

READ THE INSTRUCTIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

After itemizing all of the characteristics of kosher land creatures, birds and fish, the Torah concludes that the purpose of the exposition is "for distinguishing between the impure and the pure, and between the creature that may be eaten and the creature that may not be eaten." (Vayikra/Leviticus 11:47) Rashi notes that the text has already explicitly clarified the different species that are and are not allowed, and, pursuant to the maxim that the Torah contains no extra text, additional lessons are contained in this verse. When an animal is slaughtered, the vital passages in the neck must be majority severed; if the cut is exactly half the slaughter is invalid and the animal is not kosher. The difference between impure and pure is a hairsbreadth. Further, there are certain physical defects - some congenital, others from injury - that render an animal mortally maimed such that "the creature may not be eaten"; other such defects have no impact on the animal's status and it may still be consumed.

But Rashi finds the verse extraneous from the outset: it is self evident that the initial itemization was to create this distinction. Why does the Torah need to restate that the purpose of this chapter is "for distinguishing"? He explains that one must not merely commit the laws to memory, but that he must know and recognize these phenomena, he must be expert in them. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1) comments that this lesson frames our charge for the study and acquisition of Torah. Mere knowledge of the law is not sufficient; one must be fluent with the realities of the concept, such that he himself can distinguish between the different defects and measure the completion of the slaughter. One might think he is only obligated to know enough to know when to ask an authority; Rabbi Feinstein concludes Rashi's novelty is that one must strive to himself be that authority.

Indeed, Rashi shatters the illusion of experiencing Judaism in our "comfort zone". Judaism would be convenient if Torah worked like professional training: go to college, maybe graduate school, gain professional certification, take an occasional "continuing education" course and cruise through life on the path to retirement. But Torah, G-d's infinite wisdom packaged in a format that the finite human mind at least has the potential to fathom, is as unlimited as is the Divine Himself. The mandate of mastery that Rashi spells out is a lifetime pursuit, and even then one will have just begun to scratch the surface. But a paradigm for the relationship between a Jew and G-d is the relationship between husband and wife, and Torah is the instruction manual to forging a successful relationship. We possess a parable to appreciate how and why it is a life's work; Rashi simply reminds us "When all else fails, read the instructions".

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) 1895-1986; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem in New York City; the leading Halachic/Jewish legal decisor of his time and one of the principal leaders of Torah Jewry through much of the last century

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