

THE
TORAH
ENCYCLOPEDIA
— OF THE —
ANIMAL
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Volume I: Wild Animals/ *Chayos*

Sample Chapter:

THE LEOPARD

RABBI NATAN SLIFKIN

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LEOPARD



Leopard and Cheetah

Namer נמר
Bardelas ברדלס

The Leopards of Israel

The strikingly beautiful leopard is the most widespread of all the big cats. It lives in a variety of different habitats in much of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. In former times, leopards were abundant throughout Israel, especially in the hilly regions:

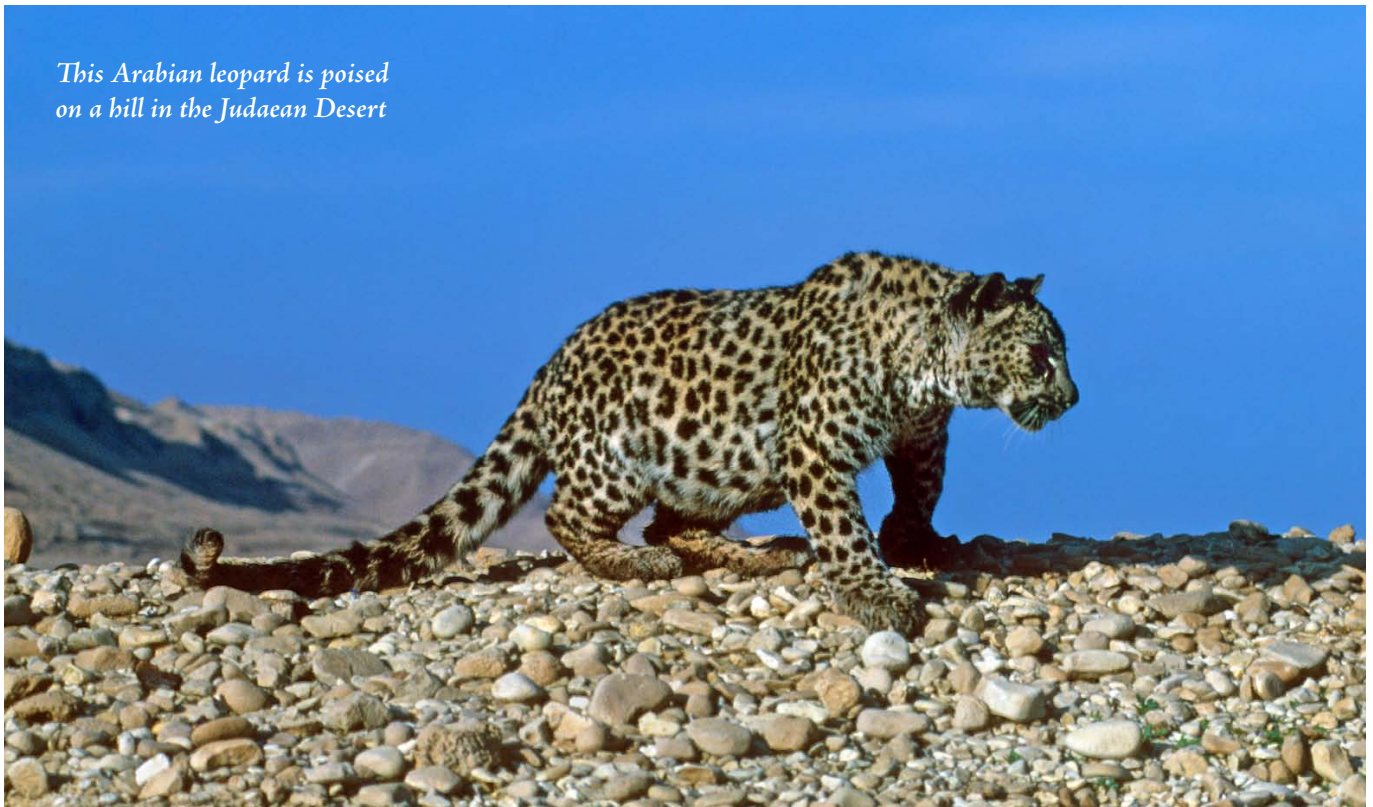
With me [you will be exiled] from Lebanon, O bride, with me from Lebanon until you will return, then look from the peak of Amana, from the peak of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards. (Song of Songs 4:8).

The leopard of the mountains was the Anatolian leopard, *Panthera pardus tulliana*. This was still recorded in the Carmel region in 1866, and was found in the Galilee until as recently as the 1960s.¹ These were one of the largest subspecies of leopards, weighing up to 170 pounds, and preying on wild boar, porcupines, hyrax, and livestock. They were also undoubtedly dangerous to humans;

leopards of this size are known to be man-eaters in other parts of the world. As a result, they were hunted, and the last specimen was killed by a shepherd near Hanita in 1965.² Another leopard subspecies was the Sinai leopard, *Panthera pardus jarvus*. It was hunted by the Bedouin upon whose goats it preyed, and is now extinct.

Today, the Arabian leopard, *Panthera pardus nimr*, is the only subspecies of leopard to be found in Israel. It is one of the smallest subspecies of leopards, weighing only up to about seventy pounds. The Arabian leopard usually preys on ibex and hyrax, and rarely attacks livestock. But it, too, faces extinction. Some leopards of this subspecies formerly inhabited the popular Ein Gedi area, and learned that an easy source of food was to be found in the dogs and cats of the local kibbutz. As a result, two females were trapped and taken into captivity, causing the collapse of the leopard population in that area. A DNA study of leopard droppings, performed in 2006, showed an esti-

*This Arabian leopard is poised
on a hill in the Judeean Desert*



PHOTOGRAPH: EYAL BARTOV

mated population size of just five males and three females of the Arabian leopard in the Negev and Judaeen desert regions. The chances of encountering a leopard in Ein Gedi today are so slim that, on the sign warning visitors about leopards, somebody once scribbled, “Watch out for polar bears too!”

There are also some names of places in Scripture that are derived from the leopard. There was a fortified city of the Tribe of Gad named Nimrah (leopardess),³ and there was a region in Moab referred to as Nimrim (leopards).⁴ The Talmud refers to cities named Namer and Nameri.⁵ With regard to names of people, Nimrod’s name may relate to the leopard; but although the lion, bear and wolf have long been popular as Jewish names (Aryeh, Dov and Zev), the leopard has never received such an honor.⁶

Leopards vs. Tigers

There is both a strong tradition and clear evidence that the *namer* of Scripture (pronounced *nah-mehr*) is the leopard. This animal is often cited in Scripture as one of the great predators in the Land of Israel, along with lions, bears, and wolves, which is indeed the status of the leopard. The coat of the *namer* is described as spotted; as we shall see later, perhaps “blotched” is a more accurate translation, and this perfectly describes the leopard. There is also evidence for the leopard from cognate languages; in Akkadian and Arabic, the leopard is known as *nimr* (plural, *nimrin*).

However, today there is some confusion regarding the term *namer*. In Modern Hebrew, this word was originally commonly used for the tiger.⁷ But tigers are natives of Asia and are not found anywhere near the Land of Israel. They would not therefore be the subject of discussion in Scripture.

