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Looking at the Monkey in the Mirror

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"Wow. Look, that one hasn't bleached her mustache," exclaimed a grandmother as she gazed at the mandrills at the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem. A mother who came with her daughter to the exhibition of cotton-top tamarin monkeys could not contain her amazement: "Believe me, even at Miriam's hair salon they don't do anything like that." A girl who stood in front of the hippopotamus exhibition said to her friend: "If you keep on eating bourekas for breakfast, you're also going to look like that."

This collection of random conversations was documented over the past two years by Dr. Idan Yaron, a sociologist. His extensive study, the first of its kind, portrays visitors to Israel's zoos. Yaron examined what brings people to the zoos, what they learn there and how they look at the animals.

Contrary to the popular perception among zoo directors in Israel and abroad, the visitors hardly ever come to learn about the animals, Yaron says. They come mainly to learn about themselves. During visits they play a kind of "mirror game."

"The animals serve as a kind of mirror in which the faces of human beings are reflected. The visitors see the advantages and disadvantages of human beings. The discussion surrounding the animals always comes back to the human and his characteristics," says Yaron. By observing the animals, the visitors engage with matters of parent-child relations, sex and gender, nutrition and external appearance.

Armed with a baseball cap, notebook and a pair of sharp ears, Yaron eavesdropped on zoo visitors without them knowing they were part of his research.

Later he went to zoos in London and Copenhagen to compare his findings. He intends to publish his results soon in a study with the provisional title: "What Does a Crocodile Say?"

The main sounds parents use to communicate with their children during a visit are "wow," "Oo-ha" and "Oi oi." "Parents communicate with their children by means of short, truncated sentences as though they are suffering from a shortage of breath," says Yaron. "They are in a constant state of affected amazement, wonder and incredulity.

"I remember I once heard a father at one of the exhibits going out of his mind with enthusiasm with his child. When they left, another father turned to him and asked what there was to see there, so the father, who a moment earlier had been firing up his son, says, 'Darn, there are just animals here.'"

It emerges that there are children and many parents who are not very familiar with animals; for whom stars of cartoons, animated films, television and books serve as mediators. This is why an elephant will remind visitors of Dumbo the Elephant, and they will compare a fawn to Bambi, heroes of Walt Disney films.

"A great many visitors are able to recognize an animal only through its representation," says Yaron. "The representation turns into the real thing. Without Timon, the meerkat from the film 'The Lion King,' it would be very difficult to interest visitors in meerkats."

In this context there is a gap between the secular public and the ultra-Orthodox public: The ultra-Orthodox, notes Yaron, who are not exposed to TV and cinema representations, "are left entirely behind."

Yaron discovered other significant differences between secular and ultra-Orthodox visitors to zoos. In one case he heard an ultra-Orthodox father turn to his son and say: "Don't worry; a few years from now the Bible researchers will also be inside a cage."

According to Yaron, "there are many things that ultra-Orthodox visitors find difficult to say in a direct way and it is easy and convenient for them to transmit the lesson by means of animals. Animals are similar to human beings in certain respects and at the same time they are not cultured."

As an example, Yaron notes a conversation among a group of ultra-Orthodox adults watching a penguin bring twigs to pad the nest he shared with his mate. "They have an intimacy room there," said one man to his wife, referring to the room where traditionally after their wedding a bride and groom are alone for the first time.

"He is bringing twigs there to pad the bed so they will be comfortable." Another ultra-Orthodox man who was standing near them responded: "This is called a husband who takes care of his wife. It is necessary to learn how to honor the wife."

And what is one of the most important stops for children on a visit? Not the encounter with the lions, nor with the giraffes, but the ice cream stand. "The ice cream experience at the zoo is a very central experience," explains Yaron. "This is the only place where the children can stick up for their right to choose. For them, the visit to the zoo is a march. The parents hardly ask them what they want. The ice cream is the only place where there is real, two-way communication with the children, when the children are allowed to choose their ice cream and express their preference."

A zoo or a picnic?

Thus, it appears that sometimes the food experience is one of the main focuses of a visit to a zoo in this country. "In Israel, not a moment goes by when the child isn't walking around with a packet of snacks during a visit," says Yaron.

At any moment it is possible to hear parents cajoling their children to eat, handing them packets of various snacks, fruit, chocolates and wafers. "The visit to the zoo is an experience that ranks with the experience of a picnic," says Yaron.

"Very often visitors to a zoo are frustrated because they can't barbecue meat there. You don't see such things at the zoos in Europe. There you don't see snacks. The children eat healthy food, usually during orderly breaks during the visit. The parents give them fruit or a sandwich and they themselves drink coffee from a thermos they have brought." Yaron discovered a whole string of differences between the culture of visiting zoos in Israel and visiting zoos in London and Denmark.

Whereas visitors in London relate to the animals as the main characters in the excursion, the Israeli visitor, having paid his good money, sees himself as the protagonist to whom rights and honors must be accorded.

Israeli visitors are perceived as a threat by the zoo staff because of their tendency to "take part" in the event, to grope, touch and feed the animals. At zoos in Denmark and England the staff allows itself a lower level of supervision and control of a more restrained audience.

Moreover, while zoo visitors in Israel tend to hurry past the various exhibits and pause only rarely at one of the animals, at the two zoos he observed in Europe the visitors roamed the zoos seemingly without any specific purpose and showed much greater interest in the various exhibits.

At the zoos in Israel, the staff makes a point of protecting visitors from sights that "arouse aversion" and do not feed the animals with dead prey. But at European zoos, feeding time is considered an attraction by the visitors, who watch animals devour dead rabbits or a zebra corpse. Tomorrow Yaron is slated to present his findings for the first time at the annual conference of the Israel Zoo Association, hosted by the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem.