

Toronto Torah

Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshat Shemini

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This issue of Toronto Torah is dedicated by Esther and Craig Guttman and Family
in honour of the yahrtzeit of Max Guttman ז"ל בן שמואל ז"ל

This issue of Toronto Torah is dedicated anonymously
in loving memory of Arthur Lebowitz ז"ל אשר אנשיל בן יצחק ז"ל
whose family commemorated his Shloshim before Pesach

Why Not Eat Treif?

This parshah contains a lengthy description of the kosher and non-kosher species. The Torah doesn't tell us too much about why we are commanded to stay away from these animals. It has something to do with being holy (see Vayikra 11:43-45), but the exact meaning of this is unclear. Throughout the centuries a significant debate arose about the exact purpose of these mitzvot. This debate raises important philosophical questions about trying to understand the reasons for the mitzvot more broadly.

The first camp explains the prohibitions rationally in terms of health, both public and private. Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 3:48) writes that most non-kosher animals are prohibited because eating them is unhealthy. Regarding pork, he adds that the environment in which pigs live is filthy, and therefore unhealthy. This approach has been roundly criticized in a number of ways, including: it reduces the Torah to a book of medical practice, and many people eat non-kosher animals without serious health repercussions. (See Akeidat Yitzchak Vayikra 60 and Abarbanel, Shemini)

A second approach shifts the focus from physical to spiritual health. Ramban (Vayikra 11:13), in explaining the prohibition of non-kosher fowl, notes that these are all birds of prey. Eating them may cause us to imbibe their cruel characteristics. This explanation dodges the empirical issues of the previous approach, but it

is difficult to confirm. As Nechama Leibowitz notes (Studies in Vayikra, 83), it is hard to tell if a person's behaviour is influenced by diet as opposed to other possible factors.

A final approach sanctifies the absence of a reason. The non-kosher animals are forbidden arbitrarily. The purpose of this is for us to live a life of abstinence and acceptance of the yoke of heaven. (Akeidat Yitzchak, ibid.) This is the holiness to which our parshah refers.

This last approach diverges sharply from the first two in the value placed on attempting to make sense of the mitzvot. Nechama Leibowitz, after declaring the last approach the most acceptable one, notes that according to this view, trying to find reasons for the mitzvot is counterproductive. Since the true goal is simply obedience to G-d, any explanation which provides a sense of meaning to mitzvah fulfillment actually undermines the goal. This approach avoids all of the critiques about reasons for mitzvot, but it denies the experiential, symbolic, and educational goals which are obviously part of some mitzvot.

Coming from the opposite perspective, Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 3:51) writes that anyone who has done a mitzvah without being conscious of its purpose (among other requirements) has not succeeded in fulfilling it properly. Consequently, an investigation into the reasons for the mitzvot is critical. This approach is also fraught. Aside from the

type of empirical attacks sampled above, any external reason for a mitzvah can never have a scope as broad as the mitzvah itself. There will always be edge cases where the reason no longer applies, but the mitzvah still does.

How does someone taking Rambam's position respond to these critiques? One option is to double down on suggested explanations despite opposing empirical evidence. Sefer HaChinuch (mitzvah 73) does this for non-kosher animals. He takes up Rambam's health-based explanation and adds that if this explanation does not seem to fit with contemporary science, it is the science which is wrong, not the explanation. A more moderate view is taken by Rambam himself. (Hilchot Meilah 8:8) He argues that while we must endeavor to find meaning in the mitzvot, when we cannot we must still keep them out of obedience to G-d. This approach allows for some mitzvot to be experienced in the way Nechama Leibowitz describes, and even for particular mitzvot to be clearly understood in some generations and not in others.

The next time we refrain from eating non-kosher food, it behooves us to consider why we are doing so. Is this simply to have a sense of the heavenly yoke, or is there something more? The same is true for other mitzvot as well. All of the approaches above have pros and cons, but considering where one's heart lies within this spectrum is critical to a thoughtful religious life.