The tiger is, however, mentioned in the Talmud:

Rabbi Yehudah said... *Tigris* is the lion of Bei Ila’i. (*Chullin* 59b)

The name Bei Ila’i is of uncertain meaning; Ila’i means “of high” and it thus may refer to a mountainous region. But there can be little doubt that the *tigris* is the tiger (and this is also the more correct term for the tiger in Modern Hebrew, instead of *namer*⁸). The *tigris* is described as being extremely large:

Rav Kahana said: There are nine cubits between the lobes of the lion of Bei Ila’i. (*Ibid.*)

Nine cubits is a little over thirteen feet, but what are the “lobes” of the lion of Bei Ila’i? Some explain the term to refer to its ears; but even as an exaggeration, it would be strange to describe the tiger as measuring thirteen feet between the ears. However, the term may perhaps mean

“between its extremities,” i.e. “from end to end.” As such, it would refer to the length of the tiger from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail, which is often described in English as its length “between the pegs.” This can indeed approach thirteen feet.¹⁰

Leopards and Cheetahs

There is one reference to the *namer* in Scripture that would perhaps match the cheetah better than the leopard. It occurs in the context of a prophecy describing the terror of the Chaldeans:

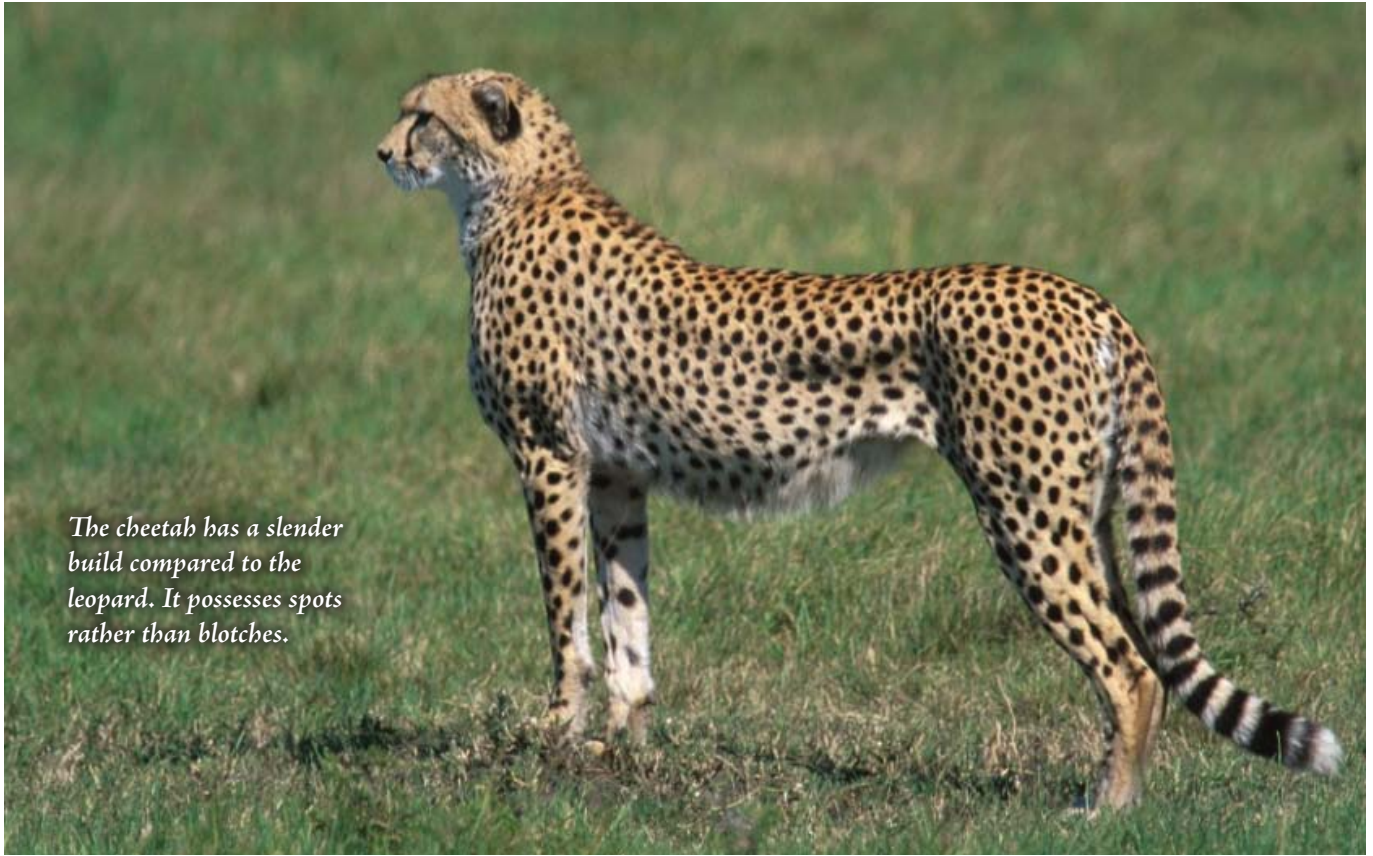
Their horses are lighter than *namerim*... (Habakuk 1:8)

The term “lighter” is a little difficult to pinpoint with accuracy. It probably means “swifter,” which would better apply to the cheetah than the leopard. Cheetahs are far slimmer in build than leopards, but are able to run much faster, reaching speeds of up to seventy miles an hour over short distances. Horses are not, in fact, swifter than cheetahs. But the *namer* is used in this verse as an example of a very swift animal, with the horses being poetically described as even faster than them. Thus, this verse is likely to refer to the swift cheetah rather than the leopard. Leopards catch their prey either by ambush or by stalking it to within a close range and then making a very short and fast rush, whereas cheetahs are renowned for their high-speed chases. The Asiatic cheetah, *Acionyx jubatus venaticus*, was found in the Land of Israel in Biblical times, but it was last seen in Israel in 1959.

However, it is also possible that the description of horses being even “lighter” than leopards means “more



This 1500-year old mosaic of a leopard is from the ancient Maon synagogue at Nirim in Israel.



The cheetah has a slender build compared to the leopard. It possesses spots rather than blotches.

agile.” Leopards are certainly very agile creatures, able to lightly bound up trees and pounce on their prey. As such, this verse may well be referring to the leopard. And even if it does refer to speed, leopards are known for their very fast charges over short distances.

In any case, the name *namer* could not refer exclusively to cheetahs. Aside from the strong tradition that it refers to the leopard, there are references to the *namer* that do not match the cheetah at all. As we shall see later, the Mishnah describes the *namer* as being brazen, which can only refer to the leopard; cheetahs, being relatively weak animals, are wary and shy.

