

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Shemini – What can kashrut teach us about how to live our lives?

In this week's Parasha of Shemini we learn about the laws of kashrut. Specifically, the Parasha 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.

The Rambam¹ says that there are two approaches to understanding chokim. One opinion is that we should accept chokim as Divine decrees without trying to understand their 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 underlying explanations and reasons as possible, may help bring the mitzvot to life and encourage us to perform the mitzvot with more passion.² On the other hand, by searching for the underlying meaning for a mitzvah, people may be tempted to forget that ultimately we must perform the mitzvot because Hashem said so. Consequently, they may drop their practice of that mitzva if the '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. However, with modern hygienic practices and proper preparation, those health concerns are no longer relevant today. Therefore, they would argue, the prohibition on pork consumption should no longer apply. However, even though the health reasons may be a reason for kashrut, they are certainly not the reason. The ultimate reason is always 'because Hashem said so'.

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 for our best, whether or not we understand it. This heartfelt belief takes patience and emunah. While working to achieve this level, we may be encouraged in our performance of mitzvot through satiating 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 vital to remember that the ultimate reason we keep all 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 on some level. 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 worthy. Consider the following:

- The Torah lists the chasidah as a bird that is not kosher³. Rashi explains that the name 'chasidah' is related to the work 'chesed', which means kindness. The Gemara⁴ explains that this bird demonstrates kindness by sharing its food with other members of its species. It may seem surprising that a bird with the admirable trait of chesed is not kosher. However, the Rishiner Rebbe⁵ explains that the chasidah directs its kindness exclusively to fellow members of its own species. Limiting our acts of kindness

¹ Moreh Nevuchim (The Guide for the Perplexed), Part III, cited by the Ramban in his commentary to Devarim 22:6.

² The word used to describe the reason for a mitzva is 'ta'am', which literally means 'taste'. We need to eat food for survival and nutrition, but the taste of the food encourages us to enjoy the experience. Similarly, we need to perform the mitzvot for our spiritual health, but the rational reasons and ideas behind the mitzva might encourage us in our mitzva performance.

³ Vayikra 11:19. Rashi identifies this bird as the stork however other disagree.

⁴ Chullin 63a.

⁵ Rabbi Israel Friedman of Ruzhyn, 1796-1850.

merely to those that are closest to us is not an admirable character trait from a Jewish perspective.⁶ It is easy to be kind with members of our own family or friends. A higher level of kindness is when we give to strangers, to people to whom we find it difficult to relate, or to those 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 have a gentler nature and are more peaceful, and they do not attack or kill other animals.
- The pig is listed as one of the animals that is not kosher.⁷ 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 Midrash⁸ 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 animal of this nature. 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, the fact that it does not chew its cud, 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, milk and eggs and they help us to work the land. 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.
- In contrast, 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.⁹ Rav Chaim Kanievsky suggested that chewing the cud requires hard work and thoroughness, which is the opposite of laziness.¹⁰
- Kosher animals have hooves that are split or broken. This may be a representation of the trait of humility, because it symbolises incompleteness.

More generally, the laws of kashrut can also teach us important lessons about our interpersonal relations. Eating with others helps us to bond with them. Since the laws of kashrut force us to eat separately from non-Jews, they serve to prevent too much intermingling with non-Jews which could lead to assimilation and intermarriage. On the other hand, eating more freely with our fellow Jews can serve as a unifying force which keeps us together. However, unfortunately the variety of standards of kashrut, and the subsequent confusion, can serve to hinder this unity in reality. Many Jews will not eat together because of differing kashrut standards. 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 at another’s house.

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 may help us to eat with other Jews whenever possible and avoid embarrassing another unnecessarily, when a particular kashrut practice is only a chumrah.
3. Remember that even though some mitzvot have ‘reasons’, the only real reason for any mitzva is because ‘Hashem told us to do it’.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ See the Stone edition of the Artscroll Chumash, footnote to Vayikra 11:19.

⁷ Vayikra 11:7.

⁸ Breishit Rabbah 65:1.

⁹ See also the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (32:13) who discusses the importance of chewing our food well before swallowing.

¹⁰ See Orchos Yosher, Artscroll, p122-123.