

“Flexible Personhood”: Loving Animals as Family Members in Israel

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ABSTRACT This article discerns how human–animal boundaries are played with and blurred through familial love of pets in Israel. It explores the ways interspecies relationships in Israel enable incorporation of animals into the (human) familial sphere and the extent and limits of this inclusion. The analysis of the incorporation of pets into households of 52 couples reveals pets are treated as loving and loved members of the family, very similar to small children. At the same time, long-term ethnographic research reveals that many loving relationships with animals do not endure: when life changes and unexpected situations pose obstacles to the human–animal love, the people involved may redefine or terminate it. Pets are treated as “flexible persons” or “emotional commodities”; they are loved and incorporated into human lives but can at any moment be demoted and moved outside of the home and the family. [*humanness, animality, flexibility, boundaries, Israel*]

Anthropologists have long been interested in the significance of animals in culture, through their examinations of human–animal relationships in various cultures and at different times. Traditionally, anthropological investigation of human–animal relationships and boundaries mainly deals with the materialistic functions of animals (i.e., Harris 1966; Rapaport 1967; and White 1949) or their metaphoric and symbolic significance (i.e., Crocker 1985; Douglas 1957; 1966, Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1956; Geertz 1972; Hallowell 1975; Lawrence 1982; Levy-Bruhl 1966; Levi-Strauss 1963a; 1963b; 1966; Urton 1985). More recently, anthropologists have been changing the focus of their consideration, examining human–animal relationships in and of themselves, reexamining basic assumptions about them (Mullin 2002), and problematizing the human–animal divide (i.e., de Castro 1992; Fausto 2007; Fuentes 2010; Ingold 1994; Sulkin 2005; Vilaça 2000). Franklin, for example, claims that “the categorical boundary between humans and animals . . . has been seriously challenged if not dismantled in places” (1999:3). Researchers such as Kohn (2007), Fuentes (2010), and Haraway (2003; 2008) have been concerned with the everyday aspects of living with animals and interactions created with them. Haraway describes: “a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down . . . with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories” (2008:42). Knight’s edited volume, *Animals in Person*, includes a collection of articles displaying “an

interest in animals as *parts* of human society rather than just *symbols* of it, and in human *interactions and relationships with* animals rather than simply human *representations* of animals” (2005:1).

I began my research in 2001, exploring such everyday aspects of living with animals in Israel, focusing on the emotional and physical incorporation of pets into the human familial sphere. Months into the fieldwork, the participant-observations and interviews I conducted indeed showed what seemed to me to be a blurring of boundaries between the human and the animal members of the family. Family members repeatedly spoke of and treated their animals as children.

Seven months after I began the research, one couple, who had just had a baby, confided to me their plans to give their dog away to another family. Not too long after that, a second pet was given away following the birth of a human child. Intrigued by the sudden seeming changes in behavior and emotions toward pet animals, I decided to extend my fieldwork to explore the changing dynamics of interspecies relationships in Israel.

It appears that the complexity of human–animal relations is especially significant in regard to a particular category of domesticated animals: companion animals, or pets. Many scholars researching human relations with companion animals point to parallel yet opposing standpoints in the human treatment of animals—domination and compassion, cruelty and love, and ownership and friendship—and how these cause conflict and incongruity in human–animal

relationships (Tuan 1984). People learn, from very early on, both to consume and love animals (Plous 1993); Animals are used as commodities or tools, similar to other consumer goods (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Caglar 1997; Hirschman 1994; Mullin 1999), and are concurrently regarded as loved individuals and may be included as family members. They may serve as companions, invite caring and nurturing treatment, and provide emotionally fulfilling relations (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Caglar 1997; Hirschman 1994; Mullin 1999; Sanders and Hirschman 1996; Thomas 1983). Indeed, it is often claimed that human treatment of animals, and especially pets, is “liminal” (Leach 1964), “ambivalent” (Beck and Katcher 1996; Burt 2001; Erickson 2000; Flynn 2001; Lawrence 1994; Preece 1999), and “inconsistent” (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Herzog 2010; Swabe 2005).

In this article, I explore these questions of boundaries and inconsistencies in human–animal relations and love in the Israeli context. As I intend to show, anthropological explorations of *flexible* cultural practices (Baumann 1996; Hall 1996; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991; Martin 1994; Ong 1999; Stacey 1990) afford a novel and alternative perspective on human–animal relations.

Harvey (1989) sees flexibility as the defining logic of late capitalism. Replacing the Fordist principles of mass production is a regime of flexible accumulation, maintaining flexibility with regard to labor processes and markets, products and consumption. Ong (1999), in her study into transnational processes in the Asia-Pacific, adds human agency and its construction and negotiation of cultural meaning to Harvey’s account of flexibility. The ability to constantly adjust, adapt, innovate, and remain flexible is becoming a vital and praised resource in a world of constant change (Jameson 1991; Martin 1994; Ong 1999). Flexibility is relevant to many aspects of everyday life, such as bodies (Martin 1994, 2000), identities (Bauman 2001; Hall 1996), and families (Stacey 1990). Thus, Martin’s systems model of the body builds on Harvey’s late capitalist economic system in that it places value on flexibility and adaptability: “Many people are reaching for a way of imagining a fluid, ever-changing body, a body containing turbulence and instability, in constant motion, a body that is the antithesis of a rigid, mechanical set of parts” (Martin 2000:123). Similarly, Bauman describes identity as “flexible and always amenable to further experimentation and change; it must be a truly ‘until further notice’ kind of identity” (Bauman 2001:64).

Following Ong’s concept of *flexible citizenship*, which refers to the cultural logics that “induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (1999:6), I introduce the term *flexible personhood* to describe the Israeli cultural reasoning in the treatment of pets that encourages people to react adaptively and opportunistically to changing ways of life and social conditions. I examine patterns of incorporation of companion animals into the human familial sphere and demonstrate the fluidity between the different patterns, as well as the extent and

limits of this inclusion, as they are expressed in three case studies. Integrating postmodern theory with the family situation in Israel, I consider how and why people symbolically deploy structures of family and kin to adapt to the influx of choice among various ways of life.

