

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayikra
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayikra – What can we learn from forbidden fat?

In this week's Parasha of Vayikra we are introduced to korbanot. We learn many details about how to bring a number of types of korbanot, including animals, birds and meal offerings. We learn how to prepare the animal, what to do with the blood and which parts of the animal are offered on the mizbeyach. These details may seem less relevant to us since we have not been able to bring korbanot for almost 2,000 years. Nevertheless, there are many important lessons to be learnt which are relevant for us even today. Let's focus on "chelev" – certain forbidden fats of an animal which are mentioned a number of times in connection with animal korbanot.

Keeping to yourself

In his lengthy commentary on verse 3:9 of our Parasha, the Ramban discusses the types of fats that are classified as chelev. The Ramban distinguishes between two types of fats – chelev and shuman. chelev fats are kept separate and distinct from the flesh of the animal and are enclosed within their own membrane. These types of fats are forbidden to eat. In contrast, shuman fats are dispersed within the meat. It is permissible to eat this kind of fat (although one shouldn't eat too much of it unless they want high cholesterol!)

The mystics tell us that when we consume animals, we absorb their characteristics. A number of commentators have pointed out that kosher animals have character traits which are more appropriate for us to internalise and emulate. For example, the animals and birds of prey that attack and kill their food are not kosher. The animals and birds that are kosher are gentler and more peaceful.¹

Perhaps we can extend this idea to the different categories of fats. Chelev fats keep to themselves. They are surrounded by a membrane and don't mix with the meat of the animal. We can suggest that this represents people who only think about themselves and are not concerned about the community. In Pirkai Avot,² Hillel teaches us that one should not separate themselves from the community. The Rambam³ strongly condemns one who separates himself from the community, even if he has not transgressed any sins. The Rambam writes that a person who separates himself from the congregation of Israel and does not fulfill mitzvot together with them, does not take part in their hardships, or join in their communal fasts, but rather goes on his own individual path as if he is from another nation, does not have a portion in the world to come.

Separating from the community is thus considered a "non-kosher" trait and therefore ingesting chelev fat is forbidden. On the other hand, shuman is dispersed throughout the animal's meat. This may represent people who are involved with the community, take an interest in others and try to be helpful. This is a 'kosher' trait and therefore it is permissible to ingest shuman fat.

Constantly in motion

The Ramban also discusses whether the tail fat of a sheep is considered chelev. One of his arguments that it is not chelev is that the tail is constantly in motion. The Ramban explains that chelev is never formed in a limb that is constantly moving. Only permitted shuman fat will form in such a limb. Perhaps we can extrapolate from this that 'constant motion' represents a positive trait that we should strive to emulate. We are put into this world to work hard, to achieve and to improve the world. That requires constant effort and exertion. At the beginning of Parashat Vayeshev we learn that, after overcoming many challenges, Yaakov Avinu wanted a break.⁴ However he was then confronted with the challenge of the dispute between Yosef and his brothers. Hashem rebuked

¹ See Darchai Noam for Parashat Sh'mini 5776 (2016) where we discussed this idea at length and gave many other examples of "kosher" character traits. A copy is available here: <https://darchai-noam.com/darchai-noam-shmini-5776/>

² Chapter 2 Mishnah 5.

³ Hilchot Teshuva 3:11.

⁴ It goes without saying that Yaakov did not want a holiday! He wanted time to focus on Torah and self-development.

Yaakov for wanting to take it easy and He said that the World to Come is the time to rest⁵! The trait of being constantly active, constantly working on ourselves and striving to improve is a 'kosher' trait.

Being modest

Later in sefer Vayikra,⁶ the Ramban discusses another distinction in types of fat. The flanks of an animal consist of layers of muscle and fat that extend down the sides of the body and surround the abdominal cavity.⁷ The portion of the fat that is concealed by the layers of flesh is not included in the Torah's prohibition to eat chelev fat. Only the fat that is visible on the flanks when the animal is flayed is forbidden.

We can suggest that this teaches us the importance of tzniut (modesty). Adhering to the laws of dressing modestly provides many benefits. For example, it helps to ensure that individuals are treated as people, rather than as objects. It is an unspoken message that we are a holy people, separate from Western culture. Privacy and holiness go hand in hand – keeping something separate and concealed enhances its holiness.⁸ Keeping ourselves covered appropriately is a 'kosher' trait and therefore the fats that are concealed are permitted.

Proof for the oral Torah⁹

The word "chelev" is also used as a support for the Oral Torah and demonstrates its necessity. Let's explore.

There is a well-known story in the Gemara¹⁰ about a non-Jew who wanted to convert but was only interested in accepting the written Torah and not the oral tradition. He first came to Shammai but he was rejected out of hand, because the two parts of the Torah cannot be separated. He then came to Hillel and Hillel agreed to convert him and to teach him only the written Torah. His first lesson was to start learning the aleph bet. However, at his second lesson, Hillel reversed the order of the letters and changed their names. When the convert complained, Hillel said to him "You see that you can't even learn the Aleph Bet without relying on an oral tradition! It is impossible to learn Torah without an oral tradition. You relied on me to teach you the Aleph Bet, you also need to rely on me in relation to the Oral Torah and accept the interpretations that it contains".

We can see another proof for the necessity of the Oral Torah from the word "chelev" which refers to certain fats that are absolutely forbidden to eat. The word "chelev" is spelt חלב. The Hebrew word for milk is "chalav", which is also spelt חלב – the same spelling as "chelev". The difference between the two words is only noticeable by the nekudot (vowels). The only problem is, the Torah scroll does not contain any vowels. So, how do we know that the law restricting chalav and meat but permitting chalav on its own, refers to "milk" and not to chelev fats? And how do we know that the item which is forbidden is chelev fat and not milk, chalav? We only know this from the oral law! The written law cannot help here because the two words look identical.

Let's try something this week:

Remember some lessons that we can learn from the forbidden fat.

1. Try be involved with the community and keep connected to it.
2. Remember that we are put in this world to work on ourselves and to keep moving and growing. Rest and relaxation are important to help keep us refreshed and energised, but it is not the purpose for our existence.
3. Try to be aware of the clothes that we choose to wear and remember that we have a halachic obligation to dress modestly.
4. Remember that the oral law is a vital part of the Torah, without which we could be misled or confused about how to keep the mitzvot.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁵ See Rashi to Parashat Vayeshev, Breishit 37:1.

⁶ See the Ramban's commentary to Vayikra 9:19 in Parashat Sh'mini.

⁷ This explanation was taken from footnote 65 on Ramban's commentary to Vayikra 9:19 in the Artscroll Graff-Rand edition of the Ramban.

⁸ Some of the laws of modesty are obligatory (e.g., covering elbows, knees and collarbones) and some are based on the customs of certain communities. One can often tell whether an item of clothing is appropriate or not. If one is unsure, they should ask their Rabbi.

⁹ I heard this idea in a shiur by Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

¹⁰ Shabbat 31a.