It seems most likely that the term *namer* is a generic term for both leopards and cheetahs. In fact, cheetahs were formerly known as “hunting leopards,” due to their being leopard-like creatures that can be trained to hunt. The very name of the leopard in Hebrew appears to refer to the variegated coloring of its coat, which would also be applicable to the cheetah. The Mishnah uses the term *hamenamer* to describe someone who sows his field in uneven patches, which is explained to be based on the word *namer*:

“*Hamenamer*”—he sows in various places in the field, like the appearance of a leopard’s skin, which is blotched...” (Rambam, Commentary to Mishnah, *Pe’ah* 3:2¹¹)

Cheetahs and leopards are basically similar in terms of their coloration; although cheetahs have spots and leopards have blotchy markings, both would certainly be described as variegated in their coloration. However, it is interesting to note the wording of the famous verse that refers to the leopard’s markings:

Can the Cushite change his skin, or the leopard his spots [*chabarbarusav*]? So too, can you, in whom evil is ingrained, do good? (Jeremiah 13:23)

The word used to describe the leopard’s markings, *chabarbarusav*, is conventionally translated as “spots,” but this is not a precise translation. Amongst the traditional commentators, some translate *chabarbarusav* as *kesem*, which is used elsewhere to refer to a stain.¹² Others relate it to the term *chaburah*, “wound,” and explains that it refers to the mark left by a wound.¹³ Thus, this particular verse seems to specifically refer to the bruise-like blotching of the leopard rather than the more perfect circular spots that a cheetah possesses.

Although the cheetah may well generally be included with the leopard in the Scriptural term *namer*, elsewhere it is differentiated from the leopard. This is in a Mishnah which discusses animals that are classified as dangerous, such that the owner is already considered warned about them and thus fully liable for any damage that they do:

The wolf, the lion, the bear, the leopard, the *bardelas*, and the snake, are all rated as animals about which one is warned. (Mishnah, *Bava Kama* 1:4; see too *Sanhedrin* 1:4)

What is the *bardelas*? Other mentions of the *bardelas* in the Talmud appear to variously refer to a hyena or a mongoose.¹⁴ But the word *bardelas* can be traced to the almost identical Greek word *pardalis*, which originally referred to the leopard (since cheetahs were unknown in Greece). Yet it cannot refer to the leopard in this list, since the *namer* is listed separately. Some therefore suggest that it became a generic term for spotted cats, which in this Mishnah refers specifically to the cheetah.¹⁵ Based on this, the cheetah is called *bardelas* in Modern Hebrew.

The Greek Leopard

One of the most intriguing appearances of the leopard in Scripture is in a prophetic vision of Daniel:

In the first year of Belshazzar, King of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and vision in his mind in bed; he then wrote

down the dream, and related an account of it. Daniel told the following: “In my vision at night, I saw the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea. Four mighty beasts, each different from the other, emerged from the sea... The first was like a lion...and behold, another beast, a second one, similar to a bear... Afterwards I beheld, and there was another, similar to a leopard, which had upon its back four wings of a bird; the beast also had four heads; and dominion was given to it...” (Daniel 7:1–6)

In classical Jewish thought, the four beasts in Daniel’s vision represent the four exiles to which the Jewish People have been subjected. The leopard was the parallel of *Yavan*—Ancient Greece.¹⁶ The four wings on its back symbolize the rapid expansion of the Greek empire to all four corners of the world;¹⁷ alternatively, they represent the division of the empire after Alexander’s death into four regions.¹⁸ The four heads of the leopard refer to the four generals between whom the empire was divided after Alexander’s death: Lysimachu, Cassander, Seleucus and Ptolemy.

“Afterwards I beheld, and there was another, similar to a leopard, which had upon its back four wings of a bird; the beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it.”



But what is the inherent similarity of leopards to Ancient Greece? Is it just that the leopard was the third greatest predator in Biblical Israel, and Greece was the third oppressive empire? There may also be symbolic similarities between leopards and Ancient Greece. One possible explanation for this is that leopards are strikingly beautiful animals. Greece, too, was renowned for its aesthetic values; and the Torah itself speaks of beauty being promised to Japheth, one of whose descendants was Yavan.¹⁹ Another explanation is that, as we have seen earlier, Scripture highlights the *namer* (whether leopard or cheetah) for its swiftness. This may represent the amazingly rapid expansion of Alexander's empire. But, as we shall now see, they may be a more fundamental reason why the leopard represents Ancient Greece.

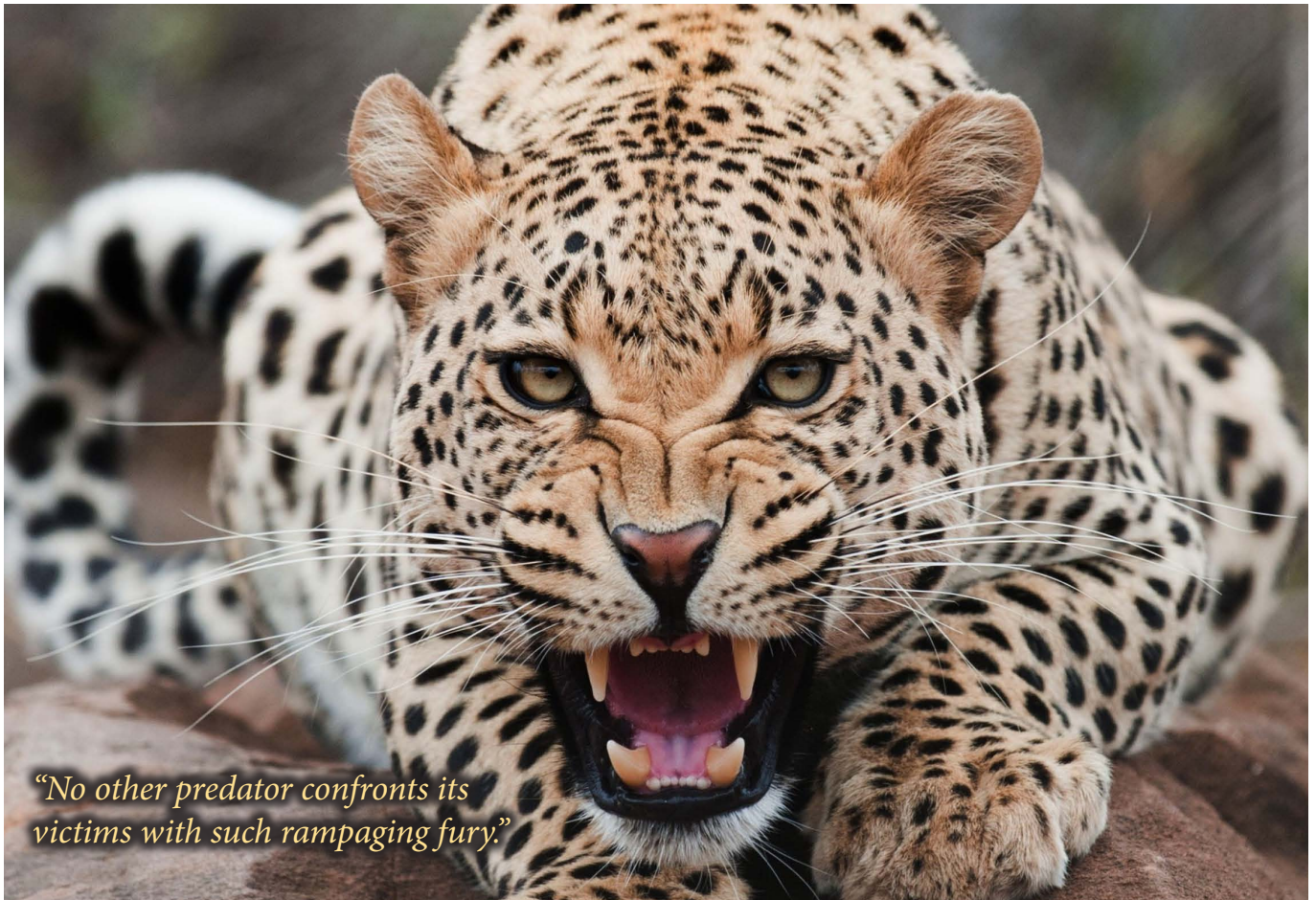
The Brazen Leopard

The Mishnah describes the fundamental character traits of various animals, including the leopard:

