

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

by Rabbi Label Lam

A lion cub is Judah; from the prey, my son, you elevated yourself. He crouches, lies down like a lion, and like an awesome lion, who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah nor a scholar from his descendants until Moshiach (Targum) arrives and his will be an assemblage of nations. (Breishis 49:9-10)

In his final moments of life, Jacob painted with a broad brush, lasting portraits of his children to guide them each to reach the promise of their futures. How is a lion like Judah? In which way is Judah lion-like?

Rabbi Judah Ben Tema said, "Be bold as a leopard, light like an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven." (Avos 5:20) The Maharal from Prague explains that a progression is described here. 1) Be tough-minded like a leopard in deciding to do a Mitzvah, without fear of public opinion. 2) Be light like an eagle to take action, so as not to remain in the arm chair, a body at rest dreaming of noble things. 3) Be swift as a deer to approach the Mitzvah quickly dodging and dissuading voices from within and without. 4) Finally, to be strong like a lion to complete the task as a lion that consumes its prey.

The Shulachan Aruch begins with the words, "One should strengthen himself like a lion to stand in the morning to do the work of his creator..." The Taz explains the analogy of the lion; "By nature a lion is not afraid of any creature. So a person should not be fearful of his negative inclination though it is stronger than he.

Decades ago, as a high school exchange student in South Africa, I took a trip to Kruger National Park where the animals roam free and the people are found in cars and compounds. It's about the size of Israel and there are supposed to be some 50 lions throughout. The big prize is to spot a lion. After almost a week we had given up hope and so we were on our way out when suddenly all the animals began to stampede. Monkeys climbed trees and screamed like alarms. A moment later out of the woods trotted confidently a female lion and the big bearded male striding a few feet behind. The animals instinctively knew that there's a lottery. Someone is going to be lunch. We followed from a short distance behind for twenty minutes or more. Then the two of them made a right turn into the woods and we turned off our engine opened the windows and waited patiently. Within five minutes there was a huge roar and not a few seconds later all the animals walked calmly back to the watering holes.

For all time we bear the name of Judah-Yehudim-"Jews" and so his character is of utmost importance to us. We see a number of key traits that stand him and us in good stead. 1) Judah is committed to finishing the job. So he is promised to make it to the "End of Times". 2) Judah is not afraid of the climate of public opinion when it comes to doing what is right. He dutifully executes his tasks and tunes out those voices and bells that toll not for him. 3) Judah the lion creates a stir wherever he goes. He is like the conscience striding into a room.

Commenting on the 2nd Psalm, "Why then are the nations in commotion and why do the peoples speculate in vain; Kings of the earth rise up and rulers together have set themselves principles against the Lord and His anointed." Rabbi S.R. Hirsch ztl. writes more than 150 years ago; "They all, consciously or unconsciously, have one common goal; namely to emancipate themselves from the sovereignty of the one supreme principle, that of dutiful obedience to the moral Law of G-d which came to their awareness through the historical fact of the existence of His people and of His anointed...All the leaders of the lives and activities of the nations are perversely engaged in a fight against this sole principle of salvation. The cure actually lies precisely where they think they can find the source of their troubles..."

We look forward longingly to the calm that follows this stormy period but in the mean time, it's jungle out there! Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.