



When Bears Attack

A Purim Essay

By Rabbi Natan Slifkin

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I. The Persian Bear

The prophet Daniel had a dream in which he saw several beasts, one of which was a bear:

Daniel spoke, and said, “I saw in my vision by night... four great beasts... The first was like a lion... And behold another beast, a second, like a bear, and it raised itself up on one side, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, Arise, devour much flesh” (Daniel 7:2–5)

In Daniel’s vision, the four beasts represented four empires under which the Jews were subjects. The lion represented the Babylonian empire of Nebuchadnezzar. After the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple and dispersed the Jews, they were themselves conquered by the combined armies of King Darius of Media and King Cyrus of Persia. In Daniel’s prophecy, the Medo-Persian kingdom is represented by the bear. It “raised itself up on one side,” just as the balance of power shifted from Media to Persia, and “it had three ribs in its mouth,” just as the Medo-Persian kingdom consumed Lydia, Babylon and Egypt. The Talmud further explains some of the parallels to the bear:

“...And behold another beast, a second, like a bear,” (Daniel 7:5) – Rabbi Yosef taught that this refers to the Persians, who eat and drink like a bear, and are clothed in flesh like a bear, and are hairy like a bear, and have no rest like a bear. (Talmud, *Megillah* 11a)

The Persians “eat and drink like a bear.” Bears eat an enormous range of food. Brown bears feed on live animals such as moose and sheep, carrion, rodents, fish, grubs, moths, ants and other insects, berries, fruit, grasses, roots, bulbs, honey, and nuts. They

consume huge quantities of food daily. This voracious appetite parallels the greed of the Persians, as we see in the excesses of Achashverosh's banquet.

The Persians were "clothed in flesh like a bear." Bears are the largest terrestrial carnivores in the world. Brown bears can occasionally weigh as much as 1800 pounds. Of all carnivores, it is the bear that represents physicality to the extreme. This, too, symbolizes the physical excesses of the Persian Empire.

The Persians are also "hairy like a bear." Brown bears are covered with a heavy shaggy fur that ranges in color from black to brown to reddish brown to blond. They have dense fur close to the skin and long, coarse guard hairs. In summer they shed much of the lower layer of fur, giving them a shaggy look. Persians were also renowned for their excess of body hair.

Finally, the Persians "have no rest, like a bear." The home ranges of brown bears are among the largest of all land mammals, extending up to eight hundred square miles. Bears spend most of their time wandering around looking for food. Likewise, the Persian empire was constantly expanding as they sought to increase their material wealth.

II. Joseph and the Bear

When Joseph's brothers kidnapped him and presented their father with his bloodstained coat, Jacob bemoaned the fate that had befallen his son:

"And he said, My son's coat! A wild beast has consumed him..." (Genesis 37:33).

The Midrash notes that Jacob had unwittingly hit upon the truth by way of metaphor:

Rabbi Huna said, the Divine Spirit was enkindled within him; "A wild animal has consumed him" – this is the wife of Potiphar. (Midrash Bereishis Rabbah 84:19)

But Potiphar's wife, who tried to seduce Joseph, was not merely any sort of "wild animal." Another Midrash describes her as a particular type of wild animal – the bear:

Joseph said, When I was in my father's house, my father would look for the best portion, and he would give it to me, and my brothers would give me the evil eye; now that I am here, I am grateful to You, that I am in tranquility. The Holy One said to him, Layabout! By your life, I shall set the bear upon you! (*Midrash Bereishis Rabbah* 87:4)

Why is the bear used as the motif in this story of Joseph? The answer relates to the use of the bear as the symbol of Persia. The ferocity represented by the bear is used against the Jewish people in a specific situation. In order to understand this properly, we need to understand how bears differ from man-eaters such as lions and leopards in their threat to man.

III. The Cause of Bear Attacks

In Stephen Herrero's book *Bear Attacks: Their Cause and Avoidance*, one of the first chapters is titled by what is considered the primary type of bear attack: "Sudden Encounters With Grizzlies." The chapter begins:

"Hikers, hunters, or other persons traveling on foot in bear country may suddenly confront a grizzly. If this happens, a grizzly may attack because it perceives a threat."

