IF ANIMALS COULD TALK
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

This is our dog Mitzi – her full name, is Key Mitzion Tetzei Torah Mishler Moskovitz – but we just call her Mitzi. We think she's the most adorable thing in the world and spend a great deal of time providing voice over for her various expressions and behaviours

At the core of it all is the burning question that every pet owner has asked at some point as they stare quizzically into the eyes dogs and goldfish and every imaginable pet in between.

"If animals could speak, what would they say?" The Torah actually offers us an answer to this question, with an incredible talking donkey in the starring role of this week's Torah portion.

Here's the context: The Israelites are in the midst of their forty-year-long wanderings through the desert, during which they pass through the land of Moab. Balak, King of Moab, freaks out – there's this huge nation of foreigners parading through his land, and he worries that "this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field" (Numbers 22:4).

Which is bible speak for, this massive migration of people is going to take all of our jobs, food and tax dollars, some things of course never change.

Anyhow, Balak calls the non-Israelite prophet, Balaam, to curse the Israelites, because Balak has heard that Balaam's curses and blessings are very effective. Balaam saddles his ass (a phrase that every school age child laughed at, at least once and most adults remember

laughing at even today), and heads off to deliver the curse.

On the way, the donkey sees something Balaam doesn't: an angel of G-d in the middle of the road, holding a sword. The donkey swerves out of the way – understandably! Balaam, not seeing the angel, beats the donkey and turns her back into the road. The angel blocks the way again, this time between two vineyard fences, so the donkey swerves once more and presses Balaam's leg into the wall. Again, Balaam beats the donkey and turns her back to where he wants to go. Finally, the angel places herself in a spot so narrow that swerving isn't possible, but still Balaam doesn't notice them. The donkey sits down in the middle of the road. Again, Balaam beats her. This by the way may be the direct origin of the expression, "sit your ass down".

At this point, the donkey has had just about enough of Balaam's violence towards her, as well as his inability to see a quite-striking-angel-with-a-sword right in front of him. G-d has had enough of Balaam's behaviour, too, so God opens the donkey's mouth, cue the theme song from the 1960s sitcom Mr. Ed:

"What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" (Numbers 22:28).

The donkey's cry is the cry of all animals who have ever been harmed by humans – what did I ever do to deserve this?!

Balaam is so angry that he doesn't realise that something truly incredible is happening right before his eyes (and ears) – that his donkey is actually talking! He just ploughs on in rage and says to the donkey, "You have made a

mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you" (Numbers 22:29).

Balaam, at first, is much more worried about how stupid the donkey has made him look, rather than that

a) his donkey is talking
b) his donkey is actually calling him out quite righteously.

Balaam is quite ready to kill the donkey just to prove that he won't be humiliated. The donkey responds with a wise rebuke: "Look, I am the ass (giggle, giggle) that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?" (Numbers 22:30).

Balaam responds with a sheepish, "No."

It is then that Balaam is able to see the angel, and he bows low to the ground. The angel takes the donkey's side, saying, "Why have you beaten your ass these three times? It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious to me. And when the ass saw me, she shied away because of me those three times. If she had not shied away from me, you are the one I should have killed, while sparing her" (Numbers 22:32-33).

The angel tells Balaam off for his treatment of the donkey, and goes even further, making it clear to Balaam that the donkey has just saved his life.

According to the Torah, if animals could talk, they'd stand up for themselves. They'd call us out on our behaviour, challenging our violence towards them. And, they might even have perspectives on the world that we don't. Just as Balaam's donkey was able to see the angel

that he couldn’t, so animals might have insight about our society or our ecosystem that we don’t.

What might a breading house raised hen have to say about the way she and her egg-laying colleagues are treated? What might an orangutan, whose rainforest habitat is being destroyed, say about the production of palm oil? What might the birds flying over our heads or settling in the trees in our local park have to say about air pollution? They have all experienced the impact of human behaviour on our planet in a visceral way, if they could speak could we handle the rebuke they would most certainly give us?

Inspite of our best attempts to narrate Mitzi’s every eyebrow raise and tail wag animals do not “talk”, nor do they have the “power of speech” per se, but they certainly do communicate.

For one, they communicate with each other through bodily reactions such as hair bristling or emitting various scents, and also through body language via various bodily movements or actions. They also communicate via sounds which convey a large variety of messages concerning mating, food supply, danger, etc.

However, from a Torah point of view, this is not considered language or speech, which is viewed as a special power or faculty that arises from the uniquely human soul that is lacking in animals.

This is based on the fact that the verse (Gen. 1:20) describing the creation of all living things refers to their vital force only as nefesh (animal soul), while human beings are described (Gen. 2:7) as having not only a

nefesh, but also ruach (spirit) and neshama (intelligent soul).

That being said, many animals have an “extra-sensory perception”, which gives them a heightened awareness above that of humans. Like that of the donkey that sees what Balaam is too angry or busy or mission driven to see right before his eyes.

This is true on a physical plane such as animals sensing oncoming earthquakes, avalanches, storms or other natural phenomena. And while humans may not be directly aware of what’s happening, animals communicate these pending occurrences through their behavior to those who “know” their language.

So too on a spiritual plane, animals have a heightened sense of awareness which enables them to detect

spiritual forces that humans are generally not aware of. Bilaam's donkey, was aware of the presence of the angel in its path even before it speaks it, while the "prophet" had no idea of its presence and beat his "dumb" donkey for stubbornly stopping in its tracks.

The Maharal, a 16th century Talmudic scholar, Jewish mystic, and philosopher explains (Be'er Hagolah, 5 p. 98) that it is the very mental superiority of humans over animals which makes them less aware than animals of these subtle physical and spiritual phenomena. Our heightened human intellect dulls or masks the intuitive sense that animals exploit.

The kabbalists teach that just as animal behavior can communicate pending physical events, so too those who know how to read animals' interactions with spiritual

forces can receive prescience regarding events on the spiritual plane.

But human hubris, not unlike that of Balaam in our parasha this week drowns out even this attempt at animals trying to communicate with humans.

Perhaps the best example beyond our story this shabbat is one from 100 years ago in the trenches of World War I. There amongst the muck and the horror a young engineer named Hugh Lofting was so moved by the sufferings of innocent horses and mules drafted into the horrifying vortex of human destruction that he couldn't sleep at night. Needing something to say in letters home to his small children, he invented a certain doctor to minister to the animals. This remarkable man could, Lofting explained to his children, talk to the animals. He would name his doctor "Dr. Dolittle" and place him in

Victorian England amidst all that period's rich discoveries of the living world.

Perhaps the Dolittle dilemma has been miscast. In the same way that Bilaam misses what his donkey is trying to say three times until in the most unlikely and improbable way the donkey actually speaks with human language.

Maybe instead of wanting to learn to talk to the animals, our greater need is to quiet down and learn to listen to them. To hear what they are trying to tell us, it may not be all cute and goofy and snarky and baby talk like we often assume our Mitzi is say to us when she looks with a half tilted head at her humans who sit there staring at our phones responding more to beeps than barks. Maybe she is saying, like the donkey in the parasha, don't you see the miracle right in front of your eyes, get off your

ass and go for a walk, appreciate God creation. Or as Balaam ultimately puts it in our parasha.

Ma tovu ohalecha Ya'akov, mishkenotecha Israel!

How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!

See the world through your dog's (or cat's or rabbit or goldfish) eyes and you might see everything like you've never seen it before.