METHODS

The research, conducted over a six-year period, 2001–07, focuses on 52 pet-owning couples in southern Israel—Jewish, heterosexual, and middle- to upper-class men and women in their twenties and thirties, from different ethnic backgrounds.¹ These criteria were chosen in advance to establish a feasible framework for the investigation. In view of the scope of the topic, national, socioeconomic, and other differences were not explored, although these may be important to consider in future research. The participants in this study thus do not represent the complete spectrum of pet ownership in Israel.

The pets in these families consisted mostly of dogs (36) and cats (22). One family included a rabbit, one owned turtles, and another kept fish. Because I wish to explore the dynamics of incorporation of animals into the familiar sphere, I chose to concentrate on people who were in the process of establishing their (nuclear) families.²

The core group of informants includes my Israeli friends and acquaintances with pets that share a strong emotional bond with them. Contact with most of the families was made by way of snowball sampling, as many initial hosts connected me with other families, known for their love of animals. Data were collected through formal unstructured interviews and informal conversations, as well as participant-observation in familial gatherings and everyday practices. One to three in-depth interviews were conducted with approximately half the couples. With the rest of the couples, long-term connections were formed, leading to close and personal contacts and observations, and many of these resulted in lasting friendships. In these situations, follow-up visits and interviews were conducted over the course of several years, usually every few weeks, and I became personally acquainted with their relationships with their animals and their intimate feelings toward them.³

Pets-as-Babies in Israel

Research across disciplines has revealed that between 68 and 93 percent of pet owners, especially in Europe and the United States, share the tendency to view companion animals as family members (Albert and Bulcroft 1988; Beck and Katcher 1996; Cain 1985; Hickrod and Schmitt 1982; Katcher and Rosenberg 1979).⁴ Many family members describe their pets as possessing a human status within the family and as being integral to the family (Cain 1991). In most families researched, the animal is treated as a dependent child (Beck and Katcher 1996; Katcher and Rosenberg 1979; Thomas 1982).⁵

Pet keeping in Israel provides an interesting case, as Israelis are influenced both by growing global trends of

incorporating companion animals into the household and by Jewish religious tradition. The Jewish religious outlook generally objects to strong emotional feelings toward animals, such as admiration (Shoshan 1971), even though there is no specific reason given in Judaism against pet keeping (Menache 1997:30). For this reason, pet keeping among religious Jews is significantly less prevalent than among secular Jews in Israel.⁶

Because Jewish religion is part of Israeli education, Jewish tradition affects secular Israelis' feelings toward animals as well. Furthermore, Israeli law is to a large extent based on Jewish law; it incorporates many of the dictates and views of Biblical thought. The laws concerning animal welfare themselves are named after the scriptural concept of *tza'ar ba'aley xaim*—the awareness of the suffering of animals. Laws involving matters of personhood are also strongly influenced by Biblical mandates.⁷

Legally, animals are considered property in Israel and not family members.⁸ The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) does not include pets in its reports on households and families but, rather, counts them in a separate report dealing with culture, entertainment, and sports, as “entertainment products and other hobbies” (2008).

All this notwithstanding, a significant proportion of secular Jewish Israelis seem to be conforming to the Euro-American patterns of inclusion of pet animals in their households. A number of public opinion polls conducted at the beginning of the millennium have shown that every third or fourth Israeli household includes a pet (Doron 2000; *Maariv* 2002; TGI survey 2007 in Paz et al. 2008).⁹ Pets in Israel are often involved in many human behavioral activities and play an important role in societal interactions; they are often pampered and treated as family members.

Although pets are not legally considered family members, they do share a household and a bond with many of their owners. Obviously, the term *pet owner* already denotes the legal and conceptual perception of animals as property. In the past few years several cities in the United States have changed this term to *pet guardian* to indicate a positive and respectful relationship. In Israel most people still use the term *owners* (*be'alim*) or *lords* (*adonim*), although some prefer *caregiver* (*metapel*), *raiser* (*megadel*), or *responsible person* (*axra'i*). At the same time, *owners* (or *be'alim*) is also the term used for husbands in Hebrew. Therefore, it does not, by any means, exclude membership in the family.

The strong attachment humans in Israel feel toward their pet animals is evident in the spread of practices such as hiring babysitters for animals (e.g., the Israeli animal nanny message board: <http://www.aninanny.co.il>), the growing amount of toys and other merchandise available for pets (one site, e.g., has a choice of 92 different toys for dogs alone: Petplanet products for animals, <http://www.petplanet.co.il>), and even the emergent tendency of divorce courts to take into account the animal's best interest when its owners divorce, treating these cases as custody hearings, sometimes granting one party visitation rights. Although the animals

in these cases are still legally considered property, they are nonetheless regarded as living creatures with certain rights in the family. For example, in one Israeli case concerning a separated couple's animals, Judge Shaul Shochat considered the animals as living creatures with a soul and not as property. Consequently, he considered the best interest of the animals when deliberating the case (court case 32405 תמז/א. א. א. פ. א. 01 dated March 18, 2004).

According to Knight (2005:2), “personhood is a legally defined status of moral inclusion. . . . Persons are beings that merit moral concern and legal entitlements.” The Israeli law, from this perspective, obfuscates the animal's status as it is treated both as property and as a rights-vested creature or “person” under the law. This ambivalence between being and property, person and nonperson, family and other, has permeated aspects of human–animal connections and emotions in Israel as is seen in the different ways the people in this research incorporate their animals into their families and everyday lives.

Patterns of Incorporation

In all cases I encountered during my fieldwork, the pet animal was considered in my initial meetings with the families as a central part of the home and of life in general. In these cases, the couples often claim that they view their pets as equally important to human family members and include them in their family as members of the household. Moreover, members of 39 of these families assert that the place of the pet within the family structure is similar to that of a child or a baby. For example, one informant said of his cat: “This is my baby. I do not care that we are not from the same species, I do not care that she has fur. I am her father. Period.” The centrality of the pet-as-dependent child characterized most families in my research. “An animal is like a child. They both need your love, to be sheltered from harm,” I heard from one informant. Similar statements were made by 78 different people.

