

Doing a Mitzva at the Zoo

by **Rabbi Ephraim Sprecher**
Dean of Students, Diaspora Yeshiva

When I study Parshat No'ach, I try to imagine all of the exotic creatures that G-d created. Therefore, some of my students and I visited the wonderful and exotic Ramat Gan Safari Zoo. Can one do a Mitzva at the zoo? A visit to the zoo is a chance to experience the wonders of G-d's creation and acknowledge that opportunity with the appropriate blessing.

The Mishna in Avot 2 states, "Let all of your deeds be for the sake of G-d." Every act, however mundane and secular, can and should be elevated to the service of G-d. When we encounter special, exciting and fascinating sights, our Sages determined to recite a blessing upon seeing them, thereby connecting them to their Divine Creation.

Thus, the Talmud in Brachot 58b states that one who sees particularly beautiful or strong animals, or especially beautiful trees, or an exceptionally good looking person recites the blessing, "Baruch Ata Hashem Elokeinu Melech HaOlam Shekacha Lo Ba'Olamo" (Blessed are You, Our G-d, King of the Universe, Who has such beautiful creations in His universe).

By reciting this blessing, a great Tikun (rectification) is made, for people are amazed and marvel at exceptionally beautiful and large creatures. It is extremely important to connect these feelings of awe and amazement to their source and give praise to the Creator Who has such beautiful creations in His

universe.

A visitor to the zoo should recite the blessing "Shekacha Lo Ba'Olamo" over the first beautiful creature he sees and have intention to exempt and include all the other beautiful animals with this blessing. The Talmud in Brachot 58b rules that a person who sees a monkey or an elephant recites the blessing, "Boruch Ata Hashem Elokeinu Melech HaOlam Meshaneh Habriyot" (Blessed are you, Our G-d, King of the Universe, who makes strange and unusual creatures).

The Meiri explains that our Sages determined to recite this blessing specifically on monkeys and elephants, because they more than any other creature arouse particular astonishment, for although they are animals, they possess a certain resemblance and intelligence, similar to humans.

When we were at the Safari Zoo, we saw a chimpanzee hugging and kissing her baby just like a human mother would. We also saw the huge and marvelous gorillas roaming in their natural habitat. One of the gorillas looked at me and I was astonished when this huge gorilla began clapping its hands and beating its chest!

These blessings praising G-d for His wonderful creations are recited once in thirty days.

The last Mishna in Avot states, "Whatever G-d created in the universe, He created only for His Glory." Everything in creation, even a gorilla who claps his hands, is a tool to enhance G-d's Glory. We just have to open our eyes and appreciate G-d's incredible, wondrous, and beautiful creations. 