

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Sh'mini – lessons from kashrut

In this week's Parsha of Sh'mini we learn about the laws of kashrut. Specifically, the Parsha lists which animals are permitted for us to consume and which animals are forbidden.

The laws of kashrut fall into the category of chokim - laws which make no logical sense to us. We accept these mitzvot as Divine decrees and we perform them just because Hashem commanded us to do so.

In his commentary to Devarim 22:6, the Ramban says that there are two approaches to understanding chokim. One opinion is that we should accept chokim as a Divine decree without trying to understand its reasons. The other opinion, favoured by the Rambam, is that we should try our best to find reasons for all of the mitzvot.

On the one hand, analysing each mitzva to the best of our ability to try to discover as many explanations and reasons as possible may bring the mitzvot to life and enable us to perform them with more passion.

On the other hand, a risk with searching for the underlying meaning for a mitzvah is that people may drop the practice of that mitzva if the apparent reason no longer applies. For example, some people claim that the reason that Jews are prohibited from eating pig products is because consuming undercooked pork can cause a disease called trichinosis. Those people may then claim that modern hygienic practices and proper preparation mean that the health concerns are no longer relevant today. Therefore, they would argue, the prohibition on pork consumption should no longer apply. However, the truth is that health reasons may be a reason for kashrut, but they are certainly not **the** reason.

We are creatures of logic and control. We often appreciate understanding the meaning behind our actions. Most of us are not on a high enough level to have completely internalised the message that if Hashem commands us to do something it is ultimately for our best. This heartfelt belief takes patience and emunah. While working to achieve this level we may need to satiate our desire for logic and meaning by exploring some rational reasons for Hashem's commandments. However, when looking into the reasons behind the mitzvot, it is important to keep in mind that the only real reason we have for keeping any of the mitzvot is purely because Hashem commanded us to do so.

The mystics tell us that when we consume animals we absorb their characteristics. Exploring the characteristics of the animals that are kosher and non-kosher may provide us with some insight into the types of middot that Hashem considers to be worthy. Consider the following:

- The Torah lists the chasidah as a bird that is not kosher<sup>1</sup>. Rashi explains that the name 'chasidah' is related to the work 'chesed', which means kindness. The Gemara<sup>2</sup> explains that this bird demonstrates kindness by sharing its food with other members of its species. We might presume that chesed is an admirable character trait and that therefore this bird should be kosher! However, the Rishiner Rebbe<sup>3</sup> explains that the chasidah directs its kindness exclusively to fellow members

<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 11:19. Rashi identifies this bird as the stork however other disagree.

<sup>2</sup> Chullin 63a.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Israel Friedman of Ruzhyn, 1796-1850.

of its own species. Limiting our acts of kindness merely to those that are closest to us is not an admirable character trait from a Jewish perspective.<sup>4</sup> It is easy to be kind with members of our own family. A higher level of kindness is that given to strangers and to people to whom we find it difficult to relate or who are different from us.

- The animals and birds of prey that attack and kill their food are not kosher. The animals and birds that are kosher are more gentle and peaceful and they do not attack or kill other animals.
- The pig is listed as one of the animals that are not kosher.<sup>5</sup> While there are many animals that are not kosher, pigs are usually considered as the 'most non-kosher' of all. Why do pigs get such a bad rap? The Midrash<sup>6</sup> explains that the pig appears kosher from the outside because it has split hooves. However since it does not possess the second requirement necessary to make it kosher – that is, chewing its cud – it is actually not kosher. The pig is the only such animal. When the pig rests it sticks out its hooves as if to say “look, I am kosher”. But it is actually hiding its true non-kosher status which cannot be seen from the outside. The pig is thus considered worse than other non-kosher animals because it symbolises hypocrisy, a particularly terrible character trait.
- Many of the kosher animals are productive – for instance they produce wool and milk and eggs. This may symbolise the importance of being productive and contributing to society.
- Non-kosher animals of prey will often devour their food, gobbling it up quickly before another animal comes to steal their dinner. This may teach us to avoid the negative trait of greed.
- Kosher animals chew their cud – this means that they chew their food a number of times, slowly and carefully. Perhaps this symbolises the character trait of being careful and thorough and thinking things through before acting. Incidentally, the Rambam teaches that it is healthy to chew our food very well before swallowing.
- Kosher animals have hooves that are split or broken. This may be a representation of the trait of humility, because it symbolises incompleteness. (see Darchai Noam for Parshat Vayikra and Parshat Terumah for further discussion about the importance of the trait of humility and some tips on how to acquire it.)

The laws of kashrut can also teach us important lessons about our interpersonal relations. They serve to prevent too much intermingling with non-Jews which could lead to assimilation and inter-marriage. On the other hand, we should be able to eat more freely with our fellow Jews. The laws of kashrut can thus function as a unifying force that keep us together. Unfortunately, the confusion and variety of standards of kashrut serves to hinder this unity in reality. Many Jews will not eat together because of kashrut. Being more aware of the halacha may help to alleviate this problem. If we have a better understanding of what is allowed and what is not allowed we will be more able to eat together and less likely to embarrass each other when unnecessarily refusing to eat.

Let's try something this week:

1. Before we eat a particular food, we can strive to enhance our middot by thinking of the character traits that we can learn from the kosher and non-kosher animals.
2. Study and learn the clear delineations of the halachot of kashrut and understand which practices are required and which are chumrot (strictures). This will help us to avoid embarrassing others by refusing to eat at their home and will thus enhance unity. We need to seek Rabbinic guidance as to how to act appropriately in such circumstances.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>4</sup> The Stone edition of the Artscroll Chumash, footnote to Vayikra 11:19.

<sup>5</sup> Vayikra 11:7.

<sup>6</sup> Breishit Rabbah 65:1.

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The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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