Early conversations with the adult couples produced unequivocal statements about the tightness of the human–animal bond and strong beliefs concerning its continuing stability. These perceptions were true for all pets, regardless of their species. A key aspect of these relationships that is mentioned among these pet owners is the unconditionality of the animal's love. Although such unconditional love does not always characterize parent–child relationships (Weston 1991:44), over 90 percent of informants expressed their belief that such love can be obtained from animals. “They accept you unconditionally,” I was told. “It gives me a sense of intimacy I don't reach in my relations with human beings. . . . It is an opportunity to be completely free of defenses, masks, no matter what.” Relationships with animals can therefore be similar to relationships with children—albeit children who never grow up and who do not have demands or stipulations for their love.

In Israel, parenting is prized, as the importance of procreation and “pro-family” values is central (Kahn 2000;

Shalev and Gooldin 2006). Simultaneously, a conflicting discourse of need for personal and vocational fulfillment is constantly pushing (nonreligious) young adults to postpone marriage and having children.¹⁰ Yet at the same time as an embrace of “high modernity” is encouraged, young people are reminded—by different social agents (Shalev and Gooldin 2006:167) such as their parents, peers, and the media—to have children. This is especially true in the places I researched in southern Israel; while they mostly comprise relatively affluent and educated populations (for southern Israel), they are also very family oriented.

Having a pet can therefore be seen as a way to enlarge the family, to love and feel loved, without the difficulties associated with having a child such as pregnancy, the interruption of schooling or a career, and high expense. This choice could indicate an unwillingness to relinquish or postpone some of the inherent advantages of parenthood and to exhibit interest in parenting and the ability to accomplish it at some future time. As I demonstrate below, “semiparenting” or “preparenting” is achieved with the help of animals. Tannen similarly shows in her research on interactions with dogs in family settings, the ways people relate to their pets strengthens “bonds among individuals who live together by exhibiting, reinforcing, and creating their identity as family” (2004:417).

Kinship, according to Schneider (1980), should be viewed as a cultural system not as a set of biological actualities. Weston (1991), in her work on gay and lesbian kinship, proposes that people do in effect have the power to change the circumstances into which they were born, as biological procreation is being replaced by the logic of creation and choice. It follows that one can incorporate friends, lovers, or children into one’s family by rearranging ideologies of love and choice. Charles et al. further claim that all families can be seen as “families of choice,” as kin relations are chosen and constructed (2008:226).

This framework can be expanded to allow the inclusion of pets into the chosen family, a choice that is a consequence of emotions of love and care that the animals evoke in the families participating in the current research. Yet when the family includes both human and nonhuman members, both choice and the symbolism of “blood” as biogenetic connectedness (following Schneider 1980) are taken to new heights. In fact, we might interpret the decision of couples to define their interactions with their animals using parent–child conceptions as challenging common perceptions of what a family is.

Indeed, the humans in this research give their pets names and care for them in similar ways to the way they would care for children. During visits I saw how the animals are fed, given water, warmth, and love; the pet owners often looked at their animal, kissed, hugged, and pet it. They enjoyed discussing their pets very much, and memories and stories about the interesting, smart, and cute things their pets do could go on for hours. The owners talked about “toilet training” and the medical treatment the animals are given

when necessary. In seven cases, people showed me pictures of their pets wearing birthday hats or participating in other family ceremonies. The very presence of the pets in certain areas of the house, such as the bedroom and even in the master bed, is indicative of their inclusion in the family. People’s willingness to deal with pet excretions also serves as strong evidence for their incorporation into the family as a child (Beck and Katcher 1996:69)—although most Israelis comply with the outdoor “pooper-scooper” laws only if they are watched (*Maariv* 2011).

Beyond the similarities in the ways that these families interact with and talk about their pets, diversity and flexibility in the treatment of the pets also exists: although the animals are all loved as family members, the equivalence of pets and children is not uniform or static. In making my claim for flexible personhood, I propose four general patterns that depict the various ways animals’ personhood is conceived of in the 52 families in this study: The animal as a “prechild,” the animal as a child substitute, the animal as a “semichild,” and the animal as significantly different from a child.

The following ethnographic descriptions relate to distinct patterns in different families and were chosen for reasons of clarity. The important aspect of these categorizations is not their constancy but, rather, the options they afford for change; these perceptions can and often do shift over the years, usually because of changes in the family. As will be seen later, what holds true for some people at one life stage might vary at another. These four categories, therefore, are by no means fixed or mutually exclusive but should rather be viewed as more of a flexible continuum, a spectrum of the various ways animals are attributed personhood. Although families portray characteristics corresponding with a specific model according to their family aspirations and status at the time (i.e., planning to have children, decidedly not having children, having children), in most cases there exist among the categories flexibility, overlaps, movement, contingencies, and continuities.

The animal as a “prechild.” Thirty-two of the 52 families in the initial stages of the research were thinking about having a future (human) baby or already pregnant.¹¹ Twenty-five of these referred to their pet at some point as a preliminary stage for their human baby. They described the animal as not quite a (human) baby but, rather, as a needy babylike being, enabling preparation for a future child by needing parental care and love in a less complex and demanding way.

Such was the case with Ami and Shani, a 25-year-old married couple from the city of Beer-Sheva.¹² Shani says that she has had a passion for animals as long as she can remember and has always had pets. Ami had also owned dogs growing up but doesn’t share what he calls “Shani’s obsession” for animals. When Ami started talking about having children, Shani insisted that they should first try taking care of a cat or a dog. A couple of weeks later, Suzie, a young midsized, mixed-breed dog, moved in. Shani delightedly reports that Ami is bonding with her: he grooms her, feeds her, takes

her to the vet. “For me,” she asserts, “examining the way people take care of animals is really an indication of the way they’ll be as parents, so the most important thing for me in a partner is the way he treats animals. I can’t imagine having kids with someone who doesn’t treat dogs like I do, with one hundred percent devotion.” Ami told me it was also important for him “to get a feeling of ‘what it’s like’ to have a baby.”

