

According to the Talmud (*Eruvin* 100b), had the Torah not been given, we could have learned many basic principles of decent behavior by observing the animal world:

Rabbi Yohanan said: Had the Torah not been given, we would have learned modesty from the cat, honesty and industriousness from the ant, chastity from the dove, and [conjugal] manners from fowl.

This teaching, although it is admirable in finding praiseworthy elements in the smallest bits of God's creation, doesn't mention that we would do well to be very selective regarding what we learn from which animal. For example, don't dart half way across a street, wait for a car to come, run half way back, turn around, and run across the street as close to the car as you can; don't learn traffic safety from squirrels. Don't roll around in a puddle and coat yourself with mud to keep cool and protect your skin like a pig. Try air conditioning and sunblock. I'd wouldn't suggest emulating certain lizards, which defecate all over themselves when threatened to make themselves unappetizing to predators, nor would I take cologne advice from a skunk. I wouldn't recommend turning to the alligator, which can go 12 months without eating, for diet advice. New fathers would do well to ignore the polar bear for advice on child rearing, as they, along with hamsters, aquarium fish, wolf spiders, and some cats, eat their young.

Despite these misgivings about what lessons we can learn from the animal world, this piece of Talmud came to mind after I heard a story about a book about bees by Thomas Seeley, a professor of Biology at Cornell University. I already had learned quite a bit about how bees operate thanks to Joe Chrenka, who let me participate in the hiving of some of his honeybees last year, but there was so much more to learn.

Dr. Seeley's book describes how humans learned to decipher the language of bees. The theme of the book, "Honeybee Democracy," is how a colony of honeybees has evolved into the perfect democratic decision-making body.

Here's what happens: Sometimes, a bee hive will have so many baby bees that it becomes too crowded. The worker bees feed one of the larva a special diet, and a second queen is born. The old queen, along with half the hive, go out into the world to seek own fortune and a new hive. They settle temporarily on something like a tree branch, making a big ball of about 10,000 bees. About 300 of the older, more experienced bees then act as scouts, and go off in search of a place to build a new hive, such as holes in trees, a wood pile, or any kind of sheltered space, such as your chimney.

These scout bees return and announce their finds by dancing. The waggle dance, as it's called, has a series of steps that would make Arthur Murray proud. It tells the other bees the direction and distance of the potential hive. If a bee *really likes the site*, she will dance her directions over and over and over, literally hundreds of times. That way, more and more of her sister scouts see the dance, know where to go, and can fly off and check for themselves.

If the site is just OK, the second wave of bees will do a ho-hum, say, 10-repetition dance. But if the site is spectacular — high off the ground, narrow opening, facing the right direction, lots of honey storage space inside — then they will give it a spectacular, say, 300-round dance, so more scouts will know where to go. If they like the site, pretty soon everybody is doing the same dance. Bees vote by dancing themselves into consensus.

Professor Seeley says that he has never seen a bee who is so absolutely convinced that his spot the right one that he never gives up dancing. There are no stubborn bees. He believes that once a

scout bee has finished her dance — no matter how strongly she feels about her site — *she stops caring*. There are no fanatic bees. If, after dancing a certain number of times, other bees have not joined in, it seems like there is an internal, neurophysiological process that causes the scout to gradually and automatically lose her motivation to dance for a site, even one that is high in quality.

Let's imagine what a Board meeting or other public discussion - or even some deliberation in the House of Representatives! - would look like if it was conducted according to the five lessons of highly effective bees:

Bee Lesson 1 - The Decision-Making Group is composed of Individuals with Shared Interests and Mutual Respect

The shared interest is that a colony in search of a home succeeds or fails as a single colony. If the bees break up into several smaller groups, each trying to create a home in one of the potential sites, the entire group will die. Bees need unity of purpose and mission to survive. The equivalent Jewish value is embodied in a midrash about the lulav and etrog. This midrash teaches that unity within a Jewish community is essential because no single group of Jews can achieve atonement alone - they need all varieties of Jews together under the umbrella of the larger Jewish community. In this midrash, the four species in the lulav and etrog represent four types of Jews. An etrog, with its distinctive taste and a wonderful smell, represents people who are both learned and do a lot of mitzvot. The lulav has taste, but no smell; Myrtle has taste, but no smell. Together, they represent the groups of people who have only one positive attribute -- they do a lot of mitzvot but don't know a lot of Torah, or they study a lot of Torah but don't do many mitzvot. The fourth species, the willow, which has neither smell nor taste, represents Jews who neither know Torah nor do mitzvot. One cannot observe the mitzvah of shaking the lulav and etrog properly without having all four species held together. Similarly, according to this midrash, one cannot achieve atonement within the Jewish community unless all types of Jews are gathered together. We learn from the bees that ultimately, a community will survive or fail based on whether we can find ways of creating inclusive community, of cooperating with each other.

