



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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**KITISA / כי תשא**

## **SERMON TITLE:**

**Killer Whales**

**A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE**

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Ki Tisa

## Killer Whales

A friend of mine recently took his kids to one of those water parks in Florida—you know, the ones where professional trainers ride killer whales live in front of huge crowds.

Well, I told him to be careful because these things are wild animals and you never know what's going to happen. Yes, I know that it's not likely a killer whale is going to jump out of the tank and eat someone in the audience, but there have been cases where they have attacked and even killed the trainers, in front of live audiences. And besides, I'm Jewish, and we Jews always find something to worry about.

But seriously, for those of you who remember, there was that killer whale in Sea World in Orlando that drowned his trainer last year. Turns out that the same whale had previously drowned two other people since 1991.

After the incident, a whale expert said that killer whales are very intelligent, sensitive creatures, and it could have been that this particular whale felt trapped or had gotten bored.

Which reminds me of an article I once read. It was by a woman who decided to use the same reward techniques used on whales in water parks on her husband.

Her husband would always lose his car keys and end up running around the house screaming and yelling, and they would always end up arguing as a result.

But the next time it happened, she decided not to mix in at all. Usually she would join him in the hunt for the keys or express her “appreciation” that he never put the keys in a set place—but this time, she decided to do what she’d learned by watching the Sea World animal trainers when they’d act up, and not do anything.

So now, while her husband was looking for the keys, she didn’t say a word. He kept on looking until he found his keys, he calmed down, and everything was peaceful once again.

She was so excited at how well it worked that she almost wanted to toss him a fish, just like they do at Sea World.

So now that that killer whale had unfortunately killed another person, I figured that they would put it down once and for all. But to my surprise, I heard that the park management announced that they’d continue working with the animal as always.

According to Jewish law, an animal that kills a person must be executed. Maimonides in his Laws of Damages (Chapter 10, Law 3) states: “Any animal, beast or bird that kills a human is stoned [to death].” It sounds cruel, but the simple reason for this is that the creature now constitutes a public danger, and so before it kills another person, G-d forbid, it needs to be “dealt with.”

In the case of the killer whale, which killed not one but three people, making it not a killer whale but a “serial killer whale,” the question of what to do seems clear.

But in truth, things are different here. Maimonides may tell us that a killer animal must be killed before it kills again—but he also says something very interesting about a different situation.

In Laws of Damages, Chapter 6, Law 5, Maimonides states: "Bulls used for sport which are trained to gore each other are not deserving of death even if they kill a person." Why? Because their trainers drive the animals crazy, starving them so that they run wild and kill each other so that they put on a good show.

As we all know, this sort of depravity was accepted in the times of the Romans. Therefore, in such cases, the bull is not at fault and you aren't allowed to kill it.

So, back to our killer whale, the whale here is not either at fault. In order to train it, they drive it crazy so that it does all sorts of acrobatic tricks—so it's no surprise that such things happen. It's certainly not the whale's fault—and, this being the case, the expert was right that we're dealing with a very sensitive creature here.

Additionally, we've got all these animal-cruelty groups like PETA who claim that what they do to these animals is a crime. Their claim is that such animals belong in the Atlantic, not in a giant swimming pool, and so their suffering should be stopped and they should be left alone in peace in their natural habitats. According to them, these attacks occur because the whale are not in their natural habitats—in other words, their environments cause them to attack people. That's also why such animal-rights groups believe that we should set the killer whales free and return them to nature.

On the other hand, Sea World's people will tell you that since these whales have lived in captivity for years if not decades, if you suddenly put them back in the oceans, they will simply die. They are no longer used to conditions in the wild.

In response, animal-rights activists will say that yes, if you just drop them back into the sea without any preparation, they will indeed die—but if you do it very slowly with the right “dosage” and with guidance by professional animal behaviorists who understand how whales think, you’ll succeed in re-accustoming the whale to life in the great sea.

And, as you may have suspected, all this brings us to our weekly Torah portion.

We read in this week’s Parshah about the *Cheit HaEigel*, the Sin of the Golden Calf.

Moshe Rabbeinu was up on Mt. Sinai, and when he’s ready to come down to the people after 40 days, he hears from G-d Himself the terrible news: “Go down because your nation has been destructive... they veered fast from the path... they made themselves a molded calf... and they said, ‘These are your G-d, O Israel!’ ” (Shmos 32:7-8). And all this happened only 40 days after G-d revealed himself on Mt. Sinai, when every single individual heard G-d directly say, “I am the L-rd Your G-d... You shall not have other gods before Me...”

Now Moses, the great lover of all Israel, the greatest defense lawyer the Jewish nation ever had, immediately began praying and offering words of defense for the Jewish people. And here is the first time the Torah reveals to us what he exactly said: “Why, O L-rd, shall Your anger flare against Your nation which You took out of the land of Egypt...?”

So along comes the Midrash and asks a basic question: “Why did Moses see it fit to mention the Exodus here?” In other words, where does the fact that the Jews were taken out of Egypt by G-d come in here? Why is it relevant here? There’s no apparent connection to the subject at hand!

But what Moshe was saying was this: "G-d: Where was it that you took them out from? Was it not from Egypt where they worshipped sheep?"

In other words, Moshe argued to G-d that You chose to bring the Jewish Nation down into exile in Egypt of all places, the world capital of idol worship. You left them there for 210 years. And now you're surprised that they went and made a Golden Calf?!

Thus, Moshe's first defense of the Jewish Nation, before he had even seen the Calf with his own eyes and before he argued that it would embarrass G-d before the Egyptians if G-d were to punish the Jews, was that "the environment did it."

This Midrash gives us the appropriate and practical answer on the question that every generation has asked: How is it possible that a generation that experienced the Splitting of the Sea and stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai went and made the Golden Calf? From this Midrash, however, we can learn just how much a person is affected by environmental factors like his house, his neighborhood and his neighbors.

Just like a whale is best suited for its own natural environment, and if it's not there it loses its equilibrium, so too does a Jew need to be in his "natural environment"—in a Jewish atmosphere. Thus, even if he doesn't know when Purim or another Jewish holiday is, someone else will remind him. But should the Jew end up in a strange place where there are no Jews, then he is liable to forget who and what he is. That's why Jews have always tried to live in appropriate Jewish neighborhoods.

When you find yourself in your natural habitat, then you are most confident and most secure—and, like a killer whale in the sea, you'll least likely to hurt anyone.

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