The animal as a child substitute. For the men and women in four of six families who have decided not to have children, the companion animal was at the time of the study a satisfying replacement for a child. The pet was, for all intents and purposes, *the* child of the family. Two of the men and three of the women suggest that their pets offer identical love and fulfillment as a baby but without the huge investment and significant change in lifestyle. Moreover, the pets never grow up or move out but, rather, remain forever dependent.

Arava and Avishai are a 36-year-old couple living in a large and beautiful villa in the town of Shalhavot. They both work in high-tech companies in the area. In their house, two rooms were converted into offices, one for each of them, and one room was transformed into Marx’s room—furnished with a sofa, pillows, and toys. Marx is a large and quite silly German shepherd, who loves to lick shoes. He is almost seven and has lived with Avishai and Arava for over six years.

In my initial visits to their home, the couple deflected questions regarding children, muttering “someday, sometime.” A few months later, as we were sitting on the terrace watching Marx running around in the garden, Arava confided: “I don’t think I’ll ever want to have kids of my own. Avishai and I are happy with Marx, with each other, with our careers, with being able to go out at nights and wake up late on weekends.” Arava and Avishai maintain that they did not feel comfortable sharing these feelings with me from the outset because reactions from others are usually disapproving. “In Israel you are perceived to be selfish and self-centered if you don’t have children,” Avishai says heatedly. “Something must be wrong with you. But that really isn’t the case. Marx receives all the love and nurturing in the world.” “I still have this need to love, take care of someone, and be loved,” agrees Arava. “Marx might be a dog, but he’s like my child—a human being. Like a kid—he needs to be taken care of. He’s just like a member of the family. Our lives revolve around him.” “I see myself as married plus one,” concludes Avishai.

The animal as a “semichild.” Ten of the families expressed at some point feelings of love, commitment, and obligation for the animal similar to but less intense than those toward a child. The “semichild” differs from the child substitute in degree: in these families, at those times, the couples wished to have a human child and did not perceive the animals as a full replacement or equivalent to a child nor as a preparatory stage to one but, rather, as a childlike creature to care for and

love. Members of these families were hesitant to completely equate their pet with a human child and, rather, spoke of their animal as an “almost child” (*kim’at yeled*), “kind of child” (*be’erex yeled*), and “similar to a child” (*domé leyeled*). The pet might be cute and lovable, and even regarded as a baby, but does not completely substitute for the human child.

Rimon and Roy are a 27-year-old couple who are raising Lenny, a two-year-old dog. The couple have been trying to get pregnant for over two years and have lately begun fertility treatments. They state that these years have been hard for them and that Lenny has provided comfort at a difficult time. Rimon has always loved animals, but this love took a different direction when she moved out of her parents’ house and moved in with Roy: “Animals were always important to me, but they were animals. Now I treat Lenny as if he was my baby. He’s an only child, he wakes me up at night, he cuddles with me and I take care of him all the time, he really comes first—except for Roy, of course.” Rimon lowers her head and whispers in Lenny’s ear: “My baby . . . at least I have you.” She then turns back to me and adds with confidence “Even if I have a kid Lenny will still be mine, he’ll have a special place in my heart. I guess it really isn’t a baby—otherwise why would I want a baby of my own so much? But there is something similar to it, he sees me as his mommy, he needs me.” Roy doesn’t seem to share the same devotion to Lenny but occasionally teasingly refers to himself as Lenny’s dad.

The animal as significantly different from a child. Patterns of love and care formed with the companion animal in some families are at certain times defined as completely separate from those formed with a child. In some cases, the relationship is defined as a friendship or partnership, while in others it was defined as completely distinct from interhuman relations. Still, the pets were described as a part of the family, although their specific status was elusive. This pattern was common among families who had children in the timeframe of the research, or previous to it, although two childless couples also refused to see their animals as childlike creatures.

According to Hanan, a 32-year-old married student, “A dog is a great friend. You come home and see the joy in his face. He guards you. When you leave him you see he’s sad. . . . But it’s better than a friend, they are always with you.”

“I am always told I probably love the dog less now that I have a daughter,” says Adva, a mother and dog owner. “And I say: you can love a girl and a dog, differently but simultaneously. She is not my daughter; she has four legs, not two. But she has another place in my heart. A special, important one.”

FLEXIBILITY, SHIFTING LOVE, LIMITS OF INCORPORATION: THREE CASE STUDIES

Although initial research demonstrates a seemingly unmistakable incorporation of animals into the familial realm, in

most families, as previously mentioned, the inclusion of animals is not static. Movement occurs among the four categories described, revealing that the acceptance of animals as children, family members, and persons constitutes a complex and fluid relationship.¹³

Given the intensity of feelings expressed by people about human–animal relationships, I was surprised to learn that over time human–animal familial love often undergoes drastic transformations. Life changes, I discovered, and particularly the birth of a human child, challenge the pet-as-baby human–animal bond and may render void the animals’ loving presence as prechild, semichild, or child substitute. Consequently, this love is often redefined if not terminated.

Noam and Tamar Tzipori-Eyal are a 34-year-old couple who live in Aluma, a suburb of a town in southern Israel, with their eight-year-old son, David; their four-year-old son, Meir; their five-month-old baby boy Yoav; and an 11-year-old dog, Albert. A small, frisky miniature Pinscher, I often observe as he interrupts his frequent naps by jumping on furniture and barking at passersby.

My first visit took place when Tamar was in the fifth month of her first pregnancy. During that visit, Tamar and Noam frequently referred to Albert as a baby, and addressed him directly as their first baby. They scheduled their daily routine so that Albert would be walked three times a day and wouldn’t be alone in the house for too long. The couple has also spent a substantial amount of money on veterinary care and food. Tamar and Noam constantly alerted each other to the funny things Albert did, even if they had seen them many times before. “When he’s noisy,” said Noam, “I tell him he must stop it now because he will soon have a younger brother, and he will need to teach him how to behave.” Albert rolled over on the floor, and Tamar exclaimed: “Look at him lie on his back, doesn’t he look like a baby?”

