

שמיני
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Ashreinu אשרינו

Enhancing your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion

Fins, Scales, and Modern Orthodoxy

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Shalom Brauser ('19)

Adina Hirsch ('19)

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In this week's parsha we are introduced to the types of creatures we may or may not consume. Regarding what types of fish are permissible, the Torah writes

אֶת-זֶה תֹאכְלוּ,
מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם
כָּל אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ
סָנְפִיר
וְקִשְׂקֵשֶׁת.....

“Any [of the creatures] in the water that have fins and scales, those you may eat...but any [creatures] that do not have fins and

scales...you shall not eat of their flesh” (Vayikra 11:9-10).

Regarding these pesukim, the mishnah (Nidah 51b) makes an interesting statement: “All that have scales also have fins;

there are [fish] that have fins but do not have scales.” In response, the gemara (Nidah 51b; Chulin 66b) asks an interesting question: Why are fins presented as an identifying sign for kosher fish when they are seemingly redundant, since scaled fish are always found to have fins? The Torah could have easily only presented scales as the single identifying kosher sign! The gemara simply provides a three-word answer: יגדיל תורה ויאדיר, to make the Torah great and glorious.

Rabbi YY Jacobson expounds on this answer, citing how unusual it is: “How does the unnecessary sign of fins make the Torah greater and more glorious? Does this single extra word “fins” really add something significant to the Torah? Besides, the Chumash is well known for its conciseness, and the gemara often searches for the reason behind a seemingly superfluous word.”

Rabbi Jacobson elucidates an insightful analysis provided by the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Reshimos v.39) in order to answer these questions. To begin, we can review some key words in the pesukim: Scales are a reinforced outer layer designed to protect a fish by warding off external dangers, such as attacking fish or sudden changes in temperature or current. On the other hand, fins propel fish forward, allowing them to navigate through their marine habitat. This appendage al-



lows fish to make progress by journeying great distances, evading enemies and adapting to external threats by being able to quickly change directions.

While Jews have been arguing about many issues for thousands of years, Rabbi Jacobson argues that the quintessential Jewish debate is between Rabbi Scales and Dr. Fins. In today's Jewish geography, Rabbi Scales might be residing in Williamsburg or Mea She'arim, while Dr. Fins can be found in Los Angeles or Tel Aviv.

We are all familiar with Rabbi Scales' modus operandi of sheltering himself off from the world, remaining behind the armor of shtetl life. "What's good for our grandparents is good for me" could be his motto – resisting change and limiting interaction with the world at large while staying true to Torah and mitzvot.

Dr. Fins, on the other hand, tries to navigate around Rabbi Scales' arguments. The ghettos are gone, and we are more integrated into outside society than we have ever been in our history. To remain relevant, we must integrate with the greater world and progress by becoming part of the larger culture. These two philosophies seem diametrically opposed: Dr. Fins accuses Rabbi Scales of being an isolation-driven fundamentalist stuck in the past, while Rabbi Scales responds by claiming Dr. Fins is trying to denigrate Torah tradition in order to attempt assimilation of Jews en masse.

Through the lens of Chassidut, we can appreciate the gemara's response above: Just as a kosher fish needs both fins and scales, so does a "kosher Jew" need both fins and scales. Our life's mission is not only to maintain our own spiritual and ethical integrity by shielding ourselves from the non-positive influences of the *velt* (i.e., to side with Rabbi Scales). Rather, our role also involves saturating the light of Torah across the earth so we can transform it into a **דירה בתחתונים**, an abode for Hashem (Midrash Tanchuma, Nasso 16). That is, in addition to solidifying our "scales" we must acquire "fins" in order to broaden our influence to the farthest possible places, so that the light of Torah can permeate not just Am Yisrael, but all of humanity as well. And by doing this may we merit

יגדיל תורה ויאדיר.

