

## Shemini

By Jeremy Burton

“Everything among the animal that has a split hoof, which is completely separated, and chews its cud, that you may eat.” Leviticus 11:3

While much has been written throughout the ages about the meaning and purpose of the *kashrut* laws (the guidelines of permitted or “fit” foods), the Torah ascribes a very specific rationale, an association with being holy. Within this context the Torah lays out rules for knowing which animals are okay - such as only eating fish with fins and scales - as well as providing lists of permitted creatures in other categories, like grasshoppers and a few others amongst “swarming” creatures.

In some categories, the enumeration is of animals that can't be eaten in a category that is more generally permitted, such as vultures & owls amongst a broad list of non-kosher birds. With beasts however, the reading offers up a double guideline, both providing the rule of what is edible – the split hoof and chewing of cud – and listing four animals that are not permitted – the camel, rabbit, hyrax (an African guinea pig) and the pig- though these are not the only non-kosher beasts (in Deuteronomy 14 there is a partial list of kosher beasts including bison & sheep).

It may go without saying that amongst contemporary Jews, regardless of our levels of Jewish literacy the pig is singularly known as an example of impermissible food, the ultimate *treif* animal. For many it is a particular point of personal observance, and is widely known as a benchmark of Jewish practice in broader society. On the recent TV show “Survivor: Africa” one contestant, who had never met a Jew before, was memorably ecstatic when the Jewish contestant won a prize of bacon breakfast, knowing full well and correctly that he would share it rather than eat it (his “he’s a Jew” dance set off concerns from some Jewish defense groups, though contestant Ethan Zohn later described it as an opportunity to educate his new friends and the audience about Jewish tradition).

So why is the pig so special? What sets it above all the others in our collective mindset?

The Torah explains that the camel, rabbit & hyrax are unclean because they chew their cud but don't have split hooves, while the pig has split hooves but does not chew its cud. But this variation in itself does not explain the level of demonization the pig holds in our tradition.

The Keli Yakar (a 16<sup>th</sup> century Polish homilist) offers one understanding of this passage. He writes that it was not necessary to tell us the positive factor of the animal's uncleanliness, namely that the pig has split hooves. It should have been enough to tell us that it does not chew its cud, the negative factor. “The Torah teaches us that the positive sign aggravates the uncleanliness, as the pig stretches its paws as if to claim it is kosher, when inside lie rottenness and deceit. To teach us that the hypocrite is worse than the undisguised sinner.”

The Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez (a classical Sephardic commentary originally written in Ladino and available in English) expands on this idea in our passage and links it to the prophetic understanding of how to do social justice. "G-d wants people to do good deeds in private and not show off. The prophet thus said, 'What does G-d seek of you? Only that you do justice, love kindness and walk modestly with your G-d (Micah 6:8).'" He continues "the main thing...is that we be modest in our good deeds. Even good deeds that must be done publicly should be done modestly so people should not praise them."

From this thought come lessons that we can apply as values and practices in our personal and communal efforts to do *tzedakah* (charity and justice).

As individuals, we can incorporate this concept and seek to engage in personal *musar* – (the movement to seek morality through introspection and the study of ethics founded by Rabbi Israel Salanter in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and still followed in some segments of the Orthodox community) as we go about the pursuit of justice. Rabbi Salanter taught his students to be concerned about their own souls and their neighbors' welfare. So too we can engage in introspection as to our reasons for doing our work, challenging ourselves to recognize that motivations can be as important as actions. We can also apply the concept of modesty in our efforts, by seeking to empower others and organize them to find their own voices as advocates and activists rather than to set ourselves as voices for them in perpetuity.

As a community, we can also apply this parable of the pig. Are we, collectively and as a Jewish communal voice, setting one standard of morality and vision in our public voice while applying a whole other standard internally? Just one such example: as a community we root ourselves in the principle of doing justly by the poor yet often we allow our own institutions to not abide by the highest morals of providing fair labor practices and living wages for our employees. In thinking about our collective pursuit of justice might we shine the light on ourselves and do a self-assessment of our own institutions hand-in-hand with our efforts in the public arena?

And if charity is to be done modestly, what are we to make of the extravagant dinners by which we honor contributors? The commentaries on Shulchan Orech (Yoreh Deah 249), in dealing with this precept to do justice modestly, specifically teach that it is fitting to broadcast good deeds in order to inspire others to follow by example. Yet they caution that it is only when we sincerely feel that an example will inspire others that it is appropriate (Ramah). Let's ask ourselves the next time we plan a shul dinner whether the people we honor are not only an inspiration for the size of their gifts but also as broader role-models to our children through their ethical business practices.

Jeremy Burton is currently the Vice President of Strategic Initiatives for the Jewish FundS for Justice.

© Jeremy Burton