

Parshat Shemini 5776

Ruminating on the Hoof

The laws of Kashrus are set out for the first time in Parashas שמ״ני in Chapter 11 of Sefer ויקרא and are repeated in Parashas ראה in Sefer דברים generally in abbreviated form although with some variations. We will focus upon just one aspect - the two signs that are pre-requisites for a kosher animal, namely (i) מעלת גרה (chewing the cud) and (ii) מפרסת פרסה (split hooves), that is שסעת שסע (completely split into double hooves).

In Parashas שמ״ני the Torah mentions the two signs but gives no examples of animals which have both: it names one animal that has split hooves but does not chew the cud (the most famous non kosher animal - the חזיר i.e. pig) and three animals that have only the other sign - they chew the cud but do not have split hooves. In Parashas ראה it names ten kosher animals (i.e those which display both signs) and also mentions the same animals that have only one sign as those named in שמ״ני - the pig (which only has split hooves) and the three that only chew the cud. Now let us consider these three in more detail - their Hebrew names set out in both Parashas שמ״ני and Parashas ראה are שפן, גמל and ארנבת. Indisputably גמל is a camel, but what are the other two? Soncino and Hertz and The Jewish Publications Society of America translate שפן as “rock badger” and ארנבת as “hare”, Hirsch translates them as “rabbit” and “hare” respectively, and Artscroll as “hyrax” (a kind of rabbit) and “hare”.

There is a problem with this: rabbits and hares (or badgers) do not chew the cud in the way that kosher animals such as cows and sheep do. Hirsch himself remarked: “One usually takes שפן to be the rabbit and ארנבת to be the hare. But this translation can only be right if it were sure that these animals chew the cud, which hardly seems to be the case”. Of course rabbits and hares do not have hooves and walk upon their paws so they certainly do not have the sign of a cloven hoof. Also, why did the Torah need to give 3 examples of animals that have the sign of chewing the cud but only one example (pig) of animals that display only the other sign (split hooves). One answer is that these are the only animals in the world which display one sign but not the other, and likewise the only kosher animals in the world are the ten named in ראה (Malbim).

In a fascinating article in a journal called “Intercom” (published in 1973 by the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists) Rabbi Meyer Lubin argues that the correct translations of שפן and ארנבת have been lost. With assistance from zoologists, he explains that what disqualifies the cud-chewing camel from being kosher is that it has an undivided cushion-like pad at the bottom of its hoof on which it gets its foot hold in the sand. Animals with this feature are called “Tylopada” (meaning “pad and hoof”) and there are only six kinds in the world - two kinds of camel and four kinds of llama. These animals are not kosher because their hooves are not split in the way mandated by the Torah – they are not completely split “שסעת שסע”. Based on his research he suggests that the גמל is the one humped camel (Dromedary) found in Egypt and Israel, ארנבת is the two humped (Bactrian) camel found further to the east in Central Asia (where Avrohom originated from), and שפן is the Llama, found only in South America (unknown by our civilisation until the sixteenth century).

If these are the true translations it would solve another puzzle which one might think is not answered to ones complete satisfaction by the classical commentators. In Parashas שמ״ני, (although not in the briefer version in Parashas ראה) the verb describing non-splitting of the hoof of the גמל is in the present tense (מפריס), the verb describing the non-splitting of the hoof of the שפן is in the future tense (יפריס) and the verb describing the non-splitting of the hoof of the ארנבת is in the past tense (הפריסה). Amazingly all translations we encounter, the Targumim, Malbim, Hirsch, Hertz, Artscroll, and Aryeh Kaplan completely ignore this change of tense! Rabbi Lubin argues that the change of tense can be explained as though Hash-m in giving over these laws to Moshe referred him separately to the kind of camel that the Bnei Yisroel used to know where they previously lived (ארנבת); to the kind that they know now in the Sinai desert (גמל); and the animal in the camel family (llama or שפן) that will only be discovered in the future. (The Gemoroh in Chullin 42a says that Hash-m held up every kind of animal and showed it to Moshe). We won't really know till Moshiach's time if Rabbi Lubin's thesis is right but if it is it illustrates graphically how the laws of Kashrus (and by extension all the laws of the Torah) are to be observed everywhere in the world and for all time.