Yehudah ben Teima said: Be as brazen as a leopard, as light as a vulture, as swift as a gazelle, and as powerful as a lion to fulfill the will of your Father in Heaven. (Mishnah, *Pirkei Avos* 5:20)

Azus, brazenness, is based on the word *az*, “strength,” but it relates to an inner rather than outer strength. The term could perhaps refer to energy.²⁰ But it is usually understood as referring to “boldness,” “brazenness” or “chutzpah.” Leopards are often described as “boldly marked,” but their boldness is not limited to their coloration; it is their fundamental nature. Leopards are not especially large predators, yet they brazenly take on animals many times stronger than them. In the words of the former curator of the Hai-Bar nature reserve in Israel, Bill Clark: “They don’t have the speed of a cheetah, nor can they claim the brute force of a lion. Instead, they rely on their wits. They’re smart, and, pound for pound, they’re the scrappiest of the big cats... No other predator confronts its victims with such rampaging fury.”²¹

This brazenness of the leopard is mentioned on several occasions in Rabbinic literature. We shall explore some of these later, but for now we shall cite just one instance of this. The Midrash expounds the verse that we mentioned earlier, “With me [you will be exiled] from Lebanon, O bride... from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards” (Song of Songs 4:8) as referring to a variety of people and nations in our history:



“No other predator confronts its victims with such rampaging fury.”

“From the mountains of leopards” - These are the Canaanites. Just as the leopard has chutzpah, so too the Canaanites had chutzpah. This is as it is written, “Not a man was left in Ai or in Beth-El who did not go out after Israel” (Joshua 8:17). (*Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 4:19)

Azus also carries the connotation of defiance, meaning “to oppose” or “contend” with something. The brazen defiance of the leopard is presented by Maharal of Prague as symbolizing the clash between Ancient Greece and the nation of Israel.²² Although the early Hellenistic kingdom of Ptolemaic Egypt, and the Syrian Seleucid dynasty of King Antiochus III, were relatively tolerant vis-à-vis Judaism, this was not to last. The tolerance towards the Jews ended with Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who promulgated various decrees against the practice of Judaism along with cruel measures. The Greeks defiled the Temple, and they forced the Jewish People to discard their Torah lifestyle:

“I saw in my vision... another, like a leopard” (Daniel 7:1,6)—this refers to Greece, which set up decrees and told Israel: “Write on the horn of an ox that you have no share in the World to Come!” (Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 13:5²³)

Good and Brazen

The evil of *azus* was not limited to Antiochus; it is something that is a danger for all of us. Brazenness stands at odds with the Jew’s sense of shame, which is supposed to keep him from sin. The brazen person has no compunctions about sinning before his Creator:

The brazen person is destined for Gehinnom. (Mishnah, *Pirkei Avos* 5:20)

Yet no character trait is *entirely* good or bad. All traits can be used either way, and *azus* is no exception.

The Greeks used *azus* in a negative way. But the Hasmoneans were victorious over the Greeks. In mystical Jewish thought, victory does not just mean military or even ideological conquest; it means that one takes the enemy’s evil trait and uses it for the good. Then one has truly conquered the enemy, which is really the enemy within.

One perspective of the leopard’s brazenness is that it stands unafraid of creatures that outweigh it or outnumber it. It does not feel confined by its natural limitations. Such was the trait of the Hasmoneans. They were far outnumbered by the gigantic Greek army, but they stood firm by their beliefs, never being scared away. Knowing they were fighting for God and His Torah, they were not discouraged by their natural limitations.²⁴

Just as the evil side of *azus* was not limited to Greece, but is a negative trait for all of us, so too the good mani-

festation of *azus* was not limited to the Hasmoneans, but can be implemented by all:

Yehudah ben Teima said: Be as brazen as a leopard, as light as a vulture, as swift as a gazelle, and as powerful as a lion to fulfill the will of your Father in Heaven. (Mishnah, *Pirkei Avos* 5:20)

An example of this positive application of brazenness is discussed in the Talmud, discussing a person who is too poor to afford delicacies for Shabbos:

The School of Rabbi Eliyahu taught: Even though Rabbi Akiva says that it is better to make one’s Shabbos like a weekday rather than to receive charity, one should do something small in one’s home to honor Shabbos. What is “something small”? Rav Pappa said: It is fish fried in its own oil with flour. This is as Rabbi Yehudah ben Teima taught: Be as brazen as a leopard... to fulfill the will of your Father in Heaven. (*Pesachim* 112a)

Rashi explains that the Talmud is urging a person to strengthen himself in the commandment to honor Shabbos beyond his natural ability. He should brazenly purchase something beyond his means, albeit something small, in honor of Shabbos. This is analogous to the leopard, which boldly exceeds its limitations in its willingness to tackle animals much larger than itself.

The brazenness of the leopard is explained by the fourteenth century halachic authority Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher to refer to the need for a person not to be intimidated by those who would dissuade him from doing the right thing:

It specifies four areas in the service of the Creator, blessed is He, and it begins with “Be as brazen as the leopard,” for it is a great principle in the service of the Creator. For there are times when a person desires to do a mitzvah, but he refrains from doing it, because there are people who are mocking him. Therefore, it instructs that a person should be brazenfaced against all those who mock him, and he should not refrain from doing the mitzvah. Similar, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said to his students, May it be His will that the fear of Heaven should be upon you as the fear of flesh and blood... (*Tur, Orach Chaim* 1)

Just as the leopard is not intimidated, so too a person should not be intimidated.

Leopard Infidelity

There is a curious background to the English name of the leopard. The term “panther” today usually refers to the American cougar, while the term “black panther” is often used to describe a black leopard or black jaguar. However, in antiquity, the term panther or *pard* (based on the Greek *párdos* and Latin *pardus*) was freely used for any big cat, and appears in the writings of the Roman naturalist Pliny as referring to a cat of unclear identity. It was

believed that the leopard was a hybrid of the lion with this *pard*, and this is how the leopard received its name: *leo* (Latin for lion) combined with *pard* spells leopard.

