

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Shemini

### The Beasts of Exile

#### BACKGROUND: KOSHER SIGNS

A central topic in our parsha is the Torah's presentation of the signs which identify the various species as permitted or forbidden for consumption. With regards to animals and beasts the two signs are having split hooves and chewing the cud. As we know, both signs are necessary to render the animal permitted – there is no such thing as a half-kosher lunch! Indeed, the Torah<sup>1</sup> specifies four animals which have only one kosher sign and states that they are forbidden for consumption: the camel, the hyrax, the hare, and the pig.

There is a most interesting comment of the midrash<sup>2</sup> regarding these four animals, for it draws a parallel between them and the four exiles endured by the Jewish people:

- ▷ *The camel* — this is the exile of Babylon.
- ▷ *The hyrax* — this is the exile of Persia.
- ▷ *The hare* — this is the exile of Greece.
- ▷ *The pig* — this is the exile of Rome.

What is the meaning behind these associations?

#### STOMACHS AND CLAWS

To understand this matter, let us first consider the words of the Gemara<sup>3</sup> in evaluating the generation which witnessed the destruction of the First Temple, compared with that of the Second Temple. The Gemara sums it up as follows:

טובה צפורן של ראשונים מכריסן של אחרונים

*The stomach of the earlier ones was better than the claws of the later ones.*

What is the meaning behind this enigmatic contrast?

<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 11:4–7.

<sup>2</sup> *Vayikra Rabbah* 13:5.

<sup>3</sup> *Yoma* 9b.

The Vilna Gaon<sup>4</sup> explains this comparison based on the Gemara's presentation of the problems which led to the destruction of the two Temples.<sup>5</sup> The First Temple was destroyed on account of the sins of the Jewish people, notably, the three cardinal sins of murder, adultery and idol worship. The Second Temple was destroyed due to baseless hatred, which the Gemara concludes is equal in some respects to the three sins mentioned above. Indeed, from a certain point of view it is worse, as the Gemara comments:

ראשונים שנתגלה עונם נתגלה קצם, אחרונים שלא נתגלה עונם לא נתגלה קצם

*The earlier ones, whose sin was revealed, the end [to their exile] was revealed. The later ones, whose sin was not revealed, the end was not revealed.*

This refers to the fact that as the Jewish people went into exile after the destruction of the First Temple, they already knew that the exile would last for only seventy years. The second exile had no limit forecast for it, and indeed continues until today. The Gemara explains that this is due to the differing nature of the two problems. The three cardinal sins, while enormous problems, were easily identifiable, and hence possible to treat. The problem with baseless hatred is that it is not revealed. It is possible for someone to carry this problem with him, but for it to remain concealed from view, even from himself! As long as the problem is not identified and recognized, it cannot be treated, and as such no end can be forecast for the exile.

### **THE HOOVES OF ROME**

With this in mind, we return to the Midrash's parallel between the four exiles and the four animals that have one kosher sign. The first three animals chew the cud, but do not have split hooves. The aspect which renders them non-kosher is on the outside and thus easily identifiable. This corresponds to the earlier generations whose sin was revealed. The fourth animal, the pig, is kosher on the outside, but not kosher on the inside. This corresponds to the generation of the second destruction, who were kosher on the outside, but suffered from baseless hatred of one another on the inside.

Indeed, this quality is what empowered Rome – the destroyers of the second Beis Hamikdash and “patrons” of the fourth exile which continues until our time – who are themselves identified by this characteristic. Rashi in Parshas Toldos, citing the Midrash, informs us that Esav, the spiritual ancestor of Rome, is himself compared to pig, who parades his kosher hooves before all. Notwithstanding his immoral behavior, Esav makes a show of marrying at the same age as his father, Yitzchak, implying through this external detail that they are similar in all respects.

This is what the Gemara means by saying that “the stomach of the earlier ones was better than the nails of the later ones.” Both generations had problems, but it was better to have a kosher stomach and for the problem to be visible on the outside than to have kosher hooves and be unkosher on the inside.