After Tamar got pregnant, the couple referred to Albert as preparation for nurturing a (human) child. Taking care of him, attending to him when he was sick, finding a “dog sitter” when they went away for the weekend—these were all described mainly as experience and practice for the baby: “We go to him at night, comfort him when he has a bad dream, clean up after him. . . . We’ll probably rest more when we have the child!”

As Tamar’s pregnancy advanced, her view of Albert’s place in their home began to change. “I really felt Albert was like a baby in the beginning,” says Tamar, stroking Albert. “Today the relationship is a little more equal.” When she thinks about their family once the child is born, she says with confidence: “Albert will be secondary.” Noam covers Albert’s ears and smiles, as Tamar continues: “The child will obviously come first. Albert is also a child, but in a slightly different way. He is the adopted kid that is less. . . .” Tamar stops and laughs uncomfortably.

At that stage, there was no apparent transformation in Noam’s attitude toward Albert. As he was listening to Tamar speak about her changed perception of Albert, he grew quieter and quieter. After a long silence, he finally

said: “I think we will be a lot more occupied with another human being. But I think Albert will still have a central role in our family. Instead of: ‘Wow, look what Albert is doing,’ we’ll probably be saying: ‘Wow, look at the baby pulling Albert’s ears, look at Albert running away. . . .’” Both Tamar and Noam laugh, and Noam turns to Albert: “Don’t you agree?”

After David was born, the change in both Noam and Tamar’s approach to Albert became significant. When I visited shortly after David was born, Albert greeted me with his usual cheerful high-pitched barks. Seconds later cries came from David’s room, as he was abruptly woken. Tamar looked despairingly at Noam, and he rushed to the baby’s room. “The family has changed,” Tamar told me after I fussed over David, as we were settling in the living room. “Suddenly, there is someone toward whom my feelings are much stronger and more intense, and he obviously comes first. And Albert. . . . Previously he was like a child, now he is. . . . a pet.” “He exists. This is a fact. He is here,” says Noam matter-of-factly. “I don’t know. Albert is something that is in the house. The fact that he is here doesn’t make him part of the family.” As David grew, their view of Albert as significantly different from a child only strengthened, and almost every time I visited, Tamar semijokingly asked me if I want a dog, pointing at Albert. “All he’s good for is cleaning up scraps from the floor,” she told me several times. “He is basically a vacuum cleaner.”

As the years went by, Albert’s presence in the house diminished. He would still bark as I entered the house, but would quickly return to his pillow at the corner of the room and stay there my entire stay. Tamar and Noam did not look at him or pet him when I came, and neither did the children. He looked thin, and his coat lost its luster. A couple of months ago, he disappeared from the house and did not return. Tamar and Noam were confident that he had died. Less than a month later they adopted a new dog and seem to be happy with her. Noam walks her often and is happy to tell me about her new deeds, but they do not speak of her as their child or baby.

The changing dynamics of the Tzipori-Eyal family exemplifies the potential impermanence of the incorporation of a pet into the family as a child and the flexibility inherent in it. The “child substitute,” if it can be called that, turned out to be susceptible to competition from “the real thing”—the human baby. Tamar and Noam’s attitude toward Albert moved noticeably between the different patterns described: the animal as a prechild, as a child substitute, as a semichild, and as significantly different from a child. Furthermore, Albert was depersonalized, and from a childlike person he was conceptually converted into a vacuum cleaner.

This family is not unusual: the tension between the perception of the animal as person and as “other,” which is generated from various practices of inclusion and exclusion, arises in all the families within my research. Twenty-nine of 33 families that underwent significant changes—usually the birth of a child, but also divorce and moving to a new

home—note a transformation in the position of the pets in their families. The other four families did not describe their animals as babies to begin with but, rather, correspond to the forth pattern described—the animal as significantly different from a child. Among the 29 who have significantly altered their perceptions of their pets and behaviors toward them were six families who chose to give their pet away altogether. Such was the case in Ally and Magda's relationship:

Ally is a self-proclaimed animal fanatic. When I open the gate and walk into her garden, several cats immediately come to greet me and rub themselves against my legs. As I enter her house, a relatively large and licking-obsessed dog jumps on me cheerfully. Ally's husband keeps telling her she takes care of all the stray animals before she cares for him. "It's true," smiles Ally. "It's a real obsession—that's my nature. I can't bear to hear them crying, asking for help—I have to be there and help them. I feel they are helpless, that they depend on me." Ally's three-year-old mixed-breed dog Magda has an important place in her heart and home. She has her own room, her own couch, and she won't let anyone else sit on it. "She's the queen here. . . . She's a part of everything in my life. If I'm sad or upset she can feel it. She's just like a member of my family . . . like a child."

Several years ago, Ally gave birth to a daughter, Eve, and things in the family changed. Before Eve's birth, Ally would talk to her dog Magda and give her constant attention. As Ally herself stated, Magda used to come first. Now most of her attention is directed toward Eve. "In the past Magda had a lot more freedom here in our house—it was hers," comments Ally. "Like a child, I let her do everything. She told me what to do. She actually ran our lives. That is not the case anymore." Every morning Magda wants to get in bed with the rest of the family, as she used to. But now that the baby is there, she is no longer allowed in. Ally acknowledges that Magda's role on the family has been modified: "She is still like a sister to Eve—she comes with me to wake her up, gives her a kiss. They are crazy about each other. . . . But she has lost her 'child' status. She is there, but sometimes I feel we take care of her because we have to and not so much because we want to."

When Ally discovered she was pregnant once again, Magda's exclusion became literal, as Ally started looking for a new home for Magda. "I'm looking for good people who will take good care of her," sighs Ally. "I don't have room in this house for another child. She will be better off. I sometimes feel we don't have patience for her. It (*ze*) is like a kid, it is a human being—it needs to be taken care of, needs attention. I can't keep Magda outside, so I want to find a family who will give her the same love, not to just throw the dog away because there is a child now."

Soon after this conversation, Ally found Magda a new home. When Ally and I went to visit her a couple of months later, Magda seemed to be settling in nicely with her new family. She ran around, wagging her tail, and sat on the couch beside her new owners. To my surprise, Magda hardly

acknowledged Ally's existence, and had I not known better I would not have guessed their previous relationship.

As I came to understand, giving animals away and abandoning them are not uncommon in Israel; according to a press release from the Ministries of Agriculture and Environmental Protection, approximately 100,000 dogs in Israel are abandoned each year (2007, May 15). The head of a local organization that helps abandoned animals in Beer-Sheva and the vicinity told me she suspects the numbers are much higher. Moreover, she pointed out, these do not include animals other than dogs, or dogs that were found new homes, such as Magda. In 2005 the *tza'ar ba'aley xaim* (animal welfare) law was amended to include a prohibition against the abandonment of animals. However, according to animal rights activists, this law is not being appreciably enforced, and the number of abandoned animals has not changed (Erlichman 2008).

The changes in the human–animal relationships are not only physical; they can be emotional and behavioral as well. These changes are evident in family members' approach to the animal or in the redefinition of its position in the familial framework. This was sometimes manifested in the conversations concerning the pets, when the animals were transformed from "he" or "she" (person), to "it" or "the dog," "the cat" (nonperson), as can be seen in the change in the way Ally talks about Magda; although still struggling to describe her as a child, a human being, she nonetheless simultaneously refers to her as "it" (*ze*). Such emotional and behavioral changes stand out in the following case:

Maayan and Doron, a couple in their 30s, live in a moshav (a cooperative Israeli settlement) named Ezra. They have two large mixed-breed dogs, Buffy and Mike, and a cat named Shalom. They also have two *Rojers' Racer* snakes and three chickens in their yard but do not consider them their pets.

Maayan and Doron live in a one-bedroom house with a small garden. The house is always full: two large excited dogs, barking and licking enthusiastically, chicken wandering about between the legs, and a cat competing for attention. The sofas in the house always used to be covered with animal hair—assuming you could find a place to sit between the salivating, panting dogs spread on them.

Both Maayan and Doron love animals and consider their dogs and cat an inseparable part of their family. Maayan in particular holds a special place in her life for animals as a veterinary surgeon in a prominent animal hospital.

During one of my visits to the veterinary hospital where she works Maayan showed me a young poodle dog with bald spots all over his body. She told me his owners brought him to the hospital because he started shedding heavily after the couple had twins. The owners refused to pay for the dog's treatment, claiming this was too much to deal with at the time. Maayan could not understand how people could abandon a loved pet they are responsible for because of a skin condition and felt very passionately about the case.

For over three years Doron tried to convince Maayan to have children, but she refused. She said she was happy with her family as it was and afraid a baby “would mess up everything.” Eventually she changed her mind. When Maayan and Doron found out they were pregnant with a girl, they were overjoyed. As Doron looked around his crowded, less-than-clean house, he laughed. “She will be like a Bedouin baby. She’ll get used to growing up with all the animals. I think it will be good for her.”

Seven months into the pregnancy, Maayan suddenly became concerned with the dirtiness of the house. Her “nesting” phase mainly consisted of cleaning areas in the house that never saw a rag before. As I joined in her house cleaning, I asked her how she imagined her life after the baby is born. “It will pretty much be the same,” she answered. “It will be a lot of work, I’m sure, a lot of our time will be devoted to her, but she will adjust to our lifestyle. This is the family she is born into—Buffy, Mike, Shalom, Doron, and I.”

A week before Maayan gave birth she placed two large pillows near the door for the dogs, and started training them not to sit on the sofas. “We can’t have the baby covered with animal hair, can we?” she smiled.

The sofas and the animal hair became a symbol of the changes in the household and the family after Raya was born. A few days after bringing the baby home, they purchased new sofas. The dogs are now restricted mainly to their new area near the door and to the garden. Shalom, the cat, is almost always outside. Maayan and Doron, with the baby in the carrier, still go for long walks with Buffy and Mike, but the cuddling, affection, and preoccupation with the animals have lessened significantly. During my visits the animals are mostly ignored. When Maayan and Doron catch me eyeing the dogs in the corner, Doron walk over to them and pets them. Maayan apologizes: “I just washed my hands, and Raya might wake up any minute.” On another occasion, they show me photos they took on their mobile phone. When I get one of Shalom spread on the baby’s activity center, Maayan mutters, “I hate him.” She then laughs uneasily and adds: “Why does he have to always sleep on her things?” All three animals seem to be accommodating well to the changes, although Mike often sneaks onto the sofas at night when Maayan and Doron are asleep.

The transformations and blurring of categories noticeable in all three cases indicate that the pet’s role can be flexible. It is negotiated and played around with, as may happen in other types of relationships as well. Yet the incorporation of pets into these families differs from the “families of choice” described by Weston (1991) not only in the expansion of choice to include nonhuman family members but also in another very significant way: while the couples in this study symbolically extend their kinship ties and the love and nurture associated with them to animals, this bond does not necessarily mean durability, resilience, and permanence, as is the case in the families in Weston’s work.

An important aspect of parent–child relationships is their continuity over time. When dealing, for example,

with an adopted child—of human “flesh and blood” but not of “ours”—the legal document transforms the “as-if” aspects into fact. With a pet, its animal ambiguity is a constant reminder of its “as-if” status and the symbolic ties are always up for (re)negotiation.

Although resilience is a significant attribute of familial relationships, and especially of parent–child relations, humans can also actively be excluded from definitions of “the family” not only through systems of classification but also through failing to engage in practices such as providing support or maintaining contact (Charles, et al. 2008).

In the cases in this research there is no change in the animals’ behaviors that would warrant their exclusion. This notwithstanding, the most central difference between flexible familial relationships with humans to those with animals is that the termination of the familial relationship with the animals is related to the termination, at least to a certain extent, of their personhood.

On a par with Ally’s perception of Magda, Tamar and Noam’s changing attitude toward Albert represents a reallocation from his being a third component of their family and a form of “person,” to being removed from the family circle and therefore becoming categorically a “nonperson” (following Weiss 1994). The animals’ nonperson attributes, such as their hair and barking, previously overlooked or minimized in the desire for personhood, are invoked when they are “depersoned.” In many cases they become nuisances, as with Maayan and Doron, as well as Noam and Tamar. They constitute reminders of the animals’ now undesirable differences.

Legally these pets are still considered living creatures that should not be abused or abandoned according to the law, as any other animal (such as livestock, laboratory animals, working, and sport animals).¹⁴ Their person status, however, in many of the cases is considerably diminished, if not terminated. As long as these couples consider their animals to be family members, the pets are recognized to some extent to be persons to others outside the family, as well. Pets may, for example, merit special legal and moral concern, as can be seen in the divorce hearings mentioned above. However, once these couples redefine the animals as pets, nuisances, vacuum cleaners—their person status changes not only in the family but also in the wider network of kin, friends, community, or country. That is, no one will be treating these animals as persons or making their claim for their best interest if they are given away or if their owners divorce. These animals can “regain” their personhood only if their owners rechoose to include them as persons into the family at some future point or if they are given away to another family who chooses to incorporate them as persons and family members.

The personhood of animals includes, according to Knight—“the recognition of the individuality and particularity of the animal interactant” (2005:2). Although the individuality of these animals is still recognized after the human child is born, this recognition is minimized; the humans

decreasingly use the pets' name, and the individual characteristics of the animals are no longer celebrated and rarely discussed.

For six of the people in this research, the animals are still considered to some (lesser) extent persons after the familial changes occurred. For example, it could be argued that while Ally refers to Magda as "it," she nonetheless states that Magda "is like a kid." In the cases in which the personhood of the animal was not terminated, their familial status was: whether the change the relationship with the animals is physical (removal from certain areas, giving the animal away), perceptual, or both, these new parents redefine the pet in some manner as different from the human child; When the pet continues to be acknowledged as a child, as in Ally's case, it is given away or at least defined as "not *my* child." Couples who keep their pet stop regarding the animal as a human child.¹⁵

Relationships with pets-as-children involve a conundrum because the equation is never complete: the animal can be flexibly (re)converted to "not-child," to an animal and a pet, there for personal convenience and comfort. Perhaps for this reason, as the three case studies show, these constructed families can turn out to be less compelling than that of (human) blood and can allow for constant change. The pet serves as a baby replacement in some frameworks and is not perceived as "of their own flesh and blood" in others.

Pets as "Flexible Persons"

The varying degrees of inclusion in families described here inform the many factors that arise when family members attempt to bridge the animal-human divide. People-pet relationships formed in the families under consideration fail to correspond to the binary perceptions of human versus animal, nature versus culture. In this way, pets as a category can be seen as mediating between animals and humans (Leach 1964); pets can be characterized by indeterminacy, simultaneously associated with each of the categories, betwixt and between and ambiguous.

At the same time, my research demonstrates that the inclination to view animals both as "person" and as "nonperson" points not only to an inherent ambiguity but also to fluidity in the category "pet." More than a category offering a mediation between humans and animals, pets offer a dynamic wide range of either/or possibilities, as they can sometimes be viewed as persons and at other times as (nonperson) animals. Viewing pets as liminal doesn't allow us to include this dynamism in their treatment; they are not statically liminal but, rather, offer the possibility of flux between person and nonperson.

Given that the pet category is indistinct and changeable in this cultural setting, it can be viewed along a "humanness"—"animality" continuum, flexibly positioned at different parts of the gamut as changes occur in the family and in the lives of its members. Like Martin's "flexible bodies" (2000:123), perceptions of animals are fluid, ever changing, turbulent, instable, in constant motion. Expanding Harvey's notion of flexibility in accumulation (1989), diverse patterns of

treating animals can subsist under conditions of flexible personhood in such a way as to enable a variety of familial and human practices that are prompted and facilitated by the changes in life styles and the makeup of families.

The cases presented here demonstrate that constructing a relationship with an animal can expand possibilities of families and parenthood, as animals provide an emotional outlet, a new form of bond, and ways to practice or rehearse other relationships. As a consequence, the intersection of flexible relationships with animals and the Israeli emphasis on parenthood allow these families to circumvent or utilize expectations to establish a family.

In fact, it is possible that the very appeal of animals is their dynamic role in the family. In Bauman's discussion of identities, he claims that "the facility to dispose of an identity the moment it ceases to satisfy, or is deprived of its allure by competition from other and more seductive identities on offer, is far more vital than the 'realism' of the identity currently sought or momentarily appropriated and enjoyed" (2001:64). Although pets are living beings and not concepts as are identities, there is a similar perceived ability to reject the animal in some way when it no longer fulfills its purpose or when it is in competition with a more alluring love object, such as a baby.

Pets epitomize options: animals can be included in families as "flexible persons," but their nonhumanness sanctions the possibility of exclusion at any juncture. From this point of view, individuals can be seen as forming a flexible perception of humanness as a strategy to expand possibilities of families and parenthood. They are continually modifying their actions to the influx of various ways of life and to ways of employing relationships that will benefit them while still enabling them to achieve vocational, and other, success.

It could be argued that animals can also be regarded as emotional tools or commodities. The key "services" received from pets are not meat, symbolic thought, or status but, rather, flexible emotional subjective relations. The pets' "value" is an emotional one; their worth to others is marginal, and their value is completely detached from market contexts.¹⁶ The animals gain and lose value through constructed relations within the family.

Haraway criticizes such one-sided emotional relations with animals in her book *When Species Meet*: "pets are taken to be living engines for churning out unconditional love—affectional slaves, in short. One being becomes means to the purpose of the other, and the human assumes rights in the instrument that the animal never has in 'it'self'" (2008:206). However, it is important to note that while people may be actively making choices regarding their animal's place in the family, they are by no means planning or strategizing to use and then discard their pets. In fact, exhibits of embarrassment in feeling toward animals were only evident when people spoke of their diminished devotion and adoration. Couples delighted to describe their pets as babies but felt discomfort as they confessed to their changing and waning emotions, indicating that this flexible treatment of animals is not morally neutral.