Bee Lesson 2 - Minimize the Leader's Influence on the Group's Thinking

The swarm's power is evenly diffused. No single scout has a more important voice than any other. All are equally valued. Remember - leaders don't always have all the answers. Our Biblical model is Moses. The daughters of a man named Tzelofhad approached him after the death of their father. Current inheritance law said that daughters could not inherit, but the five daughters had no brothers. They asked Moses if they could inherit their father's estate. He had the humility to admit that he didn't know the answer, so he consulted with God. In the hive process, the leader is an impartial information seeker. In the human model, the leader ought to facilitate open discussion, rather than pushing one pre-determined agenda.

Bee Lesson 3 - Seek Diverse Solutions

Bees investigate 10 - 20 or more possible hive sites, and choose based on how each site matches their instinctual knowledge of what an ideal site would look like. All input is welcomed. The site ultimately chosen might be an tree nook overlooked by dozens of previous bees, until it was finally spotted. In human groups, most of the time brainstorming among the existing group doesn't work because it doesn't bring in anything new. To be truly creative, we need to break outside of our current boundaries and bring in new people. In the Biblical model, leadership

comes from unlikely places, generally from the outside. Moses was an outsider to the Israelite people, having been raised on the Pharaoh's house. King David was the youngest son of a small family. When we bring in new people, we bring in a fresh set of eyes and ears and a different life experience that can prove invaluable.

Bee Lesson 4 - Debate Honestly

Among these many sites that the group of bees investigate, individual bees will initially argue for a particular site, but if it has weaknesses, they are honest about them. Bees dance shorter waggle dances for sites they see as inferior. Jewish business ethics instruct us not to package the bad tomatoes under the good ones. When we sell something, whether it be a product or an idea, we are to be honest about its weaknesses and shortcomings. Many disagreements and long debates could be significantly shortened were we to embrace a measure of objectivity about our proposals.

Bee Lesson 5 - Once a Decision is Made, Let Go

When evidence accumulates towards one site, those advocating different sites will stop dancing. When the group makes a decision, even those who disagree support the decision. To do otherwise would be dividing the swarm, causing its death. Human groups would do well to heed this principle: When the majority is clearly settling on a solution, stop arguing. When a decision doesn't go your way, don't leave the group in protest. The Jewish teaching here comes from two of our early sages, Hillel and Shammai. The two of them disagreed on virtually every important issue of the day, including what constituted an illegitimate marriage. Yet, their children and the students married each other - they never stopped treating each other with respect, they never excommunicated each other.

The reason that this book captured my attention, the reason I am sharing it with you today, is that like Rabbi Yohanan, I believe we have something to learn from the bees. The lesson I'd like you to take away today is this: From honeybees, we can learn to be responsible citizens and good members of a group.

- We learn that a group is made of diverse people who all support the same basic mission, whether to find a new hive, create Jewish community or uphold the constitution of the United States.
- We learn that no single individual, president, committee chair, or rabbi, has control over the decisions of the group. Decisions are made by the collective group based on an analysis of how a given decision achieves the mission of the group.
- We learn that a group needs to constantly broaden the scope of its thinking, seeking a range of solutions to any given problem. We do this by attracting new people, because new people bring different ideas and fresh energy to our mission.
- We learn that we need to acknowledge both the weaknesses of our ideas and the strengths of the ideas of others. We should not wed ourselves to any given position based on self-interest, wealth, or power, but rather investigate all ideas honestly.
- Finally, we learn that the decision of the group supersedes the opinion of any individual. Don't keep harping on the same issues year after year. No matter how strongly you feel that you were right, accept that the group's decision was the right decision.

May our community live by the Five Lessons of Highly Effective Bees, and may we enjoy the sweetness and light¹ of God's presence in our midst, celebrating the holidays along with family, parents, children, or siblings; with warm and supportive friends around us; may our community come together around our vision of making every one of our decisions reflect Torah; and may we continue to be a place which enables each individual to find a spiritual path through Torah.

1. Thank you to Joe and Tracy Chrenka for the phrase "Sweetness and Light," the label under which they package and sell honey from their bees.