



Pardes's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Shemini. Unhealthy for Body or Soul?

Tens of thousands have died, and billions of people have been confined to our homes by a worldwide pandemic. Rumour has it that the virus was transmitted from animals to humans by consumption of an infected bat. And here in our parsha we read Vayikra Chapter 11, which, among other things, deals with kosher and prohibited species of animal, bird, fish and insects.

Why are certain species forbidden?

For the Rambam, it was about health:

I would say that all of those things that the Torah forbade us to consume are nutritionally harmful. Only the pig and the fats may be imagined to not be detrimental, but this is not so...the Torah abhorred its consumption because of its great filth and because it feeds on filthy things ...It has already been pointed out how emphatically the Law enjoins the removal of the sight of loathsome objects, even in the field and in the camp; how much more objectionable is such a sight in towns. But if it were allowed to eat swine's flesh, the streets and houses would be dirtier than any toilet, a saying of our Sages declares: "The mouth of a swine is as dirty as dung itself" (Berachot 25a) ...carcasses of dead animals on the other, are difficult to digest and nutritionally poor, and it is well known that a beast possessing a congenital defect is akin to a carcass.

Therefore, concerning the signs that mark a permitted animal – chewing the cud and split hooves for the land animals, and fins and scales for the fish – realize that their existence is not the reason for their permitted status, nor their absence the reason for their forbidden status. Rather, they are signs by which one may distinguish the healthy species from the unhealthy species.

Abarbanel strongly disagrees with Maimonides' position:

...God forbid that I should believe such a thing! If that were the case then the Torah of the Lord would be no more than an insignificant and overly concise medical treatise. This is not the way of the Torah of the Lord or of its profound objectives. Besides, with our own eyes we see how the nations that consume the flesh of the pig, detestable things, the mouse as well as the other impure birds, land animals and fish, are all alive and well, strong and not at all feeble or frail...All of this is a clear indication that the Divine Torah did not come to heal the body or to promote physical health but rather to foster the health of the soul and to heal its afflictions. Therefore, the Torah forbade

these foods because they have a deleterious effect on the pure and intelligent soul, breeding insensitivity in the human soul and corrupting its desires. This causes the formation of an evil nature that breeds a spirit of "tuma" and banishes the spirit of "tahara" and holiness, concerning which David implored: "Do not take Your spirit of holiness from me!" (Tehillim 51:13).

Ramban articulates this further in his comments

The reason for certain birds being forbidden as food is on account of their cruel nature. It is also possible that the reason for certain animals being forbidden is similar, since no animal that chews the cud and has a parted hoof is a beast of prey, while the rest all devour others. There has also been found a difference in nature between animals fit for food and those which are unfit, as the Sages have mentioned, namely that all milk of animals fit for food curdle, whereas all milks of those unfit for food do not coagulate and cannot ever be made into cheese. Thus they are physically different.

Both Abarbanel's position and Ramban's find a firm basis in the verses of our chapter:

"You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through anything that swarms; you shall not make yourselves unclean therewith and thus become unclean. For I the Lord am your God: you shall **sanctify yourselves and be holy**, for I am holy. You shall not make yourselves unclean through any swarming thing that moves upon the earth. For I the Lord am He who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God: **you shall be holy, for I am holy.**" (11:42-45)

Please discuss:

What is the Ramban's understanding as to why various species are forbidden?

How does Abarbanel and Ramban disagree?

Do you find either Ramban or Abarbanel's views compelling? We do understand that "we are what we eat" in some way, and that food effects both health and spirit? Is this true for our Kashrut rules?

The Shadal has a different approach:

""The forbidden foods are restrictions of sanctity so that Israel constitute a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," much like the special laws and restrictions that apply to priests in every religion and culture, similarly every Israelite will be separated and by special regulations and specific prohibitions... through this the soul and each and every Jew will be raised and they will learn not to follow the practices of the other nations...

...The many laws and regulations which apply in all places and all times refine our dispositions, and this in two ways:

First, the many Divine laws give a constant awareness of God, who commanded the laws. ...This acts as a restraint and guide which halts and prevents desire from overwhelming the human will. It fixes fear of God in the human heart thereby preventing sin.

Secondly, there is no simple way to achieve self-control and to control forbidden desire other than the regular and consistent practice of restraint and denial, sometimes even suffering pain or

scarceness. ...The many mitzvot accustom an individual to a life of self-control, separation and withdrawal" ("Hamishtadel" by the Shadal)

What do YOU make of the prohibitions of forbidden species? Are they hygienic, spiritual, or can you find a different rationale?

Shabbat Shalom!