



Yeshivat Ma'alot

Parashat Shmini

Rav Yehoshua Weitzman shlit"a

ישיבת מעלות

פרשת שמיני

רב יהושע ויצמן שליט"א

Signs of Kashrut, Signs of Depth

One of the important subjects found in this week's parasha is *ma'achalot asurot*, prohibited foods. In it is described the necessary kashrut requirements for livestock, game and fish. With regard to fish the Torah states¹ "This is what you may eat from the water: all that has fins and scales from the oceans, lakes and rivers you may eat. And all that do not have fins and scales from the rivers and lakes that teem within the water, and from every other living thing in the water, it is an abomination to you."

With regard to this, the Mishnah in Masechet Niddah² says that all fish which have scales have fins, and there are those fish that have fins which have no scales. In other words, it is only necessary to check if the fish has scales, because automatically it means that it also has fins. Yet checking for fins has no independent value because it does not mean that the fish is necessarily pure. If so, an obvious question must be asked; why then did the Torah write that fins are a sign of purity on a fish?! The Gemara³ asks the same question and answers the following: Rabi Abahu and the Beit Midrash of Rabi Yishmael said 'In order to make the Torah great and glorious.'

What greatness of the Torah is found in the fins of a fish? Is it because the rules regarding the kashrut of fish added extra words to the Torah? Both the Ritva and Harav Kook zt"l have similar response to this question. The Ritva⁴ writes that it is possible that the fins of a fish add to its purity, even though by themselves they are meaningless. So too, Harav Kook writes⁵ that the Torah includes knowledge that is not always applicable to halacha. Therefore, if the Torah only wrote scales, one would think the power of the fish's purity comes only from the scales. But because the Torah also includes fins, the Torah teaches that the power of *tahara* in fish is also concealed in its fins.

From a simple perspective, by understanding the signs of *tahara* in fish to be a simple halachic guideline one is, in essence, understanding the Torah to only be a book of laws. Such an approach downsizes the Torah to being a book of technicalities that teaches man how to act. From this week's parasha, a new and deeper approach towards Torah is formed. The fact that the Torah wrote fins, even though it has no

¹ Vayikra 11, 9-10

² Niddah ch. 6, mishnah 9

³ Niddah 51b

⁴ Niddah 51a

⁵ Igrot Hareiyah 103

technical need, comes to show that there is a deeper meaning to the signs of *tahara*, not just what meets the eye. This is what Chazal intended when they said “make the Torah great and glorious.” From this one learns what the true outlook on Torah must be. One who views the Torah solely as a rule book is basically minimizing its Godly greatness. Rather, the Torah is the word of Hashem, which teaches us how to cling to His ways.

If so, then what is the Godly message that is hidden away in the fins of fish? Both the scales and the fins help to build the fish’s purity. In order to reach this state of completion, two foundations must be used; the foundation of the scales and the foundation of the fins. The Shlah Hakadosh explains that *talmidei chachamim* are likened to fish, which are fruitful and multiply. Their Torah is fruitful and it multiplies, and those who delve into the depths of the mysteries of the Torah are pure and holy like the fish. He continues to elaborate that fish’s scales are permanently embedded into it, as opposed to the fins which are outward to the fish’s body, and with the help of the fins the fish moves. The permanent scales represent the Torah which one learns from his teachers. The fins, which are less permanent and enable the fish's mobility, represent the Godly intellect that one acquires through his own power. Together, they make it possible for the Torah to be “great and glorious.” The permanent foundation is the Torah that is passed from generation to generation. The changing foundation is the strength to live in a changing world; a world which constantly renews itself based on the permanent foundations. Together these two factors build the purity and wholeness of the Torah.

The Gemara in Masechet Chullin⁶ tells the following. When Moshe ascended to the Heavens to receive the Torah, he found Hashem attaching crowns on all of it's letters. He asked “Master of the World, why are You busy doing such a thing?” Hashem replied that in the future there is going to be a great scholar named Akiva ben Yosef, who will explain "mountains of halacha" based on these crowns. Moshe asked to see him, and Hashem took Moshe and sat him in the back of Rabi Akiva’s classroom. Moshe did not understand what was being taught, and as a result he grew weak. At that point one of the students asked the reasoning behind a certain law, and Rabi Akiva answered that it was *halacha Moshe m’Sinai*, an accepted halacha that Moshe gave at Har Sinai. Upon hearing this, Moshe’s strength returned to him.

Why is it that Moshe did not understand the lesson, and how come he regained his strength upon hearing *halacha Moshe m’Sinai*, even though he did not recognize that particular halacha? This can be understood from an example from the modern day world. Imagine if Moshe was to attend a rabbinical conference on the halachic status of the internet. He would most probably hear phrases such as email, chat, surfing the web, and things of the like. Of course he would lose his strength- was this the Torah that was given at Har Sinai?! Yet what would happen if at that same conference one of the rabbis would stand up and argue: “On the one hand the Torah states⁷ ‘Do not bring an abomination into your house’, yet on the other hand a person has the choice which sites to enter, and the Torah explicitly says⁸ ‘I have placed life and death, blessing and curse in front of you, and you shall choose life.’” In such a situation, Moshe would understand that these foundations are rooted in the Torah which he

⁶ Chullin 29b

⁷ Devarim 7, 26

⁸ Devarim 30, 19

passed down from Har Sinai. He would understand that everything that is beyond his understanding is developments and expansions of the Torah which he received.

There is only one possible way for the *Torah sh'bichtav*, the written Torah, the scales, to last throughout so many generations of change. By using the fins, the ability to adapt the permanent foundations of the Torah to the present, the Torah's eternal message is imbued in every generation. The phrase "to make the Torah great and glorious" is said especially regarding the purity of the fish's fins. The fins, the ability to propel the Torah forward is in essence the power that makes the Torah great; it makes it possible for the Torah's greatness to be revealed throughout all ages.

What is true of the signs of *tahara* in fish is also true in the signs of *tahara* in animals; they are not merely indicators if an animal is kosher, rather they are spiritual foundations that build completion. The required signs of kashrut in an animal are that it chews its cud and has split hooves. These signs come to teach man how to judge things in this world. The essence of the hooves of a kosher animal is that they are split. In this world, man must know how to split and divide good from evil. In this world, it is necessary to be aware of the fact that ideas, ideologies, and occurrences are comprised of both negative and positive, and one must know how to differentiate between the two. The second sign of *tahara*, chewing of the cud, comes to teach that man must have the ability to look at reality from a new perspective. Just as the animal's cud not settled, rather it is reprocessed over and over, so too, a person must develop the capability to not be totally locked in to certain outlooks. Rather, a person must re-examine his world views in order not to be influenced by previous stigmas.

In summary, the signs of *tahara* are not only kashrut guidelines, rather they teach man the appropriate approach towards Torah; the book of Godly values. In addition, the signs of fish and animals come to teach man what outlook to have towards the world.