Attacks by bears are not like attacks by lions, leopards or crocodiles. The latter attack as part of a planned hunt. In the case of bear attacks, on the other hand, the attack occurs simply because both attacker and victim are nonchalantly taking a stroll in the woods and happen across each other unexpectedly. The bear instantly arouses itself from its relaxed state and suddenly become dangerous.

Exile is a period of banishment during which the Jewish people are not able to live in Israel and fulfill all the commandments of the Torah. This is supposed to be an unsatisfactory state of affairs for the Jewish people, one that spurs them to improve their observance of the Torah and anxiously await redemption.

Unfortunately, people sometimes miss the point. They do not miss having a Temple, and they feel no stimulus to improve their ways. They relax in exile and feel comfortable. But if you go down to exile this way, you are in for a big surprise. For it is against this sort of complacency that the bear is sent.

One example of this is with Joseph. As a slave in Egypt, with his father mourning his presumed death, he was not supposed to be content with his state of affairs. But as he rose in position to be in charge of the house of his master Potifar, he became complacent about his lifestyle:

"Joseph was beautiful of form and appearance" (Genesis 39:6) — since he saw himself as a ruler, he began eating and drinking and curling his hair. God said: "Your father is in mourning and you are curling your hair? I will set the bear upon you!" Immediately, "his master's wife lifted her eyes toward Joseph, and she said, Lie with me..." (Rashi ad loc.)

The bear is always wandering and has no rest, says the Talmud. Such is supposed to be the lot of the Jew in exile. If the Jew considers himself at rest, and relaxes, he will experience a surprise encounter with a bear that will make him pay the price.

IV. Avoiding Bear Attacks

In *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*, Herrero is very clear about how best to avoid them: "Your best weapon to minimize the risk of a bear attack is your brain. Use it as soon as you contemplate a trip to bear country, and continue to use it throughout your stay... Careful travel in grizzly country requires alertness, attention, intelligence, and knowledge. Alertness and attention to your immediate environment are important."

Joseph's bear was the wife of Potiphar who attempted to seduce him. Yet Joseph managed to overcome this test. The Midrash presents an unusual etymological exegesis regarding the Torah's description of his accomplishments:

“And God was with Joseph, and he was a successful (*matzliach*) man” (Genesis 39:2). Rabbi Berechyah said, A jumping man, as it says, “And they forded (*vetzalchu*) the Jordan before the king” (Samuel II 19:18). (*Midrash Bereishis Rabbah* 86:4)

The phrase used to describe the fording of the Jordan refers them leaping over it in a light and joyous way. Since the Hebrew word used, *vetzalchu*, is similar to the word used to describe Joseph's success, *matzliach*, the Midrash tells us that this sheds light upon the nature of his accomplishment. The Midrash continues:

It is comparable to a bear that was standing in the street, decorated with precious stones and pearls. They said, “Anyone who jumps on it can take what is on it.” There was one wise man there who said to them, “You are looking with what is on it, and I am looking at its teeth!” Rabbi Berechyah said, “That she-bear is doing nothing other than jump at you, and yet you are greater than that!”

Joseph was the great jumper, because the more that Potiphar's wife jumped at him, the more he jumped away. Joseph ultimately triumphed because he shed his mood of tranquility and going along with whatever happened in Potiphar's house. He was a “jumping man,” not relaxing in the bear's company, but jumping out of the way. True victory over the enemy means using their trait for the good; like the bear, Joseph was able to instantly arouse himself from his relaxed state.

So, too, was the situation in the Persian exile at the time of Achashverosh. The Jews indulged themselves in his feast, ignoring their position in exile. Their complacency called for an attack by the bear. Sure enough, Achashverosh turned against them and sealed a decree to annihilate them. It was only when they returned to God through fasting and prayer that the decree was rescinded. “On that night, the king's sleep was disturbed” (Esther 6:1). Simply speaking, this verse refers to King Achashverosh; but traditionally, any reference to “the king” in the Megillah alludes to the King of Kings. Only when they woke themselves up from their relaxation did God wake up (so to speak) from His slumber and intervene in helping the Jewish people. They finally learned the lesson that the Jew is never to relax and enjoy exile, but instead we must always be on the alert for spiritual dangers and actively yearn for redemption.

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