

THE DOG OF THE EXODUS: ON FREEDOM AND HUMANITY

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AN UNLIKELY PROTAGONIST—a dog—hides in the margins of the Exodus story. This dog appears in Moshe's last address to Pharaoh, announcing the upcoming tenth plague:

שמות יא

ד וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בֹּה אָמַר ה' בַּחֲצֹת הַלַּיְלָה אָנִי
יוֹצֵא בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרַיִם: ה וַיָּמָת כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
מִבְּכוֹר פְּרִיעָה הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל כִּסְאוֹ עַד בְּכוֹר הַשֹּׁפֶחָה
אֲשֶׁר אַחֲרֵי הָרָחִים וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה: ו וְהָיְתָה צָעֲקָה
גְּדֹלָה בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר כָּמָהוּ לֹא נִהְיְתָה
וְכָמָהוּ לֹא תִסָּף: ז וְלִכְלֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִחְרָץ בָּלֵב
לְשׁוֹנוֹ לְמַאִישׁ וְעַד בְּהֵמָה לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּן אֲשֶׁר יִפְּלֶה
ה' בֵּין מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Shemot 11

4 Moshe said, "Thus says God: Toward midnight I will go forth among the Egyptians, 5 and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; and all the firstborn of the cattle. 6 And there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again; 7 **but not a dog shall whet its tongue at any of the Israelites**, at man or beast—in order that you may know that God makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel."

The appearance of a dog—the first in the Torah!—in verse 7 is puzzling: Why does Moshe mention these animals in his speech to Pharaoh? What exactly do the words "whet its tongue" - *יחרץ לשונו* mean? The general sense, however, is clear, that the dogs in Egypt will not show aggression toward the Israelites (including their animals), allowing the slaves to escape to freedom

unhindered. In this way, the dogs' silence acts as a recognition and enabling of the Israelites' new status as free people. An old midrashic tradition even reads the commandment of throwing carcasses to the dogs as a reward for their ancestors' behavior in Egypt, and a recognition of a permanent debt we owe to dogs.¹

In a deeply moving essay, "The Name of a Dog,"² Emmanuel Levinas offers a modern exegesis of Shemot 11:7, one that shifts the focus from the Exodus and its active memory, to a situation where the lines between human and animal were brutally blurred by the actions of humans themselves.

Levinas first weighs various symbolic interpretations of dogs in our society. The philosopher then rejects the symbolic, mythic, and legendary dogs and, by means of a personal memory of his internment during World War II, recalls a real one: Bobby.

A wandering dog in the Nazi labor camp where Levinas was a prisoner of war, Bobby would greet the group of French Jewish soldiers and show them affection. Bobby was the only living being to relate to the prisoners as human beings:

And then, about halfway through our long captivity, for a few short weeks, before the sentinels chased him away, a wandering dog entered our lives. One day he came to meet this rabble as we returned under guard from work. He survived in some wild patch in the region of the camp. But we called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we

1 Shemot 22:30, and see Mekhilta quoted by Rashi on לבלב תשלבון אותו.

2 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," in Seán Hand (trans.), *Difficult Freedom* (1990), pp. 151-153.

returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men. (Levinas, 153)

In Levinas' reading, a direct line, a genealogical tradition, leads from the Exodus to Bobby, and from the silence of the Egyptian dogs to the happy sounds of the stray dog in the Nazi camp: "He was a descendant of the dogs of Egypt. And his friendly growling, his animal faith, was born from the silence of his forefathers on the banks of the Nile" (153).

The silence of the Egyptian dogs enabled the Israelites' freedom, but Bobby's sounds had a different function: they affirmed the humanity of the prisoners in a context wholly designed to deny it, where humans were robbed of their humanity and "other men, called free... stripped us of our human skin" (152-153).

This act of recognition became a profound statement in itself, and a powerful assertion of humans' intrinsic worth:

At the supreme hour of his institution, with neither ethics nor logos, the dog will attest to the dignity of its person. This is what the friend of man means. There is a transcendence in the animal! And the clear verse with which we began (i.e., Shemot 22:30) is given a new meaning. It reminds us of the debt that is always open. (152)

Levinas uses the two mirroring anecdotes—the mysteriously silent dogs in Egypt, and Bobby the stray dog in a Nazi camp—to unlock a fundamental philosophical insight about the nature of humanity and our relationship with the other. He argues that our very status as humans is intrinsically linked to our recognition of the other. When humans fail in this fundamental ethical responsibility, when they debase themselves by denying the humanity of others (as the Nazi jailers did), it can be an animal—the ultimate "Other" in many human hierarchies—that steps in to fulfill this crucial role of affirmation.

The dog, in its innocent gaze and joyful greeting, reflects back the humanity that the oppressors sought to erase. But Bobby's recognition of the prisoners as humans also became a silent and powerful indictment

of the jailers' inhumanity. Levinas suggests that the debt we owe dogs is not only an acknowledgement of an ancient deed; it also indicates a standard of humanity that is up to us to maintain, always.

We began with a singular detail in the great narrative of the Exodus: no dog will harm the Israelites on their way to freedom. Levinas, through a personal anecdote from his incarceration as a French Jewish soldier, extracts from this puzzling detail a message of humanism that goes beyond the historical and the particular: when humans refuse to recognize other humans as such, a dog's joyous barking can be both a recognition of humanity and an indictment of moral failure. The dogs of Egypt help us to expand the limits of the Pesah story and the cast of its protagonists; to reflect on the relationship between freedom and humanity; to respect and honor what we owe to every animal—and to every human. ♦