The notion of there being crossbreeding and infidelity in the ancestry of the leopard is also found in Jewish sources. The Talmud expounds a series of place-names as alluding to a dark period in the history of the Jewish People:

“These are the ones who went up from Tel-melach, Tel-charsha, Keruv, Adon, and Immer...” (Nechemiah 7:61). The Master (a play on the word *Adon*) said, “I said that Israel should be considered before Me as the cherubs (a play on the word *Keruv*), and they set themselves as a leopard (apparently a play on *AdoN Immer=Namer*).²⁵ Another version: Rabbi Avahu said, The Master said, “Even though they put themselves as a leopard, they are considered before Me as the cherubs.” (Talmud, *Kiddushin* 70a)

What does it mean that the Jewish People “set themselves as a leopard”? Some explain that just as the leopard is full of dark spots, so too were the Jewish People spotted with sinners.²⁶ But others give a different explanation:

“As a leopard”—like this animal, which does not care about the mate of its friend. (Rashi, commentary ad loc.)

The *keruvim*, the cherubic statues that were on the Ark of the Covenant, were in the form of a boy and girl embracing each other. They were the symbol of fidelity and loyalty. But the Jewish People acted as the leopard, which is the exact opposite of this.

Other sources, recorded by two fifteenth-century Rabbinic authorities, indicate that the very ancestry of the leopard is rooted in such infidelity:

The leopard is born from a wild boar and a lioness. For when lions come into heat, the lioness pokes her head into the forest thickets and roars to summon a mate, and the boar hears her voice and cohabits with her; the offspring of this pair is the leopard... (Rabbi Ovadiah MiBartenura, commentary to *Pirkei Avos* 5:20; also Rabbi Shimon Ben Tzemach Duran, *Magen Avos* 3:4)

This statement is difficult to understand. Needless to say, there are plenty of records of leopards being born in zoos from other leopards. Furthermore, there is no record of any leopards being hybrids of lions and wild boar. From a biological standpoint, it would appear impossible; the species are simply too different. It is possible to crossbreed some animals, such as wolves and dogs, because they are genetically closely related. Likewise, one can crossbreed horses, donkeys and zebras because all of these are closely related (although the offspring are mostly sterile). But it is impossible to crossbreed pigs and lions because they are genetically very different from each other. A pig is a herbivore with its whole body per-

fectly suited to its lifestyle. A lion is a carnivore with its whole body perfectly suited to hunting and eating other animals, such as pigs! Even if a very confused pig mated with an equally confused lion, their genes are incompatible, so there would not be any offspring.²⁷

This explanation of the leopard’s origins is queried by others:

This is something novel and bizarre, and according to his words it would be sterile; and I have not seen this in the books on nature. (*Rashash* ad loc.)²⁸

Lions and boar are vastly different creatures. It is therefore inconceivable that they could produce offspring at all, let alone fertile offspring. This is acknowledged by other rabbinic authorities:

...One type cannot bear offspring with another type; and even those of similar natures which can produce offspring, such as mules, will have their seed cut off, for they shall not give birth... (Ramban, Commentary to Leviticus 19:19)

However, others interpret the notion of the leopard being a hybrid of the lion and boar as a metaphor. Thus is the explanation of Rabbi Tzaddok HaKohen of Lublin:

The boar represents the kingdom of Edom... the kingdom of Ancient Greece is represented by the leopard; thus *Magen Avos* of the Tashbatz, in reference to the Mishnah of “Be as brazen as a leopard,” states that the leopard is the illegitimate offspring of the lion and the wild boar, for the lion is Babylon... (Rabbi Tzaddok HaKohen, *Divrei Sofrim, Likutei Ma'amaram, Siyum HaShas, s.v. u'lekach parashiyos*)

...and he proceeds with a deeply profound explanation of how Greece was the synthesis of Babylon and Edom. The lion represents the Talmudic knowledge of the Jewish community in Babylon. The boar represents the wisdom of the Edomite Empire, Rome. The leopard therefore represents Greece, which caused the adulteration of the wisdom of Torah with the wisdom of Rome.

Although, in a biological sense, leopards do not originate from interspecies hybridization, they do seem to have a propensity for interbreeding with other big cats. Koshien Zoo in Japan bred a leopard to a lioness, which subsequently gave birth to a litter of “leopons.” The Hagenbeck Tierpark in Hamburg mated a puma with a leopardess, producing “pumapards,” and a tiger with a leopardess, producing a “tigard.” A facility in the US first mated a jaguar with a leopardess, giving birth to a single female “jagulep,” which was in turn mated by a male lion, producing a litter of “lijaguleps”!

Nor are such hybrids necessarily limited to artificial circumstances. A rare spotted lion, known as the *marozi*, is thought by many to be an example of natural crossbreeding between the lion and the leopard, although other



A rare photograph of a leopon (a hybrid of a leopard with a lioness)

explanations have been offered. And in the early 1900s, Indian natives regularly spoke of an animal they knew as the *doglas*, which was claimed to be a natural hybrid between the leopard and the tiger. Although it was never established that hybridization was the cause, there were reports of some large leopards in the area with striping on their abdomens.

Whether in ancient ideas about its ancestry, its cross-breeding ability with other big cats, or mystical imagery, the leopard is a symbol of hybridization and infidelity. This is another reason why it represents the Greek empire in Daniel's prophecy and in Jewish mystical thought. In the writings of the Greek historian Diodorus, we see how the Jews' preference for keeping apart from other nations led to resentment and persecution.²⁹ The Greeks did not want to kill the Jewish nation, but there was a creeping Hellenizing influence upon the Jewish religion. Judaism was under the threat of hybridization, symbolized by the leopard.

The infidelity of the leopard is also inherently linked by some to the leopard's brazenness. The progeny of forbidden relationships, such as a mother and son, brother and sister, etc., is known as a *mamzer*. This is not a mere label for the purpose of legalities; it is a description of his very nature. The Mishnah states that this person will also possess certain character traits by virtue of his nature: "A *mamzer* is brazen" (*Maseches Kallah* 2). The idea behind this Mishnah is that a *mamzer* does not have a distinguished lineage, and has nothing to live up to. He therefore does not respect tradition or authority.³⁰ Later, we shall return to this Mishnah's linkage of the *mamzer* with brazenness.

The Jews were threatened by Ancient Greece with hybridization, with merging into Hellenistic culture. They won by remaining separate, by retaining their

unique identity as Jews. This is part of the symbolism of the olive oil that is lit in the menorah:

Other liquids mix together, but olive oil remains separate. So, too, Israel is separate from other nations... (*Midrash Shemos Rabbah* 36:1)

Olive oil represents the singularity of Jewish identity. Rather than succumb to Greek culture, a significant number of Jews remained true to the Torah. The Written Torah was translated into Greek and stolen from Israel; but with the Oral Torah, they retained their uniqueness. The thirty-six lights that are lit in total over Chanukah also represent the thirty-six tractates of the Babylonian Talmud with which the Jews resisted Hellenism. Chanukah thereby also symbolizes victory over the leopard, symbol of Greece and hybridization.