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Summary

Our chapter is basically a list of Shlomo's high-ranking officials. The first six verses give us the names of the 'cabinet members' – the high priest, the scribes, the secretary, the chief of staff and more. The rest of the chapter gives us the names of the ministers, spread throughout the land, who were responsible for collecting the funds needed to run the king's palace. There were twelve, one for each month of the year. Finally, the last verse describes the state of the nation: "The children of Yehudah and Yisrael were numerous as the sand in the seacoast, and they ate, drank and rejoiced."

Insight

The main question troubling the reader of our chapter is simple: why is it important to include this list in our

Divine book? What is the message for future generations?

The answer seems to depend on the right contextualization of our chapter:

- Should it be read as a continuation to the previous chapter, in which we were told about Shlomo's great wisdom? If so, our chapter serves as an example of this wisdom, showing how Shlomo created a smooth and powerful apparatus to run the country. This is the direction taken by Don Isaac Abarbanel.
- A different approach is to see our chapter as a prelude to the next one, in which we will be told about the enormous wealth possessed by Shlomo, who served at his table huge quantities of bread and meat every day, and fed thousands of

horses. According to this reading, suggested by the Radak (commentary to 5:7), the complex machinery described in our chapter enabled Shlomo to sustain this luxurious lifestyle. Reading the text in this light, we can also see in this chapter the roots of our sages' sharp critique of Shlomo in Sanhedrin 21b. They noted that the Torah prohibits kings from accumulating too much gold and many horses (Devarim 17:16-17), and Shlomo violated this.

Was Shlomo's ramified bureaucratic apparatus a living demonstration of his wisdom, or was it the seed of his calamity? Perhaps both options are correct.

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Clickable Zoom links also available at www.torontotorah.com/letslearn**

SPECIAL PROGRAMMING

10-11:30 AM Sunday April 11

**"The Land of Israel is Acquired Through Suffering" (Berachot 5a)
Rabbi Moshe Aberman: Is Israel Truly Acquired Through Suffering?
Rabbi Sammy Bergman: Irrational Love for the Land of Israel**

7 PM Wednesday April 14

**Program Commemorating Yom haZikaron and Celebrating Yom ha'Atzmaut
With Mizrachi Canada - <https://mizrachi.ca/yh>**

DAILY

Mon-Thu 10 AM to Noon, with Rabbi Moshe Yeres, via ZOOM (men)

Monday/Wednesday: Gemara Succah, Orot haTeshuvah

Tuesday/Thursday: Parshah, Tanach: Shemuel

WEEKLY

Sunday Apr. 11

9:20 AM Contemp. Halachah, Netanel Klein (not this week)

10:00 AM Gemara Shabbat with Rabbi Aaron Greenberg (University) (not this week)

7:30 PM Ketuvot with Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner (men)

Monday Apr. 12

8:30 PM Gemara Shabbat, Chap. 15, with Rabbi Moshe Yeres

Tuesday Apr. 13

1:30 PM Megilat Ruth, with Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

7:30 PM Shemuel Ch. 1, Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner (men)

Wednesday, Apr. 14, Yom haZikaron

6:15 AM Talmud Eruvin, with Rabbi Sammy Bergman

7:30 PM Pirkei Avot, with Rabbi Alex Hecht (not this week)

8:15 PM Midrash with Rabbi Chaim Metzger (not this week)

Thursday Apr. 15, Yom ha'Atzmaut

8:30 AM Daniel, Rabbi Chaim Metzger (University)

1:30 PM Shemuel Ch. 19, with Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner (women)

8:00 PM Gemara Beitzah, with Rabbi Eitan Aviner (men, advanced)

8:15 PM Gemara Bava Metzia, with Rabbi Sammy Bergman (University women)

Friday Apr. 16

8:30 AM Parshah, Rabbi Sammy Bergman (University)

11:30 AM Shemitah! with Rabbi Sammy Bergman and Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner