

3a. The significance of the three symbols

Our Gemara states that the first watch of the night is marked by donkeys braying; the second by dogs barking; and the third by wives conversing with their husbands in bed, and babies nursing from their mothers. The commentators offer a number of explanations about the significance of these symbolisms:

Maharsha: The three stages mark the three states a person goes through at night, which correspond to the three levels of spirituality extant in a person.

1. The donkey symbolizes the material and the physical. At the first stage of the night, one is exhausted, and his mind is full of the day's events and affairs. He is in a completely physical state at that point, symbolized by the donkey.
2. The dog represents a more spiritual level, albeit still physical (the dog represents a level of intellect, but without soul). In the middle of the night, one is at rest, his material concerns are now set aside, and he is conscious only at a deeper level.
3. The last stage of the night, before the morning, is when the spiritual side of man is at its prime; the mind is clear, the concerns of the day have not yet begun. This is the time most conducive for Torah learning, symbolized by the baby nursing, for by learning Torah we are like a baby drawing our nourishment from its source; and for prayer, symbolized by a woman who utilizes the intimate and peaceful time with her husband in bed before the morning begins to make her requests of him.

Benayahu (Ben Ish Chai): The three symbols symbolize three levels of human intellect and achievement in this world.

1. The donkey, which symbolizes pure materialism without intellect, represents the folly of human intellect—the ever repetitive phenomenon of human intellect developing understandings and beliefs in various areas of science etc. which are eventually rejected, leaving the efforts of great minds completely useless and obsolete.
2. The second is the symbol of dogs barking. As above, the dog represents intellect with no aspect of spirituality. This represents the true achievements of human intellect in the material realms of science etc.
3. The third represents the Jewish Nation nursing the milk of a Torah and “conversing” with their husband—the true achievements of the human intellect.

Maharal: The three symbols correspond to the three stages of the Exile:

1. The donkey, which is an animal used to bear loads, represents the initial stage of the exile, during which the non-Jews taxed the Jews heavily (thus imposing heavy loads upon them, like a donkey), but did not persecute them bodily.

2. The dogs barking, which indicate the presence of the Angel of Death, represent the second stage of the Exile, during which the Jews were subject to terrible persecution and massacre.
3. The woman speaking to her husband indicates the third stage of the Exile, during which the non-Jews do not exercise force against us, but rather draw us close (which can represent the greatest threat of all). This period is also represented by the child nursing from its mother: The Jewish People are in a state of infancy, and can retain their connection to Torah only by drawing on the teachings of the previous generation.

Chasam Sofer: The three stages represent three stages of this world, which Chazal divide into three millennia:

1. The first is millennium of emptiness, i.e. the years before the appearance of Avraham and the Giving of the Torah. This is represented by the donkey, who symbolized Egypt, and pure materialism and physicality.
2. The second is the millennium of Torah, i.e. the years after the Giving of the Torah, before the coming of Mashiach. This is represented by the dog barking, which is a step higher than the donkey (see above), but is not yet the ideal.
3. The third is represented by the woman conversing with her husband and the baby nursing. This represents the end of time, as above, when the Jewish People will be reunited with Hashem, as above.