The Talmud records a story which relates to the battle between Torah and Greek philosophy:

[The Elders of Athens asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah:] "When salt spoils, with what can one salt it?" [Rabbi Yehoshua] replied: "With the afterbirth of a mule." [Asked the Elders:] "But does a mule have an afterbirth?" [Replied Rabbi Yehoshua:] "And does salt spoil?" (Talmud, *Bechoros* 8b)

It is suggested that when the Elders of Athens spoke about salt, they were referring to Torah, the preservative of the Jewish People. It was time, said the Elders, to change the Torah, in order to keep it in the spirit of the day and ensure its popularity. Rabbi Yehoshua replied that they should use the afterbirth of a mule, the hybrid offspring of a horse and donkey. At first sight, the mule seems like a wonderful animal; it is strong, sure-footed, resistant to disease, and long-lived. By taking elements of the donkey and of the horse, we seem to have the best of both worlds. It's just like a Hellenized, modernized Judaism—hybridizing the two cultures in order to have the best of both worlds. But a mule is sterile; it cannot perpetuate itself. So, too, a hybridized Jewish-Greek culture will not last.



An artist's rendition of the legendary marozi, believed by some to be a naturally-occurring hybrid of a leopard with a lion

Can the Leopard's Spots Disappear?

A lion has spots at birth, which quickly fade. So does the Florida panther. But a leopard never, ever, changes its spots:

Can the Cushite change his skin, or the leopard his spots? So too, can you, in whom evil is ingrained, do good? (Jeremiah 13:23)

Yet although a leopard cannot change its spots, it does have a way of making them effectively disappear. With melanistic (black) leopards, which are a color variety of normal leopards, the spots are still present, but they are mostly obscured by the dark color of the rest of the animal's coat. Irregularities no longer stand out when the entire area resembles them. Homiletically, if we recall the idea that the leopard symbolizes hybridization with other cultures, and that a leopard's spots represent a person being "spotted" with sin, there



is an analogy here. Adulterations of Torah that begin with hybridizations with other cultures, and small distortions of religion, can end up losing any and all resemblance to Judaism.

Brazeness in Torah

As we mentioned earlier, brazenness does have its positive applications. *Azus* is also integral to the Oral Torah with which we conquered Greek philosophy. One of these positive applications relates to Torah study:

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Meir: Why was the Torah given to Israel? Because they are brazen. (Talmud, *Beitzah* 25b)

Some explain this to mean that Torah was given to the brazen Jews in order to temper them and keep them in line.³¹ But others explain precisely the opposite: that the Jewish Peoples' *azus* enables them to stick it out in plumbing the depths and truths of the Torah, whereas other nations would give up.³² *Azus* is an essential tool for success in Torah:

A bashful person cannot learn... (Mishnah, *Avos* 2:5)

Although a sense of shame is usually a virtue, and one of the hallmarks of the Jewish people, it is not desirable (in excess) in the study of Torah. One explanation of this is that someone who is afraid to ask questions, fearful of being mocked for his ignorance, will always remain with doubts and ignorance. A person needs to be courageous enough to ask about that which he does not understand, or he will never learn.³³

Another explanation is that when learning Torah, one must always seek the truth. When two people are arguing over the correct understanding of a section of Talmud, each must be concerned only with reaching the true explanation. A person must never cower into submission to accept an explanation he has reason to feel is incorrect.³⁴

As we noted earlier, Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, when discussing the maxim that one should be brazen as a leopard, presents King David as the quintessential example of the type of *azus* that is required:

Yehudah ben Teima said: Be as brazen as a leopard, as light as a vulture, as swift as a gazelle, and as powerful as a lion to fulfill the will of your Father in Heaven. It specifies four areas in the service of the Creator, blessed is He, and it begins with "Be as brazen as the leopard," for it is a great principle in the service of the Creator. For there are times when a person desires to do a mitzvah, but he refrains from doing it, because there are people who are mocking him. Therefore, it instructs that a person should be brazenfaced against all those who mock him, and he should not refrain from doing the mitzvah. In this vein, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said to his students, May it be His will that the fear of Heaven should be upon you as the fear of flesh and blood. Similarly, he is speaking regarding embarrassment; that sometimes, a person is more embarrassed in front of people that he is before the Creator. Therefore, he warns that a person should be brazen in front of those who mock him, and not be ashamed. Similarly, David said, "And I shall speak of Your statutes in front of kings, and I shall not be ashamed" (Psalms 119:46). Even though he was pursued and was fleeing from the heathens, he strengthened his Torah and studies, even though they were mocking him. (Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, *Tur, Orach Chaim* 1)

King David spoke that which he felt to be the truth, and was not ashamed to do so. This is one of the reasons why he is described as being the quintessence of the Oral Torah.³⁵ This quality of *azus*, which also enabled David to stand in combat against the giant Goliath, was his heritage from his ancestors Boaz and Ruth.



*“Be as brazen
as a leopard...
to fulfill the will
of your Father
in Heaven”*

Boaz wished to marry Ruth, but faced opposition. For Ruth was from the nation of Moab. As such, it was thought that Boaz was prohibited from marrying her:

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of God; to their tenth generation they shall not enter into the congregation of God forever. (Deuteronomy 23:4)

Yet Boaz proposed that one must take into account the precision of the wording; the law was specifically speaking about a Moabite, and not a Moabitess. The Midrash expounds a verse as alluding to the story of Boaz with particularly appropriate terminology:

“And Shacharaim fathered children in the fields of Moav, after he had sent them away; Chushim and Ba’arah (were) his wives. From his wife Chodesh he bore Yovav, Tzivya, Meisha, and Malkam” (Chronicles I 8:8-9).

“...Shacharaim...”—this is Boaz, who was free (*meshu-chronar*) from sin;

“...fathered children in the fields of Moav...”—that he married Ruth the Moabitess;

“...after he had sent them away...”—that he was from the tribe of Judah, about whom it is written, “he sent Judah in front of him...” (Genesis 46:28);

“...Chushim and Ba’ara his wives...”—But can a person father his wives (as a literal reading the verse might imply)? Rather, it means that he pounced (*chash*) like a leopard and explained (*bi’ar*) the law.

It should not say, “From his wife Chodesh he bore,” but rather, “From his wife Ba’arah he bore” (since she was just mentioned)! Rather, it means that through her, a law was innovated (*nischadshah*): An Ammonite, and not an Ammonitess; a Moabite, and not a Moabitess. (Talmud Yerushalmi, *Yevamos* 48b)

Boaz “pounced like a leopard.” It is not by chance that the Talmud picks the leopard here as its metaphor; rather, it is due to the Sages’ exquisite sensitivity to the nature

of the animals around them. Boaz had the *azus* of the leopard within him—hence the name *Bo-az*, “in him is brazenness.” And Ruth herself was the product of an illegitimate relationship—Lot’s incest with his daughter gave rise to Moab, the ancestor of Ruth. As noted earlier, the Mishnah states that illegitimate children are prone to brazenness. Thus, their descendant David had a tendency to brazenness based upon both lines of his ancestry. He implemented this trait for the good, which enabled him to triumph in Torah against all opposition.