### **AUTHENTICITY**

The Gemara<sup>6</sup> relates that after concluding the *Shemoneh Esrei*, Rav Alexandri would say the following prayer:

*Master of the World, it is revealed and known before You that our will is to do Your will; and what prevents us from doing so? שבעיסה שאור — The yeast in the dough,*

4 *Biur Al Kamah Aggados, Yoma ibid.*

5 *Yoma ibid.*

6 *Berachos 17a.*

and מלכויות שיעבוד — *subjugation of the kingdoms. May it be Your will to remove them from us, so that we may return to serve You with a full heart.*

The first impediment, the “yeast in the dough,” refers to the evil inclination, which primarily assumes the role of yeast in inflating a person’s sense of worth. Regarding “subjugation of the kingdoms,” although on the face of it, this would seem to be a reference to the various decrees of hostile host nations who declare it illegal to perform mitzvos, it is more than that.

The term שיעבוד (subjugation) literally means beholden and refers to any form of pressure which binds a person to someone or something. When one borrows money, his estate thereby becomes משועבד — beholden to his creditor; he is no longer completely free to decide what to do with it. Here, the term שיעבוד refers to the atmospheric pressure of life under Roman rule.

The preoccupation with external appearances which characterizes this exile permeates the very fabric of life there, and it cannot fail to influence the Jewish people who live under their rule. Ultimately, it has a hold on them, and affects the way they lead their lives, even their Torah lives. There is a strong message being broadcast from all sides which says, “When in Rome, do — even your activities — as the Romans do theirs.”

This has never been truer than in our times, when more and more emphasis is being placed on how things look, and not how they really are. The Mishnah<sup>7</sup> forecasts that in the time referred to as *ikvesa d’meshicha* (the footsteps of the Mashiach), “truth will disappear.” We are witness to this phenomenon, as the reality of how things really are is consistently made to take second place to how things are presented.

Unfortunately, under these conditions, not only does truth disappear, but so do we.

### **ESAV’S NEMESIS**

The Midrash<sup>8</sup> tells us that Esav will fall into the hands of the descendants of Rachel. The Avnei Nezer of Socatchov<sup>9</sup> explains that this is due to a special quality of Rachel — the quality of silence. When Leah was substituted for Rachel to marry Yaakov, she knew about it, but kept silent in order not to embarrass her sister. Chazal<sup>10</sup> call this the trait of silence. What is the nature of this trait? Presumably, being silent is simply a matter of not talking, which actually involves doing nothing. Why is it considered such an accomplishment? The answer of the Avnei Nezer is extremely thought-provoking.

One of the reasons a person may have difficulty keeping information to himself is because he feels that “someone should know.” If we should ask, is it not enough that the person himself knows this information, the answer will depend on whether he considers himself to be “someone.” If the pieces of his life only attain meaning when other people perceive them as being meaningful, then he has no intrinsic existence. He exists only as the reflection in other people’s eyes and, as such, he will feel compelled to share information that he knows, because someone has to know, and not being “someone” himself, he doesn’t count!

Rachel’s ability to keep information to herself thus represents an authentic existence. Even if she is the only one who knows that it still “someone.” This establishes her as the matriarchal nemesis of Esav, for striving for authenticity is the antidote to Esav’s obsession with appearances at the expense of one’s existence.

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7 Sotah 49b.

8 Bereishis Rabbah 75:6.

9 Ne’os Hadesheh, Vayishlach, sec. 2.

10 See Bereishis Rabbah 71:8.

This should give us much pause for thought as we consider the current near obsession with sharing information about ourselves or people we know in any way possible. Could it be that we do not have enough confidence in our own existence?

Our war against the obsession with appearances should take its cue from Rachel. To be sure, the proper performance of mitzvos is non-negotiable; they are the very limbs which make up the body called Judaism. Yet the Sages are beckoning to also remain true to what we are doing, to see to it that those limbs have the blood of meaning and idealism flowing through them. Indeed, every authentic Torah act is a reclaiming of the self, and a step toward the redemption from the exile of Esav.