

# Can an Ape Ape Humans?

- *Chaim Rivkin*

A popular legend says that the Rambam disproved a supposedly successful attempt at training a cat to walk and act like a human by releasing a mouse in its presence, at which point the subject of the experiment immediately reverted to its feline inclinations. It is clear from our sages that Hashem invested humans with the power of speech and lower life forms are and will always be incapable of that level of intelligent communication.

Still, in the secular world the debate goes on. Can an animal be trained to behave and act like a human? One professor in New York announced with certainty that a monkey raised in a human environment could learn to speak and behave exactly like a human and he decided to prove it by taking a chimpanzee, giving it a name and placing it in the midst of a normal human family.

What happened after that is astounding.

**“H**e wears baby clothes, sits straight at the table and eats dinner together with the family!”

“Not yet one year old, yet he asks for his food, climbs the walls and even says ‘sorry!’”

These headlines from leading American newspapers are not describing another child prodigy, but a... chimpanzee named Nim.

Nim lived in a typical brown house in Manhattan as a regular member of the LaFarge family. He spent time with his human step-siblings playing and tickling, and even communicating with them in his own chimp language. When Nim was hungry, he learned to sign to them with his hands, “Give banana. Me eat.” And when he grew bored, he could sign to them, “Want Nim play.”

What was a chimpanzee doing living with a human family? It was part of Project Nim, an experiment undertaken to challenge the notion that only humans have language.

## Can Monkeys Talk?

Monday, November 19, 1973, began like any ordinary day at the Institute for Primate Studies (IPS) in Norman, Oklahoma. There a group of 40 chimpanzees jumped around and shrieked as they waited for their breakfast to be served. The aide who was there that morning spent most of his day at the research center and was used to the commotion and tumult that accompanied feeding time.



A mother primate with her young.

That afternoon the scientist’s attention was focused on Caroline, an 18-year-old chimp who had just given birth. The new mother hugged and carried the baby—her seventh—like any mother chimp would, but the expression on her face was sad. She climbed a branch in her cage and turned her back to the researchers, as if to shelter her baby from the view of supervisor William Lemmon and his helpers.

All of the workers understood Caroline’s behavior perfectly. The experienced chimpanzee knew exactly what to expect. Just like all of her other babies, this new one was about to be taken from her. He would become the subject of yet another research project which the humans were performing to learn more about the inborn abilities and intellect of chimpanzees. That was the sole purpose of all the monkeys being held at the Institute.

The newborn chimp, “Number 37” as he was identified in Lemmon’s notes, was to become the subject of one of the most important studies ever performed on monkeys.

Herbert Terrace, a professor of psychology and one of Columbia’s leading scientists, was out to prove his long-established belief that chimpanzees are capable of learning to speak intelligently. In this he was at odds with Professor Noam Chomsky, a widely recognized linguistic expert (despite his provocative and controversial political ideology). Chomsky advocated that only the human is capable of utilizing speech in an intelligent fashion.

To spite the man whose opinion he opposed, Terrace named the subject of his experiment Nim Chimsky, intentionally mimicking the respected professor’s name. The project under which his experiment would be performed was labeled Project Nim.

The debate was not new. In the 1950s, a psychologist in Florida tried to teach a chimpanzee named Viki to talk. Eventually, she was able to voice four words: mama, papa, up and cup, but the project ended in failure when she could not do more.

Another pair of scientists, Allen and

Beatrix Gardner, postulated that the failure of previous experiments to teach chimpanzees to communicate through intelligent speech was not due to a lack of intellect, but to the physical inability of the monkeys to produce the necessary range of vocal sounds. To get around this physical handicap, they proposed teaching the chimps to use American Sign Language instead of speech. This was anyway much closer to the simplified form of communication that chimpanzees are used to in the wild, involving hand motions and facial expressions.

In 1966, the Gardners took in a chimpanzee they named Washoe and raised it in their home. Washoe often dressed in clothes and sat with them to eat supper at the table. She lived in her own 8x24 foot trailer with a kitchen and refrigerator, sofa, drawers and bedroom complete with bed linen and blankets. She had clothes, combs and brushes, toys, books and even a toothbrush. Like any other child she was subjected to a regular routine which included basic chores, outside playtime and even family outings in the car.

Whenever they were together with Washoe, the Gardners refrained from talking, even between themselves, relying solely on sign language to communicate so that they would not confuse the poor chimpanzee. Over the next few years the new addition to the Gardner family learned over 300 words in sign language, indicating that their project had been a success, and eventually they returned Washoe to the IPS.

The linguists who maintained that speech is a uniquely human attribute did not back off because of the Gardners’ work. They argued that Washoe had never been proven to understand the signs she was making and might have been capable of no more than imitating the humans around her. They wanted to see a chimpanzee string together a group of coherent words, such as “Joe gave the toy to Moe” to create a clear idea that the monkey demonstrably understood.

Now Terrace wanted to administer a project that would settle the matter once and for all. Children develop their language

skills slowly, one step at a time; and from single words they advance to small groups, then to larger word clusters and finally to complete sentences. The question for Terrace was whether Nim was capable of following through the same process as any human child. Could the chimpanzee learn to string together word phrases and eventually entire sentence structures in an intelligent fashion?

If a chimpanzee could be taught to communicate openly with humans, it followed that this would then give scientists a window into the innermost thoughts and feelings of an animal for the first time. Researchers would be able to ask the monkey what it was thinking and how it felt in response to different situations, leading to a tremendous scientific breakthrough in the field of animal psychology.



Nim Chimsky communicates with humans through sign language.



Nim is pushed in a carriage by his older “brother.”