Post-Pesach Reflections

Shalom Brauser ('19)

For those of you unfamiliar with the wide range of Maccabeats acapella covers, there is a Les Miserables medley that was the Maccabeats Pesach song one year. With lyrics

like, "you'll always be a slave," and, "do you hear the people sing," it is an incredibly appropriate medley for the themes of Pesach. If you are looking for a great acapella song to fall in love with and get tired of after the hundredth listen, it is the song for you. Coincidentally, I finished reading *Les Mis* during the second days of this Pesach. It is a book of many universal themes, such as the power of love, the triumph of the human spirit, and the horrors of poverty, but what struck me most after reading it was its intense focus on seeing God's hand in one's life. It tells the story of an escaped convict who, after encountering a bishop who shows him incredible kindness, embarks on a journey of self-perfection and goodness. This man, Jean Valjean, had lived in horrible conditions as a prisoner for 19 years. He left prison angry and hungry for revenge. But this small act of kindness, this revelation of Divine Providence in his life, sparks a battle between his good and bad side, or in Jewish terms, his *yetzer hara* and *yetzer hatov*. Through sheer force of will, his good side wins the battle and he begins a new life, still full of hardships and suffering, but with only positivity in his heart, *emunah* in his soul, and goodness in his actions.

Throughout the book, there are constant references to the hand of God. Jean Valjean's *emunah* in Hashem's ultimate plan and his ability to see *hashgacha pratit* in everything is what turns his sorrowful life into one of happiness and fulfillment. No matter how hard life is on him, he always makes the right choice. No matter how much it seems that God has turned away from him, he never turns away from God. He always manages to see God in the struggles of his life.

One particularly poignant line describes Jean Valjean's escape into the sewers, where he bravely saves the life of a man while risking his own. The line states, "The pupil dilates in darkness, to see the light, just as the soul dilates in misery, to see God." This line struck me like a lightning bolt. Is this not exactly the message of Pesach? Do we not eat bread of affliction to celebrate our freedom? Do we not say "Now we are slaves" as we celebrate the very festival of redemption? Do we not hold a seder in which we are obligated to act like free men, kings even, as we sit in the midst of the longest and most painful exile in Jewish history? This is one of the most difficult of the many questions of Pesach. How can Jews in concentration camps hold a seder to commemorate their freedom and the *geulah* of Hashem? How can a nation, exiled from its land and constantly persecuted, call itself "*bnei chorin*?"

The only viable answer to this question is to hope. To disregard the "Now we are slaves" sentiment and instead focus on "Next year we will be free." To know that yes, now we are in exile, but to shout "*Lshana Haba'ah B'Yerusha-*

layim” joyously at the end of the seder. Every instance of sorrow in the seder is immediately followed by a message of hope. The only way we can move forward, both as individuals and as a society, is to know that “at the end of the day there’s another day dawning.” This very act of hoping, of scrutinizing every situation to see the good, turns our lives into ones of happiness and gratitude. We do not stoically accept misfortune. Instead, we push it out of the way and embrace the good. We have all had situations in our lives that have seemed bad, but with hindsight we found the good in them. The key is to locate this good before the situation ends, not with hindsight but with foresight. This powerful idea has pervaded Jewish consciousness since the birth of our nation, and has been one of the main factors in our continued survival. We do not know why God makes bad things happen. And the truth is, we never will. But as long as we sit around wondering why terrible things happen, we will never have the strength to journey on. Hashem wants us to realize that He is the ruler of all events, both good and bad. He asks us to assume an outlook of hope. He asks us to overcome our fearful instinct, our split-second reaction to misfortune, and to put soul over matter and continue following Him. This is precisely what Jean Valjean did. After a long life of physical hardship, fear, and heartbreak, everything falls into place. He reunites with his daughter in an incredible moment of divine salvation. His final redemption is made all the more sweet because of his years of suffering. And he only merited this redemption because he never gave up, never lost sight of God in the whirlwind of misfortune, and always moved forward.

The Jewish people have been through immense suffering and pain. Yet every year, at the seder, we gather and proclaim our glorious vision of a hope-filled future. And so we have survived through every persecution and exile. May it be Hashem’s will that our hopes for the future are fulfilled, and that we encounter no more suffering, but rejoice in the presence of *Mashiach*, *bimheira b’yameinu*.

Think Before You Act

Adina Hirsch (‘19)

Parshat Shemini mentions two *korbanot*, both of which were offered to Hashem by Jews in the desert, yet these two *korbanot* end with two distinctly different consequences. The first *korban* was offered by the Kohen Gadol, Aharon, and his sons, and its reward was:

“וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד ה’ אֶל-כָּל-הָעָם”

“the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people”
(Vayikra 9:23).

