

PARASHAT BE'HAR-5774, 2014

Chazal [our Sages] taught us {Gemara Berachot 40a} that before partaking of a meal, a person must first feed his animals and only then may he sit down to eat his own meal. This teaching is based on a section of the Torah which we are all familiar with because it's the second paragraph in the parasha of Shema [Devarim 11:15], "I shall provide grass in your fields for your cattle, and [then] you will eat and you will be satisfied". Animals come first.

However, here in our parasha the Torah tells us that, first of all, during the Shemithah year, all produce of the land is rendered ownerless. Then we read, [26:6,7] the owner is permitted to take from the produce for his own needs and his animals' needs, [provided that he allows equal access to everyone one else as well.] But clearly we find והיה שבת הארץ לכם לאכלה ולבהמתך ולחיה אשר בארצך "The Shemithah produce of the land shall be yours to eat....And for your animal and for your beast that is in your land" . Here the Torah emphatically states "*LACHEM*"- for you" prior to "*LIV'HEM'TECHA*"- "for your animal". HaShem is telling us that WE are to eat first and only then should we have concern for our animals. How do we reconcile these two Torah directives?

There is no doubt that if a person has only a limited amount of food, that **his** need for eating supersedes that of animals. The Torah requirement in Devarim, in the Shema, is that when a person has sufficient food for both himself and his animal, the responsibility to his animal comes first. But here comes the chidush of our parasha. That in the event the food does not belong to the owner of the animal, but is being given to him as a gift the person giving the gift does NOT have a responsibility to his friend's animal. In fact, it would be viewed, under such circumstances, as disrespectful to feed an animal prior to its owner. Therefore, during the Shemithah year, when a person **does not own his produce**, but HaShem is gifting it to him, he may eat prior to his animal.

This will explain why Rivka gave Eliezer water to drink prior to feeding his camels. [Bereishit 24:18,19]. The Magen Avraham is bothered by this question and he answers that the rule of feeding animals before human beings is ONLY regarding food to eat but when it come to water to drink a human being always come s before the animals. With this principle he also answers why when our ancestors were in the desert and they asked Moshe for water, HaShem tells Moshe and Aharon "Speak to the rock before their eyes that it shall give its waters. You shall bring forth for them water from the rock and give drink to the assembly and to their animals [Bamidbar 20:7]. Again, says the Magen Avraham that when it come to drinking –human beings come first and only then- the animals afterwards. Here too we can say, that Moshe received this water as a gift from HaShem, therefore he had to distribute this water to Bnei Yisrael first and only afterwards was he permitted to feed it to the animals.

An important lesson we learn as to how we view the gifts we receive.