles, which is found in the prayer book²⁹. Maimonides³⁰ also explains that G-d has no specific relationship with any animal, and is not involved in each instance of interaction between animals. Rather, G-d insures the survival of the species and cares about each species as a whole, but, unlike the case with man, He is not concerned with any one animal.
9. There is afterlife for man, but none for animals. When Judaism speaks about a World to Come, it is a world reserved for human beings alone. (In Judaism, there is no doggie heaven). Since man is spiritual because of the G-dliness within him, his soul continues into the next world upon his body’s demise in this world. Maimonides explains³¹ that a person’s portion in the World to Come is proportional to the mitzvot-commandments a person has done in this world. A purely evil person will lose his entire portion. But animals never get any portion. Sefer Chasidim³² also explains that while a human’s soul cannot die, an animal’s soul perishes along with its death in this world. This view is echoed by Rashi,³³ and the Midrash³⁴ that states that while an animal that dies goes to a final resting place, people are judged for their actions in this world, and a determination is then made about what will happen with them next.

A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MAN AND ANIMAL

In order to understand the fundamental difference between human beings and animals on a deeper level, Maharal³⁵ writes we must first analyze the names of each. In Hebrew, the Holy tongue, words can have far deeper meanings than simple descriptions. The Hebrew word for animal, *Behema*, can be broken down into two words, *Ba* and *Ma*, which translates “there is something (already) within it.” Thus, Maharal goes on to explain that an animal is born completely formed. All of its instincts and tendencies already exist at birth. It is no wonder that most animals can move unassisted within a few hours or days after birth. But man is different, says Maharal³⁶. His Hebrew name in the Torah is Adam, which comes from *Adama*, the earth, from which he was formed. And man, in some ways, is like the earth. On the day before a rainstorm (after planting) and the day after the rain, the earth looks the same. Everything is going on underneath. Only months later are the results of the planting, rain and effort revealed in something tangible. So it is with man. The human being is born with great potential. How that potential becomes a reality takes a very long time. Therefore, it takes many years for man to develop and leave his parents to be on his own. It is for this reason that after the animals were created, G-d said that “it was good³⁷” because the result of the creation of animals, completely developed at

²⁹ Number 10 of the 13 principles of Maimonides, found in the Siddur after the morning prayers.

³⁰ Guide for the Perplexed, Sections II, 17

³¹ Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuva 8:1

³² Sefer Chassidim 1131

³³ Rashi commentary on Ecclesiastes 3:21

³⁴ Midrash Eliyahu Zuta 24:1

³⁵ Maharal, Drush al HaTorah 11

³⁶ Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael 3

³⁷ Genesis 1:25

birth, could already be seen as good. And while it is true that He called creation as a whole “good,”³⁸ after man’s creation we do not find that G-d said “it was good”³⁹ because at that point it was not yet good. The reason for this is that the creation of man was one of potential, and man could turn out good or not good. Since man has the potential to perfect or destroy, his creation alone cannot signify completion of purpose

This fundamental difference between man and animal also helps answer questions about some laws of ritual impurity. Touching a dead animal causes ritual impurity for a person for one day until nightfall⁴⁰. But an animal can never make anything else ritually impure as long as it is alive, as it says “Whoever touches them when they are dead, shall be unclean until evening” (Leviticus 11:31). But a human being can sometimes cause ritual impurity even while alive. For example, childbirth, the very act of giving life, makes a woman ritually impure for 7 or 14 days⁴¹. This is the antithesis of the law and logic concerning animals. Why is there a difference between man and animals in ritual purity and impurity?

When man or animal fulfills its potential or purpose, it is in consonance with its basic nature. The life of an animal is such that as long as it is alive, its purpose is fulfilled. Every minute of its life it is actualizing its potential and fulfilling its reason for existence. Therefore, an animal can only become ritually impure when its purpose no longer exists – i.e., upon its death. If the animal still has a purpose even after death, then it does not become ritually impure when touched. Thus, kosher animals (those with split hooves that chew their cud) that are ritually slaughtered and continue to have a purpose for human beings as food or as a sacrifice, do not become ritually impure⁴².

But why does a woman become impure at that great moment of giving life, which seems the antithesis of ritual impurity? Perhaps this question can be answered by understanding another anomaly regarding the mother giving birth. The Torah tells us⁴³ that after her time of impurity, the mother brings a sin offering and receives atonement. What possible sin could the mother have committed in giving birth that requires a sin offering and atonement? Although there are many answers to this question, Rabbeinu Bechaya⁴⁴ reminds us that the first mention of childbirth in the Torah was connected to the first sin when Eve ate the forbidden fruit and gave it to Adam. Her punishment was a childbirth filled with travail.⁴⁵ Thus, every birth reminds us of a time that man did not fulfill his potential, and the sin offering tries to repair that first sin, whose consequences are seen in the case of each childbirth. Since man is not completed at birth and has not yet fulfilled his potential, he can become ritually impure in life and can render others ritually impure as well.

An outstanding contemporary rabbi⁴⁶ has captured how man should be regarded as different from an animal in analyzing one Torah verse⁴⁷. The verse uses three different words for the types of animals to be sacrificed: *Behema*-animal, *Bakar*-cattle and *Tzon*-flock. Each of these represents an aspect of life both common to man and animal. *Behema*, as noted above, represents the animal born

³⁸ Genesis 1:31

³⁹ Genesis 1:26-27

⁴⁰ Leviticus 11:24-26, 31, 39

⁴¹ Leviticus 12:2-6

⁴² Maimonides, Hilchot Avot HaTumot 1:2

⁴³ Leviticus 12:6-7

⁴⁴ Rabbeinu Bechaya commentary on Leviticus 12:7

⁴⁵ Genesis 3:16

⁴⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of England, Covenant and Conversation, Vayikra 5771

⁴⁷ Leviticus 1:2

with instincts to live and survive. Man, too, has instincts. But if man uses all his efforts merely to survive, like an animal, this person has not distinguished himself as a human being. The *Bakar*-cattle is a word that reminds of *Boker*, the dawn, when light breaks through the night. *Bakar* has the ability to break through barriers by stampeding without recognizing boundaries. The human being who acts like *Bakar* and does not respect boundaries – boundaries between pure and impure, between holy and profane – has not risen above the animal. Finally, the *Tzon*-flock has a “flock mentality,” acting a certain way because every other animal is doing it, without any individuality. The human who constantly gives in to peer pressure and does not think for himself or herself has not risen above the animal either.

Ultimately, what makes man unique and distinguished from animals comes down to the human soul and brain, and how he uses both. The rest of his body is no different qualitatively than the body of an animal. The Jerusalem Talmud⁴⁸ has an interesting discussion about a creature that is half man, half animal, and tries to analyze whether this creature is to be considered human or animal according to Jewish law. In the final analysis, the Talmud rules that we go after the head (containing the brain and soul). If the head is that of a man, even if the rest of the body is animal, then we rule that this creature is a human. Conversely, if the creature’s head is that of an animal, even if his body is completely human, even if it can read the Torah (!), we rule that it is an animal. Ultimately, it is the brain and the soul, contained the head, that is the key to the difference between man and animal.

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⁴⁸ Jerusalem Talmud, Nidah 10a