

POSITIVE FIRST

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Reeh

Positive First

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"But this shall you not eat from among those that bring up their cud or have completely separated split hooves: the camel, the hare, and the hyrax, for they bring up their cud, but their hooves are not split — they are unclean to you; and the pig, for it has a split hoof, but not the cud — it is unclean to you" (14:7-8)

The Torah's listing of kosher and nonkosher animals, which seems somewhat technical, contains many lessons beyond the mere details of what we may and may not eat.

Rav Noach Weinberg, Rosh Yeshivah of Aish HaTorah, who was directly responsible for bringing tens of thousands back to Yiddishkeit and an exponentially larger number through his students, would point out (based on a Gemara in Chullin 60b) that there is proof that an all-knowing God wrote the Torah from the verses listing the animals that chew their cud but do not have split hooves, and the animal that has split hooves and does not chew its cud. Would a human put his credibility on the line by predicting that at no point in the future would a single animal that is not on that list be found somewhere in the world?

And indeed, some three millennia after the Torah was given, and with all the searching science has done for unknown species, not a single such animal has been found!

Aside from strengthening our faith, however, these verses also teach us a lesson in how to view, and relate to, other people.

The point of the verses listing the animals that have only one kosher sign is to teach us that they are not kosher. It would seem appropriate, then, to list the sign that causes them to be nonkosher first. Yet we see that the Torah lists them as the camel, the rabbit, and the hyrax, which chew their cud but do not have split hooves, and the pig, which has split hooves, but does not chew its cud.

Why does the Torah list the kosher signs of these animals first if the non-existent signs are the only ones we really need in order to label these animals nonkosher?

A Midrash explains that the Torah is trying to teach us that even when something is not kosher, we should find a way to mention something praiseworthy about it first. Even something as treif as chazir (pig) deserves to have its positive trait pointed out.

If the Torah does so for nonkosher animals, how much more do we have to learn to have this consideration with regard to people?

Bosses, employees, children, students, coworkers, and neighbors will invariably have some negative traits. It might be our job, from time to time, to deliver a negative message.

This Midrash is teaching us that even when we have to deliver a negative message to others — to tell them that they are "nonkosher" in some way — we should always find a way to point out their positive attributes or qualities first.

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