

# PARSHAS TAZRIA: OF INSECTS AND MEN

*by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz*

Rashi begins his commentary to this week's parsha by noting that the halachos related to the tumah and taharah of humans begin in Parshas Tazria - after those of the animal kingdom were listed previously in Parshas Shmini. This order would seem to defy logic, as one would think that the halachos related to humans ought to have been placed before those of the other living beings.

Rashi quotes a Midrash, where Rav Simlai explains the reasoning behind this sequence. He maintains that in listing halachos, Hashem followed the order of creation - beginning with all the members of the animal kingdom (who were created first) and concluding with man (who was created last). The Midrash quoted by Rashi finishes with an additional thought. If we fulfill the ratzon of Hashem, says the Midrash, it is as if the world was created on our behalf, and we were therefore created last so that we would arrive to a 'finished' world. If we ignore the laws of the Torah, we are informed that even the lowly 'ayitush' - a form of insect - was created before us.

This Midrash and the commentary of Rashi, however, seem to leave us with more questions than answers. First of all, what is the meaning of the Midrash regarding the insects preceding man in creation - and why was the 'ayitush' singled out among all other insects? Finally, why should the Torah follow the order of creation when listing the halachos of tumah and taharah?

The primacy - and responsibility - of man

Many meforshim note that the cryptic words of the Midrash are commenting on the role of man in the creation of the world. Humans are essentially offered a choice. If we follow the laws of the Torah, then we become the central focus of creation. After all, Hashem created this world so that we can serve Him and elevate our neshamos (souls). When one lives a spiritual life, and fulfills Hashem's master plan, he or she brings meaning to the world and all facets of creation. This would be analogous to a customer who walks into a restaurant and sits down to a delicious meal - with all the cooking and preparing done on his behalf. In this scenario, this elevated form of man, whose neshamah rules over his body, arrived last on the scene during b'rias ha'olam to signify that the world was created with his service of Hashem in mind.

The Midrash continues with the logical corollary of this reasoning. It states that if one does not fulfill the master plan of Hashem, he is no better than any of the other living creatures that populate the Earth. The moser ha'Adam min ha'behemah, the superiority of man over animal (Koheles 3:19, tefilah of Yom Kippur), lies in our ability to control our impulses and harness our energies to a greater

purpose. Delaying gratification and harnessing desires are qualities of the human race to the exclusion of nearly all other living beings. Failure to exercise these abilities blurs the distinction between man and the members of the animal kingdom.

I would like to suggest that there is great significance in the fact that the Midrash selected the 'ayitush' as the example of animal life. While telling the story of the destruction of the Beis Hamikdosh and the demise of the wicked Titus, the gemorah (Gittin 56b) relates an interesting detail about the yitush. It is a peculiar form of insect, which consumes its food, but does not pass its waste. It therefore has a short life span, as it grows bloated and dies.

Upon reflection, our mission in life is strikingly similar to our digestive system. Healthy living in the physical realm requires us to carefully select our food and plan our meals. Then, after we partake in a meal, our digestive system filters our food, stores the nutrients in the appropriate sections of our bodies, and passes the waste products.

In the spiritual plane, as well, we need to carefully screen our 'inboxes' - what we look at and listen to. We need to extract the good and meaningful things of this world and 'delete the files' that hinder our growth. Failure to do so results in the spiritual equivalent of the 'ayitush' - the demise of one's neshomah that becomes choked by overindulgence in worldly matters.

The Midrash is reminding us to live meaningful lives. We are not angels - nor were we created to live like them. We need to eat, drink and sleep properly. The Torah mandates that we nurture our bodies; that we exercise and refrain from activities that harm them. During our lifetime, it is our sacred mission to have a healthy spiritual digestive system as well - to extract the sparks of ruchniyus that are inherent in all areas of our lives, and remove the harmful elements. Doing so will result in an elevated living that places us in our proper position as the final element of creation - and the *raison d'être* for Hashem's beautiful world.

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Rabbi Horowitz is the founder and dean of Yeshiva Darchei Noam in Monsey, NY, as well as the founder and Program Director of Agudath Israel's Project Y.E.S. (Youth Enrichment Services), which helps at-risk teens and their parents. He is a popular lecturer on teaching and parenting topics in communities around the world, and is the author of several best-selling parenting tape and CD sets. For more information on Rabbi Horowitz's parenting tapes, visit <http://www.rabbihorowitz.com/> or call 845-352-7100 X 133.