Leopards and Goats

In a prophecy concerning the utopia of the Messianic era, there is a description of some unexpected comradery between predators and their prey:

The wolf also shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

There is a dispute as to whether these verses are intended as literal description of biological changes, or if they are a metaphor for the future harmony of the nations represented by these animals.³⁶ In any case, it is interesting to note that the same pairings are always presented: the lion with cattle, the wolf with the lamb, and the leopard with the goat:

“God seeks the pursued” (Ecclesiastes 3:15) ...It is even so with offerings. The Holy One said: The ox is pursued by the lion, the goat is pursued by the leopard, the lamb is pursued by the wolf; do not bring offerings before Me from the hunters, only from the hunted... (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 27:5; *Pesikta d’Rav Kahana* 9:4)

In the statues of animals on the throne of King Solomon, the same pairings were made:

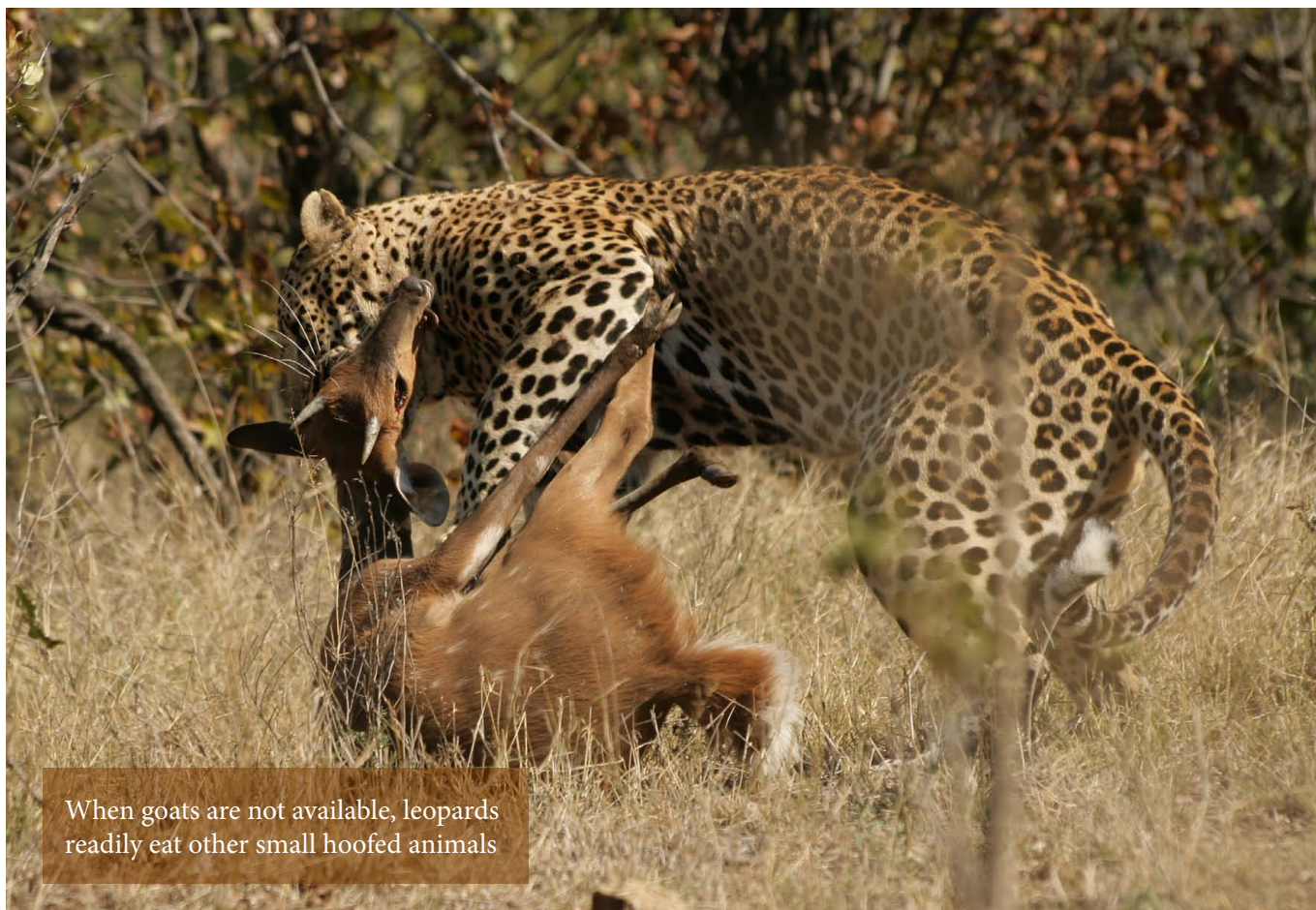
...On every step there were kosher animals facing non-kosher ones. On the first step, an ox, and opposite, a lion; on the second, a lamb facing a wolf; on the third, a goat facing a leopard... (*Midrash Aba Gurion* 1)

These pairings can be simply explained as referring to each predator’s preferred prey. Lions are the only predators big enough to take on cattle, while wolves must settle for sheep. Leopards habitually prey upon goats—not only domestic goats, but also wild goats (ibex), since, unlike lions and wolves, they are agile enough to chase ibex in their steep terrain.

But the prey animals in these pairs are not only the preferred prey of each predator. In all these cases, the two are related in another way. Both animals in each pair represent the same attribute. The lion and ox both express the trait of pride. The wolf and sheep both live in groups. And the leopard and goat are both brazen:



This snow leopard is preparing to pounce upon its prey



When goats are not available, leopards readily eat other small hoofed animals

The goat is the brazen one of the domesticated animals. (Talmud, *Beitzah* 25b)

It therefore comes as no surprise that the goat is also used as a metaphor for Ancient Greece:

And the rough goat is the king of Greece... (Daniel 8:21)

Again, we see the brazenness of the leopard relating to Ancient Greece.

The Vigilance of the Leopard

Another attribute of the leopard highlighted in Scripture is its vigilance:

And I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt, and you know no god but Me; for there is no savior beside Me. I knew you in the wilderness, in the land of great drought. According to their pasture, they became full; they were filled, and their heart was exalted; therefore they have forgotten me. Therefore I will be to them as a lion; as a leopard on the way I will be watching (*ashur*). (Hosea 13:4-7)

Some understand the word *ashur* to refer to the name of a place: Assyria, which is the native home of the Anatolian leopard. Thus, the verse is read, “as a leopard on the way of Assyria.”³⁷ But others explain it to be

describing vigilant observation, as in “I shall observe him (*ashurenu*), but not from near” (Numbers 24:17).³⁸ It thus refers to the leopard’s nature of stealthily stalking and ambushing its prey. This technique enables them to catch a wide variety of prey, and is perhaps contributory to their being the most widespread member of the cat family.³⁹ This vigilance is referred to elsewhere in the Torah with a specific word:

Therefore the lion from the forest shall slay them, and the wolf of the deserts shall destroy them, the leopard is poised alert [*namer shokeid*] over their cities; every one who goes out there shall be torn in pieces; because their transgressions are many, and their apostasies are great. (Jeremiah 5:6)

This verse refers to the leopard’s alertness and vigilance with the term *shekeidah*. This is inherently linked to the leopard’s brazenness. It is all very well to possess the quality of *azus*, but one might not make use of this trait without the zeal of *shekeidah*. It is not enough to just be *able* to stand up against the threat of an enemy—one has to actually *do* so. The Hasmoneans utilized the characteristic of *azus* only with the benefit of their *shekeidah*. The combination of these two properties enabled them to defeat Ancient Greece.

