

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת ראה

רק חזק לבלתי אכל הדם כי הדם הוא הנפש ולא תאכל הנפש עם הבשר
“Only be strong not to eat the blood – for the blood, it is the life – and you shall not eat the life with the meat” (12:23)

Why does the Torah need to warn us to “be strong” in connection with the prohibition against consuming blood? Rashi cites the opinions of two Tannaim. One says that they were accustomed to consuming blood, perhaps a vestige of Egyptian culture, and they now needed to be strong and break that habit. The other opinion says that even though we have no desire for blood, the Torah teaches us that one has to be careful even regarding mitzvos that are easy and most certainly regarding difficult mitzvos as well.

All the mitzvos requires our focus to ensure that we fulfill them properly. Even though one does not have a desire to transgress, there is always a possibility that he will make a mistake if he lets his guard down. How much more so must we constantly be vigilant in areas that are challenging for us and make sure that we remain strong.

It is important to set boundaries for ourselves so that we do not transgress. Sometimes the Torah itself enacts these boundaries. For example, later in the parsha we read about the prohibition of owning chametz on Pesach. The Netziv explains that this prohibition only came about because it is forbidden to eat chametz on Pesach. The Torah forbade owning it as well so that a person should not come to eat it. Sometimes the Torah did not set limits but Chazal imposed additional fences and sometimes a person needs to create his own limits for himself in areas where he knows that he is vulnerable.

ואת החזיר כי מפריס פרסה הוא ולא גרה טמא הוא לכם מבושרם לא תאכלו
ובנבלתם לא תגעו

“And the pig, for it has a split hoof, but not the cud – it is unclean to you; from their flesh you shall not eat and you shall not touch their carcasses” (14:8)

Rashi explains that although the posuk says not to touch the carcass of a non-kosher animal, this only applies during Yom Tov when one is obligated to be pure. (This is the source for the custom to immerse in a mikveh prior to Pesach, Shavuos and Sukkos.) During the rest of the year, one is permitted to become impure if he chooses to do so. Since this is the case, why does the Torah teach this law here among year-round issues? The answer is that the Torah is teaching us how to protect ourselves from eating non-kosher food. The way to do that is to avoid handling non-kosher animals. The Torah alludes to the fact that a person who deals with animals that are not kosher may end up eating them. Therefore, we are advised to be aware of our involvement with these animals at all times so that we will not come to eat them.

Why does the Torah have to tell us the kosher sign which the pig does possess and not just state clearly that it lacks one of the signs and is therefore not kosher? R' Yaakov Kamenetzky says that the fact that it has a kosher sign and is still not kosher is a higher level of impurity. Symbolically, it represents a person who is knowledgeable in Torah and mitzvos but does not act the way he should. A person who knows better is held more responsible than others because more is expected of him. The fact that the pig has one kosher sign causes us to repudiate it even more than the average non-kosher animal.

Regarding the two signs of a kosher animal, Rabbi Friedman notes that the split hoof is an external sign while chewing the cud is an internal sign. Perhaps these symbolize that a person must be good through and through, both inside and out. A good heart without the performance of mitzvos is not sufficient and the same is true for the reverse. We must learn how to develop our own character from the fact that both internal and external factors are considered in the kashrus of an animal.

העניק תעניק לו מצאנך ומגרנדך ומיקבך אשר ברכך ה' אלקיך תתן לו
“Adorn him generously from your flocks, from your threshing floor and from your wine cellar; as Hashem, your G-d, has blessed you, so shall you give him” (15:14)

The Sefer HaChinuch (482) describes this mitzvah as follows: [We are commanded] to give from what is ours to a Jewish servant at the time when he goes from our ownership to freedom and not send him away empty-handed...

“Among the roots of this mitzvah is in order that we should acquire refined, beautiful and desirable character traits for our souls and with a beautiful and refined soul we will merit success. Hashem, who is good, desires that we do good deeds for his people. Our glory and splendor is that we have compassion on those who served us and give them from which is ours as an act of kindness, in addition to the amount previously stipulated as their wages. This is a logical concept which does not need to be explained at length...

“This mitzvah applies to men and women in the time when the Bais HaMikdash stands, as the law of the Jewish servant only applies when Yovel applies... Nevertheless, even today the wise person should listen and learn a lesson that if one hires a Jewish person who works for him for an extended period of time, or even for a short time, he should give the worker a gift from that with which Hashem has blessed him when the worker leaves.”

In addition to the profound lesson that this mitzvah teaches about chesed and gratitude, it is important to note the practical implications that this mitzvah has today, in terms of giving bonuses and tips, and the way in which the Sefer HaChinuch frames them. A wise person should pay attention to the many mitzvos that do not apply today when we, unfortunately, do not have a Bais HaMikdash. All of these mitzvos have underlying reasons which can teach us lessons about how to act in our times as well. No part of Torah is completely irrelevant to us. When we encounter these areas of Torah study, we should seek to find something practical that we can glean from those laws.

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