

TORAH WEEKLY



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Parshas Shemini | April 5, 2024 | Volume 25 | Issue 24

You Are What You Eat

By: Rabbi Dov Holczer (Originally Published 2020)

It is one of the most well-known, yet least understood, areas of Judaism. For one to be considered an observant Jew, it's one of the basic areas that are kept. In this week's parsha, Hashem commands the Bnai Yisrael about the laws of keeping kosher. What is the great importance attached to eating kosher? Conversely, why is eating non-kosher food such a terrible problem?

The commentators explain that the food a person eats affects him spiritually. When one eats the meat of an animal, that animal becomes a part of the person, and along with that come the spiritual qualities of the animal. Thus, the Torah forbids eating any animal that will bring negative spiritual traits into the person. Hashem allows us to eat only animals that chew their cud and have split hooves, as these animals do not have an adverse effect upon one who consumes them. It should therefore come as no surprise that there are no predatory animals that are kosher; imbibing the character traits of such a creature would have a negative effect upon the spiritual stature of a person.

The Ramban (Shemini 11:13) says that the most effective way to determine whether a particular bird is kosher or not is by identifying if it is a predator; if the bird displays any predatory traits, it is certainly not kosher. However, if it does not show any such characteristics, then there's a good chance it is a kosher bird.

The Torah provides a listing of non-kosher animals that have one of the two kosher signs – they have only split hooves or only chew their cud. The Kli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Lunschitz; 1550-1619) points out that when referring to these non-kosher animals, the Torah first states that it possesses one of the kosher signs and only subsequently says that it's missing the second requirement. This is strange, as it would seem to be sufficient to just tell us that the animal lacks one of the kosher signs; why the need to discuss its one kosher sign? Furthermore, its non-kosher sign should be mentioned first, as it is the reason for its non-kosher status.

The Kli Yakar explains that one would expect that an animal with one of the two kosher requirements would be better than an animal with none. However, says the Kli Yakar, the opposite is true. An animal that shows some symbol of purity but is still not kosher is worse than the animal that has none. Something that seems good but is really bad can be much more dangerous than something whose evil nature is easily recognizable, as a person may well connect with such a being, thinking that there is nothing wrong with it. In interpersonal relationships, a person who is known to be a wicked individual will be avoided by others, for they realize clearly that they must stay away. On the other hand, a person who is rotted at the core but puts on a façade of goodness can attract people and influence them with his evil ways. Therefore, says the Kli Yakar, the Torah spells out the kosher sign of these animals at the outset, and then notes its non-kosher quality to stress that it is the kosher trait in combination with the non-kosher one that makes these animals a whole new level of non-kosher.

It is noteworthy that the paradigm of a non-kosher animal, both in the teachings of our Sages as well as in the world at large, is the pig. The pig is the sole animal whose one kosher symbol is displayed externally, as it has split hooves, while the other one-kosher-sign animals, such as the camel, lack the external trait of split hooves and possess the internal sign of chewing their cud. Since the pig's resemblance to a kosher animal is much more noticeable, its level of impurity is much more pronounced and is thus seen as the epitome of something not kosher.

The Torah thus teaches us the importance of keeping out negative influences, not just when eating, but in life in general. One must be extra cautious for seemingly positive influences that are, in fact, much worse than that which is clearly evil. Allowing only truly kosher influences through will help ensure a person's spiritual standing will not be dragged down.

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Rabbi Dov Holczer



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