

## “Beast and Human”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

A prayer recited each morning reads, “The advantage of man over beast is nothing, *ki hakol havel* — for all is vanity.” My teacher Rabbi Simon Greenberg pointed out that the Hebrew word *ki* can also mean “when.” The prayer then teaches that human beings have no advantage over beasts when we think everything is vain; that is, without consequence or meaning.

The conviction of life’s meaningfulness is not the same as the conviction that it will always prove easy, pleasant or kind. It is the confidence that our choices are significant, that life is more than accident and happenstance. One who concludes, “Well, it doesn’t matter what we do anyway,” has forfeited the singular spiritual advantage humans have over beasts — the ability to perceive and create meaning.

“He who makes a beast of himself,” said Samuel Johnson, “gets rid of the pain of being a man.” In the biblical book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful king in the world, loses his mind and grazes on grass like an animal. This tyrant who treated the world as his whim, for whom nothing was ultimately meaningful but his own pleasure and power, ended as a beast. In our world there are those similarly convinced that there is no ultimate standard or meaning. Beware of the nihilist — certainty of purpose is bound up with being human.