Nadav and Avihu, Aharon’s sons, sacrificed the second *korban*, resulting in Hashem’s extreme anger and harsh punishment:

“וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה’ וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ לְפָנָי ה”

“fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died” (Vayikra 10:2).

The striking difference between these two *korbanot* seems to lie only in their consequences. While the first *korban* invited Hashem’s presence and a sacrifice-consuming fire, the other resulted in immediate death. Why did Nadav and Avihu deserve to die? How was their *korban* any different from Aharon’s *korban*?

Numerous commentaries provide explanations for the contrast in consequences between the *korbanot* offered by Aharon and Nadav and Avihu. The Ibn Ezra focuses on the end of the pasuk that describes Nadav and Avihu bringing their *korban* to understand where they erred.

The Ibn Ezra juxtaposes the phrase, “which [God] had not enjoined upon them” (Vayikra 10:1), to the phrase used where the Kohanim do, “as Moses had commanded.” Rather than seeking permission from a higher authority, Nadav and Avihu acted impulsively, bringing a *korban* without thinking through the ramifications. Nadav and Avihu were not punished for simply bringing a *korban*, however they were punished because instead of bringing a *korban* because Hashem had commanded them to do so, they brought it instead out of their own desire to serve Hashem in their own contrived way.

Still, it seems difficult to believe that Hashem would punish Nadav and Avihu for bringing a *korban* spontaneously. After all, they still were trying to get closer to Hashem. Furthermore, in our 21st century mindsets, bringing a *korban* spontaneously should merit a greater reward than simply bringing a *korban* because Hashem commanded them to do so.

Obviously, Nadav and Avihu would not have said no to a request made by Hashem. Deciding to bring a *korban* on their own seems like they are taking initiative and appears to be more genuine. However this is not true. Impulsive acts of sacrifice are not applauded. Before we decide to be generous, we must understand and then respond to the specific needs at hand.

The tragedy of Nadav and Avihu, according to the Ibn Ezra, serves to teach us that we must not allow our positive motives to blind us from reality. We must not act impulsively even while being generous. Instead, we must

control our impulses and seek out the best way to help before we rush to sacrifice ourselves.

Words From The Heart

Yitzy Lanner ('19)

In this week's parsha, Parshat Shemini, we are told that Aharon spread out his arms and blessed the Jewish people. What bracha did Aharon give the Jews? Rashi suggests that Aharon gave the Jews the bracha of Birkat Kohanim. However, the Ramban has a problem with this. The first time we are introduced to the bracha of Birkat Kohanim is only later, in Parshat Naso. So how can Aharon possibly be giving Bnei Yisrael the bracha of Birkat Kohanim here in Parshat Shemini?

The Ramban attempts to answer this question by quoting Rashi and saying that the Torah is not always in order. So, the few pesukim in Parshat Naso that talk about Birkat Kohanim really belong earlier when Aharon is about to bless the Jews. With this being the case, it is very easy to understand how Aharon knew what blessing to give the Jewish people. Hashem told him exactly what to say.

Although this is an adequate answer, the Ramban suggests maybe an even more satisfying answer to this bothersome question. The Ramban says that whatever it was that descended upon Aharon made him feel very connected to Hashem, and therefore he wanted to bless the Jewish people. Since at this time Hashem had not yet given Aharon the bracha to give over to Bnei Yisrael, Aharon came up with something on his own to bless the Jewish people with. Hashem loved the bracha that Aharon came up with so much, that He decided to use that bracha as Birkat Kohanim, and that is still then same bracha the we use till this very day.

A very important lesson that we can learn from this answer of the Ramban is that Hashem tremendously values our tefillot that genuinely come from the heart. Since Aharon came up with this bracha from the bottom of his heart, and really meant it, Hashem chose to make those words the same words that every kohen will use to bless Bnei Yisrael. The takeaway message from this idea of the Ramban is that Hashem greatly values and appreciates our tefillot that are completely genuine and from the bottom of our hearts.

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