

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

VAYIKRA

TZAV

SHEMINI

TAZRIA

METZORA

ACHREI MOT

KEDOSHIM

EMOR

BEHAR

BECHUKOTAI

SHEMINI

THE FINS AND SCALES

OF CONTINUITY

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According to the great sage Ben Zoma, the definition of Jewish wisdom is to learn from every person.¹ The Talmud extends this concept of learning from those around us beyond human beings, to the animal kingdom. It states that had the Torah not been given, we would learn good character traits from animals, such as modesty from a cat and manners from a rooster.² The lesson that there is more to learn from the animal kingdom than initially meets the eye is intrinsic to the spirit of the laws of kosher food, where we are instructed, 'to distinguish between impure and pure, and between creatures that may be eaten and creatures that may not be eaten.'³ This distinction, according to the Torah, has spiritual ramifications.⁴ Quite simply, you are what you eat - if you eat impure food, by definition some impurity will penetrate.⁵ While it is self-evident that what

comes out of one's mouth is highly significant, we now begin to understand that an awareness of what goes into it is of equal importance.

When it comes to the *kasbrut* of fish there are two criteria that must be present in order for a fish to be deemed kosher - fins and scales.⁶ The Talmud points out that while all fish with scales have fins, fish with fins do not necessarily have scales.⁷ Therefore, it makes sense that the Torah specifies that a kosher fish must have scales, but it is apparently redundant to mention that it should also have fins. Clearly there is an underlying significance to these features of the kosher fish, beyond the simple fact of their presence or absence.

The Talmud compares the Torah to water and the Jewish people to fish.⁸ **Just as fish cannot live without water, said Rabbi Akiva, Jews cannot live without Torah.** This metaphor can be taken further, with the fins and scales of fish representing specific human characteristics. The scales make up a thick, skin-like layer that helps to protect the fish from external dangers such as predators and environmental changes. Fins act like the rudder of the fish, used to navigate and manoeuvre it through the streams, rivers and oceans. The *Ner Uziel* explains that the millennia of trials and tribulations that the Jewish people have endured have necessitated the development of both of these characteristics in order ensure survival and continuity. Our 'thick skin' is made up of the non-negotiable values that protect us from the many negative influences around



us, and our ‘fins’ are that part which enables us to navigate the waters of life and to know when to adapt and swim with the tide, and when to swim against it if anything threatens to breach our ‘scales’.

It may be for this reason that Jacob blesses Ephraim and Menashe, the sons of Joseph, that they will ‘multiply abundantly like fish’.⁹ These brothers are the first Jewish children to be brought up outside the Land of Israel, in a predominantly polytheistic environment. Despite being the sons of the viceroy of Egypt, living in the palaces of a society that runs counter to their core values, Ephraim and Menashe stand true to their faith. In the same way, no matter what our environment,

we too should develop a layer of ‘scales’ to protect and preserve our indispensable ideals, and a set of formidable ‘fins’, a strong moral compass to guide us up and down the stream of life.

Notes

- ¹ Mishna, Tractate *Avot* 4:1.
- ² Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Erubin* 100b.
- ³ *Leviticus* 11:47.
- ⁴ *Leviticus* 9.
- ⁵ *Leviticus* 11:43.
- ⁶ *Leviticus* 11:9.
- ⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Chullin* 66b; Tractate *Nidda* 51b.
- ⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Berachot* 61b.
- ⁹ *Genesis* 48:16.

In honour of a speedy and complete recovery for our precious daughter

Lital Gila bat Renana Yael

מוקדש לרפואתה השלמה
והמהירה של ביתנו היקרה
ליטל גילה בת רננה יעל

Parasha Fact:

Perhaps the reason the pig is considered a quintessentially non-kosher animal, is because it contains one of the two signs, appearing kosher from the outside. To be kosher is to act in a kosher way inside and out.

Next week in Tazria:

As the well-known phrase goes, it takes lemons to make lemonade and rain to make rainbows. In life, there are many ways in which to regard every situation, and it is up to us to seek out the positive lens through which to view the world. Will we be those that simply see the lemons and the rain, or will we generate positivity through adopting a brighter perspective? The Torah’s discussion of leprosy, and in particular its use of the word “nega”, meaning affliction, provides the key to unlocking a truly optimistic attitude.

שבת שלום