

THE SONG OF THE FOX



The fox says: **Woe is he who builds his house unjustly, and his upper rooms unlawfully. He works his fellow without remuneration; he does not pay him for his labor.**

In Torah literature, as well as in parables around the world, the fox is known to be sly and cunning, and this is apparent in many ways.

It is highly intelligent, and is keenly alert to its surroundings. It trots through the wild stealthily and cautiously, often glancing behind to check if it's being followed. The fox also has a sharp appearance, with a sinuous form, a pointed muzzle bearing twisted teeth, and sharply-pointed ears, with which it can hear prey or predator, far away.

With characteristic resourcefulness, it thrives across the globe in a wide range of habitats, managing to procure food for itself and its kits with great efficiency. It hunts alone, relying on skill instead of strength. Even when hunting within long vegetation, much taller than itself, the fox can leap out at its prey with astounding accuracy. Recent research indicates that foxes utilize Earth's magnetic field, coupled with their acute hearing, to discern both the direction and the distance of their prey.

The fox's burrow is typical of its style. It may dig its own burrow, but more often, it will seize the burrow of smaller animals. It will then make renovations, enlarging its length to 15 or 20 feet, and adding many openings, for air circulation and escape.

A fox is extremely difficult to catch. It is both fast and nimble; it can leap and dodge, slip into narrow crannies, and one species can even climb trees. Its bushy tail helps it maintain perfect balance. The fox is even known to employ tricks to shake off pursuers. For example, it may double back over its own tracks, or it may abruptly change direction and leap away from its tracks, or it may run over a shallow creek so as not to leave any tracks at all.

Sometimes, however, the fox's craftiness proves to be its own undoing. Indeed, cunning and wisdom do not always go together. Although the fox is omnivorous, with a widely varied diet, its nocturnal scavenging excursions often take it into nearby farmlands, and if

it's lucky, into the chicken-coop. Hence, it is a notorious pest and a long-time enemy of farmers, who will do their best to get rid of it.

Although the fox obviously intends no evil, from our perspective, it symbolizes one who takes advantage over others by trickery, and its feud with the farmers demonstrates that even the most cunning of thieves eventually pays for his greediness. Thus, the fox's song is the lamentation of the prophet Yirmiyahu: **Woe is he who builds his house unjustly, and his upper rooms unlawfully. He works his fellow without remuneration; he does not pay him for his labor.** With these words the prophet admonishes one who hires workers to build him a mansion and then neglects to pay them. This type of trickery is especially expressed by the fox in its seizing of others' burrows. The fox's behavior brings to heart that it is the hard-working laborer who truly deserves to eat the fruit of his toil, not the cunning trickster. This is the ethic that the fox's nature conveys— and this its song.

The Sages employed fox parables to convey important moral lessons in a vivid and striking manner. Sometimes, the fox represented the wily Yetzer Hara, the evil inclination; other times, it represented how one must be shrewd and even resort to counter-trickery, in order to outfox the Yetzer Hara. Instead of allowing ourselves to become its daily prey, falling naïvely into the same pitfalls over and over, we can choose to slip away from sinful habits, to channel our physical drive beneficially, and to prudently avoid arousing temptation in the first place. It is regarding tricks such as these, the Sages teach, that one must be cunning in the service of Hashem.

However, generally speaking, trickery and unfaithfulness are antithetical to Judaism. Hashem's seal is truth and He abhors falsehood and guile. Trickery may appear to be profitable, but ultimately, that which is unjust cannot last in Hashem's world. It says in Pirkei Avos, that the world stands on three matters: truth, justice, and peace. Accordingly, when people cannot trust one another, society falls apart. The glory of Yerushalayim in the times of the Beis HaMikdash was unimaginable, and it was largely due to the impeccable standard of justice and honesty that was prevalent. It was only when this standard decayed that the great metropolis fell into ruin.

Quite poignantly, on account of the people's foxlike social conduct, the site of the holy Temple Mount became inhabited by foxes instead.

If we wish to see Yerushalayim and the Beis HaMikdash rebuilt, then we must build our lives and societies, brick by brick, with straight honesty. It may be challenging to do so at times, but the fox's song reminds us that only such a structure is worth building.