

What Kind of Pig Do You Want To Be?

To us, their oinks, grunts, and squeals might all sound one-note but in fact, pigs are great communicators. According to veterinary scientists, pigs have 20 unique sounds that they utilize to communicate with their fellow swine siblings. Pigs, unlike most other animals, pass the mirror test in that they recognize that mirrors are reflections and not windows and can suss out where food is based on their self-awareness in a mirror. Pigs are also capable of abstract representation which allows them to...play joystick based video games. In fact, Hamlet and Omelette, the two pigs Dr. Stanley Curtis of Penn State observed, would beg to be the first out of their pens in the morning so they could play the games. Sound familiar?

Outside of these lighthearted facts about pigs, there is also a recent revolutionary breakthrough related to organ transplants. In a study done at Yale Medical School, neuroscientists using a special machine that pumps blood and other fluids around the body, restored cells and organs in pigs an hour after the animals' death by cardiac arrest. This feat holds the potential to one day increase the number of human organs available for transplants. Although still quite early on in the research process, if we can extend the time that organs can survive after blood flow stops, think about all the potential lives saved.

Knowing all that and with full recognition that most of these are relatively modern revelations, why do the Rabbis hate pigs so much? We don't get much in the Torah beyond the basic facts in our parsha this week. Immediately following the hare and the hyrax, the Torah tells us that the chazir, the swine, although it has split hooves, it does not chew the cud: it is impure for you.

But that's where the similarities with its fellow animals ends as the later rabbinic tradition begins a treatment of the pig that seems, honestly, kind of harsh given how cute they are. Early in the Greco-Roman period, as my teacher Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein notes, "the pig likely stood out because it was the most popular meat in the ancient world and not eating it made the Jew different and unassimilable."

This fact was most recognizable in Hasmonaean times when the Greeks tried to impose the sacrifice of pigs and their consumption on the Jews. One of the martyrs that we read about, Eleazar, chose death over consuming a pig for that was akin to choosing Hellenism over Judaism. Swine consumption continued to be pronounced in Roman times and Jews were castigated in Roman “stand-up” comedy for not eating it.

Later commentaries, perhaps reflecting a more refined sense of the world, offered different reasons. Maimonides, Rabbi, Philosopher, and Physician of the 12th century, said the prohibition against eating pig meat was for health reasons as it had a “bad and damaging effect” upon the body.

But perhaps the greatest association the Rabbis create with the swine is with their quintessential enemy: Rome. Once Rome destroys the Temple in 70 AD, the pig becomes the stand-in, perhaps in part because of the emblem of the Tenth Legion which occupied the ruins of Jerusalem after 70 C.E. was a boar.

It got worse, according to the Latin Church Father Jerome, who lived in Bethlehem for the last 30 years of his life,

“In front of the gate which led to Bethlehem, Hadrian placed a pig carved in marble signifying that the Jews were subject to the Romans.

That’s a non-no.

Even so, what is it about the pig that boils the blood of the sages so much? It can't just be that the legion that ransacked Jerusalem had a boar as their symbol. One has to imagine, other legions' symbols had other animals on their banners. In order to understand part of the why, we'll look to an ancient text from Vayikra Rabbah 13:5, the midrashic compilation on the book of Leviticus.

“‘Why is Rome compared to a pig?’ they asked. To inform you that just as a pig, when it lies down, puts forth its paws and says: ‘Look, I am pure (since it has split hooves, even though it does not chew its cud); so it is with the wicked kingdom (the Romans) which [prided itself on its benevolence and righteousness] while robbing and extorting, all under the guise of carrying out justice.’

The midrash goes on to relate an anecdote to illustrate its point: “There was a certain government official in Caesarea, who after sentencing to death thieves, adulterers and sorcerers, leaned over and recounted to a fellow official: ‘I, myself, have done all three of those things in a single night.’”

According to this Midrash, pigs are duplicitous. They stick their foot out, pretending they are kosher in order to trick you into eating them. The veracity of this is questionable for as we know, a pig would never! But for the Rabbis, it’s more about what that represents, which is living a deceitful life which was embodied by the Romans.

They spoke loudly and proudly about being good, kind, and just. Then, they'd turn around and rape, pillage, and ransack. For the Rabbis of the Midrash, you can't speak out of both sides of your mouth. Don't tell the world one thing in your esteemed public role and do the exact opposite in private.

That's how the Jews during the Roman period saw their enemies. Under the facade of legality, their religious center and home was wiped out. That is the embodiment of what it means to be unclean and impure. You show off your fancy split hooves but really you're just hiding that you don't chew your cud. This inauthentic behavior rings true but it still doesn't capture why the pig is the choice. There were other animals listed in the groupings in the Torah that could've been utilized by the Rabbis.

To understand that, we turn to a more contemporary source, the British anthropologist Mary Douglas. In her 1966 book "Purity and Danger" she illustrates that the pig did not fit conveniently into the Israelites' definitions of what a domestic animal should be with one characteristic of being kosher and lacking the other. Animals like pigs that cross over definitions, Ms. Douglas argues, that crawl instead of walk or swarm instead of fly, defied the tribal need to create an intellectual ordering of the world. Disorder of any kind, Ms. Douglas writes, provided a frightening glimpse into the chaos inherent in the universe.

This type of ambiguity is unnerving because it makes the world really challenging to understand. Walking through an already chaotic world and faced with people who say one thing but do another represents all that is wrong with the world.

We seem to be living in a time in which this type of inauthentic behavior is still rampant. We have politicians that send out Christmas cards with everyone in their family holding a gun and then when there's a mass shooting in the district, whipping out the old thoughts and prayers. We have other politicians who vehemently decry a woman's right to choose only for an expose to later unearth that they themselves had been involved with a woman that had benefited from having that very choice. We have clergy members speaking about justice, safety, and truth and then finding themselves complicit in any number of scandals. We have other leaders making homophobic and transphobic comments only to later hear that they themselves have been involved in same-sex relationships or relationships with a trans partner.

It's not that we expect humans to be perfect. That's not realistic. We are all flawed. Be flawed in an honest way. Especially for those that we entrust with authority, aspire to a sense of authenticity.

So as I sat here thinking about the power of another young person becoming a young adult in the Jewish tribe and all the messages we want to share to our youngest folks, being real and true to who you are seems apt. Don't think that to please others, you need to say one thing but act in a totally different way. Especially if you are a leader, the more authentic you can be, the longer lasting your legacy will be.

The Rabbis of the Talmud have a phrase for this: תוכו כבורו,
your insides need to match your outsides. There are many
interpretations of this phrase especially around how you measure it
because after all, no one knows what you or I are actually like on the
inside. One potential answer that resonates with me is an
aspirational consistency. It's not a false sense of always being perfect
or on the right side of things. It's a recognition that you need to
motivate yourself to bridge the gap between the ways you are
keeping it real and the ways in which you are falling short.

Because in the end, pigs aren't really just pigs. There are the pigs with their oinks as great communicators, their deep wisdom, their love of video games, and potentially the ability to save lives. Then, there are the "pigs," the types of people who show you one thing while hiding something pretty nefarious behind their back. I know which one I would rather be.

Shabbat Shalom

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