HIPPO PROBLEMS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

A noted Rabbi was once on a trip to the zoo with his family, came upon the enclosure for the hippopotamus, and was confronted with a problem. Our Torah portion teaches that Kosher land animals are those that both chew their cud and have cloven hooves. But then the Torah goes out on a limb, as it were, telling us something which only the world's Creator could have known at the time: it specifies the four animals which possess only one sign but not the other.

The camel ruminates (chews its cud) but does not have a cloven hoof. Two other animals are listed as sharing these characteristics, and we are not certain which these are today, so we have a certain amount of "negotiating room" should we stumble upon a clearly distinct species that possesses the same traits. The hyrax is one of the two -- the rabbit is not, apparently, since it does not really chew its cud.

The pig, however, is listed as the only animal that has a cloven hoof but does not ruminate -- and this was the Rabbi's problem. The hippopotamus also has a cloven hoof and does not chew its cud, and it's not listed.

One could, of course, dodge the issue. The Torah does not explicitly say that these four animals, and only these four, possess one trait but not the other. Perhaps it was only giving examples. But if so, why does the Torah go on to tell us that fish must have fins and scales in order to be Kosher, but not provide examples such as sharks, which have fins but no scales? The implication is that in the case of land animals, the Torah is listing the only ones which could cause confusion.

Only when the Rabbi read the taxonomy of the hippopotamus did he realize that there was no problem at all. For although the name "hippopotamus" is derived from the Greek for "river horse," a more appropriate term would be "river pig." The Artiodactyl order of hoofed mammals comprises over 220 different species, so it is often divided into distinct suborders. The Suiformes include the hippopotamus, the pygmy hippopotamus (which is considerably more visibly pig-like), three different types of peccaries (also a pig-like creature, native to the American equatorial region (from the US southwest down to Brazil)), and 11 distinct species of pigs, hogs, warthogs and boars. And it is the Suiformes that are cloven-hoofed but do not ruminate!

[Genetically, dromedaries and two-humped Bactrian camels are distinct species, proving that the Torah was speaking about classes of animals. In geneological terms, there are several different varieties of camels, and if I understand it correctly, the entire family of Camelidae, which includes

Llamas and a creature called a Vicugna, ruminate without having a cloven hoof. The six species of hyrax, however, are of an entirely different order; camels are more closely related to giraffes and cows. For more details, consult the "Ultimate Ungulate" home page at http://www.ultimateungulate.com/.]

So as we see, there are lots of animals that qualify as "chazir," or pigs. In fact, there are even a few that no taxonomist will identify: people can also be pigs, hogging everything for themselves.

Rav Immanuel of Rome, in his book Machberos Immanuel, proved nearly one thousand years ago that a stingy person is little more than a pig, right in our Torah portion. In Biblical Hebrew, the word for hoof (parsah) is also a unit of distance, and the word for cud (gerah) happens to also be a unit of money -- and an extremely small one at that, comprising a mere 0.05 shekel.

So what, then, is a pig? A creature that will "mafris parsah," travel a great distance for his own needs, but "gerah lo yigar," he won't give a nickel to charity!

Charity is one of the greatest of the mitzvos. All we are blessed with comes from G-d, and the Rabbis call upon us to recognize this by giving 10% (or even more) of our income for the needs of others: for Torah study, for Jewish schools and houses of worship. In so doing, we demonstrate that we are not "pigs" who gather everything for ourselves, but that we care and feel the pain of others. Charity is so great that, as we read in the magnificent "Unesaneh Tokef" prayer on the High Holy Days, it -- along with prayer and return to G-d -- is one of the things which reverses an evil decree.

These are, of course, terrible times for our brethren in the Land of Israel. Their pain is our pain, and we must pray and act in ways that express our desire for an end to it. Charity -- especially in support of the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of Israelis -- demonstrates that we are with them, and helps to accomplish the reversal of an evil decree that we seek. It is a good time to show that we are not pigs!

Good Shabbos,
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