

On this Yom Kippur We Offer Thanks for the Special Place of Pets in Our Lives
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A young colleague of mine tells a story about having a congregant come up to him at a Shabbat service and ask if he could have a parrot's name added to the kaddish list.

"Of course," he replied.

"Wonderful," said the congregant. "The name of my parrot is..."

"Oh, oh," thought the young rabbi

"Polly"

Oy, he realized, there was no hiding from this one.

Even as many of us find that story funny, a number of us may think it insensitive, after all, our bonds with pets and animals can be profound. I find that as a rabbi, one of the more awkward moments is when someone comes to me and says their cat or dog has died. It's awkward because there's a good chance, we're both caught between worlds. We know it's perfectly appropriate for them to share this with me. The death of a pet, especially a cat or dog, and a parrot, is a major event in someone's life. And surely you should share emotional challenging moments with your rabbi. And yet.

And yet, the where to from here is very unclear. Traditionally, there is no Jewish mourning rite for animals. But the loss is very real because we are so connected to our pets. Animals loom large in Jewish sacred texts, after all, our ancestors were herders and farmers. The Psalmist tells us that animals come under God's care,

"God's mercy is upon all creation." (Psalm 145)

The creation story suggests we should be modest about our place in the world. In the story, all living creatures proceed us and after they are created, we read, "And God saw that this was good" and even as we are given dominion over them we are not directly declared to be good. Judaism understands the prohibition of cruelty to animals to be central in the human relationship with God. There is a whole set of mitzvot that address the care of animals. In Deuteronomy we read that,

"You shall not plow with an ox and mule harnessed together" (Deut. 22:10)

This is because the animals are of unequal size and strength and will therefore suffer. The Torah also pays attention to the emotional health of animals, In Leviticus we read,

“No animal...shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young.” (Lev. 22:28)

Maimonides (12thC) says about this,

“It is prohibited to kill an animal and its young...in such a manner that the young is slain in the sight of its mother, for the pain of the animals under such circumstances is very great. There is no difference in this case between the pain of humans and the pain of other living beings, since the love and tenderness of the mother for her young ones...exists not only in people but in most living beings.” The Guide to the Perplexed 3:48

Jewish tradition's consideration of animals goes far beyond this. There's a wonderful story of a Jewish farmer who sells his Ox to his non-Jewish neighbor, but come Saturday the animal will not work, no matter how much his new master coaxes him. Yet much to his surprise, the next day the Ox is happy to be harnessed up and taken into the field to plow. But the next Saturday arrives and again he will not move. The owner goes to the former master to ask after this peculiar behavior, and he explains about Shabbat and resting one's animals. This being a Jewish story, the new owner is so inspired by his ox's behavior that he converts.

There is something holy in our relationship with animals. Our most powerful bond is the one between cats, dogs, and people. We prize dogs for their unalloyed affection and devotion. A dog's after school greeting, tail wagging, running to the door, can brighten up any child's day. And if you love the outdoors, they are unparalleled companions, always up for a walk round the block or in the woods. Or if you love the indoors, there they are cuddled up beside you on the couch, sleeping at the foot of your bed, or wrestling with you in the den. And best of all it can be the same dog.

Cat lovers, of course, sneer at such antics. They prefer the integrity and autonomy of their cats. Their affection must be earned but once you have it they are just as affectionate as a dog and without the fawning over anyone and everyone who walks through the door. It feels much more personal. There's nothing not to like here, except that we mostly outlive our animals. Just moments ago I made sport of poor Polly's demise, but her death was a very real event for her mistress. Kaddish for Polly? We'll come back to that in a minute, but grief is not too strong a word. Judaism has a sublime set of rituals for moving us through loss and grief. Why not just employ them when a pet dies?

Maimonides can again be of guidance to us,

If the law provides that such grief not be caused to cattle or birds, how much more careful must we be to not cause grief to our fellow man.

Even as the Rambam counsels us to treat animals well, he is also drawing a distinction between the animals and people in our lives. He is, in essence, telling us that kindness and compassion to animals is a mitzvah, but not as high a mitzvah as caring for people. If you're not a pet person you would certainly agree with this. You may even find the discussion to be, well, silly. How can we even talk about the loss of a pet and a person in the same breath? Even many of us who are pet owners would insist on a distinction between our bond with our dogs and cats and our ties to our parents or someone very close to us, as if to make sure we understand that mom and Fido are not on equal footing.

I want to be careful here. Without question, a pet's death can be shattering. But the love that happens between us and a pet is very different than that between ourselves and another person. Yes, we must care for pets but there's little guilt or emotional dysfunction involved, just a simple, boundless, affection.

And more's the point. A parent's love is partly predicated on making demands of us and requires years of unrequited care. Our love for a parent or spouse is covenantal, wholly committed especially in the face of illness, setbacks, or troubles. A pet may well sense we are upset and come over to cuddle up with us, but they haven't set aside their life to care for us. They may not be disappointed in us, but neither will they be able to claim they never gave up on us.

A distinction between the life of a person and our love of a pet does not dismiss the depth of the loss when our pet dies. It just clarifies that it is not the same event and calls for a different ritual – different, not non. And a tradition that has so much to say about our relationship with animals is surely up to the task of providing some sort of gateway to mourning and comfort.

This is not so different from the rituals people turn to when they mourn their pets, but by bringing in some Tanakh and brachot, it gives a sacrality to the moment. Part of what makes mourning for a pet so hard is that we often do it silently. Everyone gets what it is to lose a parent, close friend or sibling, even if you haven't gone through it yourself, you respect how monumental it is. But you don't know what reaction you'll get when you share how much you miss your pet. What I like about Rabbi Offel's ceremony is it frames the loss, letting us at once acknowledge its importance without having to negotiate its status.

Which is really the point of this sermon. We come from a tradition which has a name for our relationship with animals, *Tza'ar Ba'alei Chaiyim*, Compassion to Animals. It counsels us to be kind and attentive to the animals in our care. It follows that the love that we and our pets have for each other should be worthy of Jewish status.

On this Yom Kippur we offer thanks for the special place of pets in our lives, which has been even more central in this past year. Much of what makes them so important to us is precisely the way their love differs from that between people, and when they pass from our lives we do mourn. May we be granted the wisdom to understand this and to be present for our friends and family when they do suffer the loss of a pet. May we also grow in the ways we let people we love know how we are hurting when a pet of ours dies. And let us draw comfort from new Jewish rituals such as Rabbi Offel's lovely service. Not quite kaddish for Polly, but not an oh, oh, either.