Almonds are called *shekeidim*. This is because the almond tree is the very first tree to blossom each year, as soon as the rains ease off. The almond thus represents assiduousness and zeal. That is why we find that *shekeidim* are integral to the menorah, the symbol of the Chanukah victory:⁴⁰

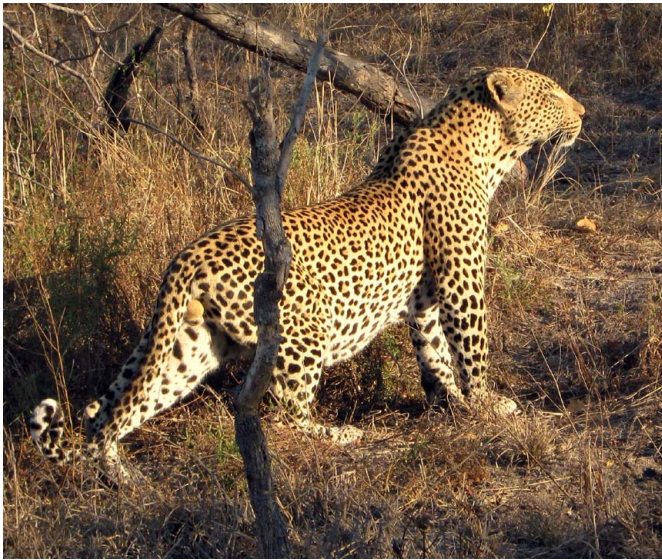
And you shall make a menorah...three cups made like almonds on each branch... four bowls like almonds on the candlestick... (Exodus 25:31, 33)

An attitude of *shekeidah* toward Torah is therefore a prerequisite for dealing with Ancient Greece:⁴¹

Be vigilant [*shokeid*] in learning Torah, and know what to answer a heretic... (Mishnah, *Pirkei Avos* 2:14)

This is undoubtedly stated with regard to Greek philosophy... (Maharal, *Nesivos Olam* 1, p. 62)

It is with zeal and vigilance that we must approach the Torah if it is going to help us tackle the ideology of Ancient Greece. The threat of assimilation is one that gnaws away at the foundations of Jewish beliefs. It is only with constant vigilance and dedication to Torah values that one can withstand it. The vigilance of the leopard is the key to the victory of Chanukah. ♦



PHOTOGRAPH: N. SLIFKIN

NOTES

- 1 H. B. Tristram, *The Natural History of the Bible* (London 1883), p. 113.
- 2 Heinrich Mendelssohn and Yoram Yom-Tov, *Fauna Palaestina: Mammalia of Israel*, p. 225.
- 3 Numbers 32:3. In Numbers 32:36 it is referred to as Bet-Nimrah.
- 4 Isaiah 15:6 and Jeremiah 48:34, describing the “waters of Nimrim.”
- 5 *Bechoros* 55a.
- 6 The leopard is also conspicuously absent from *Perek Shirah*, the Midrash which records the “songs” of various creatures and elements of the natural world.
- 7 See Eliezer ben Yehudah’s dictionary. Much earlier, Rabbi Pinchas Eliyahu Hurwitz of Vilna (d. 1821) in *Sefer HaBris* 1:14:6 translates *namer* as “tiger,” but he describes its coat as blotched and thus appears

to be describing the leopard.

8 Avraham Even-Shoshan, *The Even-Shoshan Dictionary*.

9 See R. G. Burton, *The Tiger Hunters* (London: Hutchinson, 1936), p. 189.

10 The “lion of Bei Ila’i” is further discussed in the chapter on lions.

11 This is as per the more accurate Kapach edition, which has *baheros*, whereas the regular edition has *nekudos*.

12 Radak and *Metzudas David* ad loc.

13 *Metzudas Tziyon* and Malbim. Cf. Talmud, *Shabbos* 107b, which relates the term as used in this verse to a wound.

14 These shall be discussed in their respective chapters in this encyclopedia.

15 See Binyamin Mussafia, *Mussaf Ha-Aruch*; Menachem Dor, *HaChai BiYemei HaMikra, HaMishnah VeHaTalmud*, p. 64; Avraham Ofir-Shemesh, “The *Bardelas* in Ancient Rabbinic Literature: A Test Case of Geographic Identification” (in Hebrew), *Mo’ed* 14 (5764) pp. 70-80.

16 *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 13:5.

17 Malbim to Daniel 7:6.

18 Rav Saadiah Gaon.

19 Genesis 9:26, 10:2.

20 See Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Talmud*, p. 1060, apparently contrasting the unqualified term *az* with the term *az panim*.

21 Bill Clark, *High Hills and Wild Goats* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), p. 110.

22 Maharal, *Ner Mitzvah* p.16. The word “brazen” also refers to something made out of brass, a strong alloy of copper. Maharal also points out that in another prophetic vision, Greece was represented by copper.

23 Cf. *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni Vayikra* 11:546.

24 *Shem MiShmuel*, Chanukah 5673, sixth night; Rabbi Gedalyah Schorr, *Ohr Gedalyahu, Mo’adim*, Chanukah 5, 6.

25 According to Rashi, however, the leopard is not directly alluded to in the verse, but is instead simply used a symbol of infidelity.

26 *Sefer haMakneh*.

27 R. Chanoch Henoch ben R. Yosef David Teitelbaum (1884-1943), in Responsa *Yad Chanoch*, questions Rabbi Ovadiah’s statement based on the Talmudic dictum (*Bechoros* 8a) that they could not interbreed since their gestations periods are not equal. He claims that there is a printing error and that Rabbi Ovadiah was actually talking about a lion interbreeding with a tiger or leopard.

28 But see the comments of Rashah to *Chullin* 79b where he retracts, at least in part, this objection.

29 Frank William Walbank, *The Hellenistic World* (Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 222-223.

30 For a mystical explanation of why a *mamzer* is described as feeling no shame, see Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlap, *Mei Marom*, vol. 13 p. 40.

31 Rashi ad loc.

32 *Pnei Yehoshua* ad loc.

33 Rabbi Ovadiah MiBartenura ad loc. and to *Pirkei Avos* 5:20.

34 In the words of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin: “It is forbidden for a student to accept the words of his teacher when he has difficulties with them. And sometimes, the truth will lie with the student. This is just as a small branch can ignite a larger one” (*Ruach Chaim* to *Avos* 1:4).

35 Rabbi Tzaddok HaKohen, *Tzidkas HaTzaddik* 167; *Dover Tzedek, Mitzvos asei* 1; *Kometz HaMinchah* 2:6.

36 Rambam, *Hilchos Melachim* 12:1, takes the position that the verses are allegorical.

37 Cf. Malbim, who explains that this alludes to Ancient Greece entering the Land of Israel.

38 Rashi, Radak, *Metzudas David, Metzudas Tziyon*, Malbim.

39 Brian Bertram, in *The Unwin Encyclopedia of Mammals*, p. 45.

40 Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, commentary to *parashas Terumah*, regarding the Menorah.

41 Cf. Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain, *Shem MiShmuel, Mikeitz* 5680.