CONCLUSION: FLEXIBLE PERSONS—RIGID BOUNDARIES

In this article I show how perceptions and treatments of pets are flexible: Like humans, pets can be flexibly incorporated into the family and rejected from it. But these transformations seem to be generally more extreme, rapid, and unproblematic when they involve animals and not humans. Moreover, when dealing with animals, the flexibility of the kin relations is strongly related to the personhood of the animals: In most cases, this personhood is terminated, and in others diminished. In all the cases, the personhood and kin relations are redefined so as not to equate the animal with the human child as was done previously.

Although the extent to which pets are loved and incorporated in Israeli families may appear as a challenge to human boundaries, as well as to emotional and familial ones, the presence of pets actually strengthens and preserves conceptions of humanity by demarcating those boundaries that we are not ready or willing to cross.

In perceiving their animals as "flexible persons," people are consciously transgressing boundaries yet perpetually reminded and reminding themselves that the "baby" is really just an animal and can always be "disinherited" from the family. The hidden rigidities that can inherently exist in flexible relations (Sayer 1989) and familial love become apparent when a human child is born. Flexibility in the treatment of animals shows that human boundaries are not becoming insignificant or blurred and that "the human" is not losing its distinction from "the other." Animals in the families I researched may be treated as "persons" at times, yet they are never accepted as actual humans; rather, they serve a flexible function in terms of the human role they play.

The question should be asked whether these extreme shifts in feelings and behaviors toward animals are an idiosyncratic Israeli phenomenon. Hearing the stories of the families presented here can be heartbreaking to animal lovers, and it would be easy to dismiss these cases as a specific cultural tendency. I would be surprised if that were the case. It is enough to look at statistics of animal abandonment in the United States and Europe to realize that these issues need further exploration in other countries as well. For example, according to the Humane Society of the United States, there are an estimated six to eight million dogs entering shelters each year (2008; www.humanesociety.org). Many of these are abandoned by their owners. What is more, North American households with children have been identified as being at high risk of surrendering family pets, compared to households with no children (Kidd, et al. 1992a, 1992b; Patronek, et al. 1996). I therefore believe that this framework could prove to be constructive for research in other places as well.

Viewing animal-loving practices in the family as flexible, rather than ambivalent, provides a theoretical perspective that goes beyond the treatment of animals as commodities or symbols that are treated irresolutely in their service to humans and examines the intimacy created with pets as a flexible, yet structured, space with its own objectives and meanings.

This analysis is important not only to the understanding of our relationships with pets but also our relationships with other animals, not to mention other humans who may be denied a place in the society (or "human family") because of religious, racial, or linguistic difference. Flexible frameworks enable the incorporation of dynamic and changing processes into our understandings of humans' actions, perceptions, and feelings. They thus offer the possibility of illuminating different situations in various settings that seem ambivalent and inconsistent.

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NOTES

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1. Neither ethnic backgrounds nor gender differences proved to be of major significance in this research.
2. Thirty-eight of the couples did not have children when I started my research; 14 couples had one to three children between the ages of two months and nine years.
3. The methodology implemented in this research neglects a central component of transspecies connections: the animals' point(s) of view. In certain ways, the animals *are* a part of this ethnography. They are present in the observations and interviews, they have an identity (although it is obviously constructed by their owners and myself), and their familial significance penetrates the text. Even so, they are never completely integrated nor are they represented as reflexive subjects. This therefore is not a multispecies ethnography. Despite claims from scholars such as Latour (1993), Kohn (2007) and Kirksey and Helmreich (2010), I do not feel I have the ability to represent animals in a just way.
4. Different researchers have also written about people in tribal societies with their strong parentlike attachment to pet animals, including the practice of human women breastfeeding puppies, monkeys, and other animals (e.g., Basso 1973; Roth 1970; Lumboltz 1889; Galton 1883; Hugh-Jones 1985 in Serpell 1996).
5. It has been claimed that animals can also act as parents (Albert and Bulcroft 1987; Beck and Katcher 1996; Perin 1988; Veevers 1985) or partners (Albert and Bulcroft 1987; Veevers 1985). A discussion of the occurrence of these roles can be found in Shir-Vertesh 2008.
6. For example, a survey conducted in 1998 found virtually no cats in ultraorthodox Jewish homes, and about half the percentage of cats in orthodox and conservative homes than in secular homes (Terkel 1998). This research did not examine the prevalence of other pets.
7. For a more comprehensive analysis of the view of animals in Judaism see Shir-Vertesh 2008.

8. See, for example, sections 451 and 457 in the 1977 Penal Code, section 6 of the 1974 Lost Property Law, and section 22 of the 1967 writ of execution. Animals are considered a special kind of property and their welfare needs to be taken into consideration (see, e.g., the *tza'ar ba'aley xaim* law of 1994).
9. The Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel does not collect statistical information regarding pets.
10. According to the Jerusalem Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) the median age of marriage has grown by more than three years since 1970 (CBS 2006a), and the age women have their first baby has increased by almost a year and a half in the past decade to 26.6 (CBS 2006b).
11. Thirty-one of these couples eventually had babies. One couple did not get pregnant as of now.
12. All names of informants have been changed.
13. The changes in these families underline the importance of long-term research: "traditional" one-year field research would have precluded the opportunity to see the shifting of relationships between some people and their animals.
14. As previously mentioned, these laws are rarely enforced.
15. It is interesting to note that it seems that as the (human) children grow up, the pets can take the form of children once more. Though this research focuses on young couples, I have come across older couples with teenage or adult children during my fieldwork. Many were the initial couples' parents or friends. These older couples often introduce their pets as their children, and one couple even took out pictures of their two dogs from their wallet so I can see how they have grown. The relationships of these older couples and their pets could be a promising venue for further research, as the "empty nest" is refilled with "animal children."
16. In my research, the animals' market value proved to be immaterial. The majority of pets were not purebreds but rather mutts, and the inquiries into the prestige or monetary value of the pets were rejected by the families as irrelevant.

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