
THE LANGUAGE OF HEAVEN

What the laws of kashrus teach us about the way we speak

In this week's parashah, the Torah teaches us the laws of kosher and non-kosher animals. At first glance these pesukim appear to be little more than a list of dietary laws. Yet beneath the surface lies a profound lesson — not only about kashrus, but about the way a Jew should speak to another human being.

TWO SIGNS

The Torah tells us that a kosher animal must possess two distinguishing characteristics: it must chew its cud, and it must have split hooves. The Torah then identifies four animals that possess only one of those signs — the camel, the hare, the hyrax, and the *chazir*.

The Gemara makes a remarkable observation. From the time the Torah was given until today — a span of more than three thousand years — countless species have been discovered across every continent on earth, yet not a single one has ever been found that falls outside the Torah's description. There has never been an animal that chews its cud without split hooves other than those, nor an animal with completely split hooves that does not chew its cud other than the *chazir*.

Think about that for a moment. How could the Torah make such a definitive statement about the entire animal kingdom? Had even one additional species ever been discovered, the Torah's words would have been disproven. But generation after generation, expedition after expedition, the Torah has remained flawlessly accurate. It is yet another breathtaking reminder that the Torah could only have been written by the Creator Himself.

WHY BEGIN WITH THE PRAISE?

Yet Rabbi Yissocher Frand points out that hidden within this remarkable proof lies another lesson — one that speaks directly to every one of us.

When the Torah describes these four non-kosher animals, it could have immediately told us what disqualifies them. Instead, it deliberately begins with what is correct. The camel chews its cud, *but* it does not have split hooves. The *chazir* has split hooves, *yet* it does not chew its cud.

The Midrash asks the obvious question: why mention the positive characteristic at all? If the Torah's purpose is simply to tell us that these animals are not kosher, why not begin with what is lacking?

The answer is that the Torah is teaching us far more than the laws of kashrus — it is teaching us how the Borei Olam speaks. Even when He must point out a deficiency, even when the Torah must tell us that something is not acceptable, it first acknowledges what is worthy of praise.

If the Torah can find something positive to say about a pig, how much more should we strive to begin with the good in every person we meet?

All of us will at times have difficult conversations — a parent with a child, a husband with a wife, a teacher with a student. Too often we begin with criticism. The Torah teaches a very different way: before speaking about what needs to change, first acknowledge what is already beautiful. Not because it is an effective communication technique, but because that is the way the Borei Olam speaks.

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ONE LETTER TO THE WHITE HOUSE

There is a splendid story that illustrates the extraordinary power of speaking with respect before making a request.

During the presidency of Harry Truman, the White House announced that the president would begin making a weekly nationwide radio address. Each week he would summarize the nation's most important events and outline his agenda for the days ahead. After careful study, the staff concluded that Friday evening at eight o'clock would attract the largest audience: the work week had ended, families were home, and the nation would be listening.

To most Americans it was a perfect decision. But for thousands of observant Jews it created a painful dilemma. Listening to the president's address would mean being *mechallel Shabbos kodesh*; missing it meant being excluded from one of the nation's most important weekly broadcasts. Most people accepted that there was simply nothing to be done. After all, what influence could one ordinary person have over a decision made by the President of the United States?

One Jewish woman refused to accept that respectful words were powerless. Her name was Mrs. Baruch, and she sat down and wrote a letter to President Truman. What is striking is not merely that she wrote, but *how she began*. She did not open with criticism. She began with sincere appreciation:

“Mr. President, I wish to express my deep appreciation for your outstanding leadership of our great nation. I was delighted to learn that you will be addressing the American people each week...”

Only after expressing her genuine admiration did she explain that, as an observant Jew, she and thousands of others would be unable to listen because the broadcast was scheduled during Shabbos. She respectfully asked whether another time might be considered.

She signed the letter and mailed it, expecting nothing. The odds against her were overwhelming. The White House received thousands of letters daily, and the great majority were opened briefly by staff and discarded long before reaching the president’s desk. With no political influence and no personal connections, she possessed nothing but one heartfelt letter written with dignity, sincerity, and respect.

A week later an envelope bearing the seal of the White House arrived at her home. Inside was a formal reply informing her that the president had personally received her letter and was giving her request careful consideration. Barely three weeks after that, President Truman made an unexpected announcement: beginning the following week, his nationwide address would no longer be broadcast on Friday evening.

One ordinary Jewish woman, with no influence and no connections — just one respectful letter — had changed the schedule of the President of the United States. One thing is certain: words spoken with dignity, humility, and genuine respect possess a power far greater than we often imagine.

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HOW THE BOREI OLAM SPEAKS

Perhaps the greatest lesson in these pesukim has nothing to do with the animals, or even with kashrus. It is a window into how the Borei Olam speaks.

The Torah could have described these animals in a single sentence and begun with what disqualifies them. It chose not to — not because the camel or the *chazir* would be offended, but for our sake. Every word of the Torah teaches us how the Borei Olam thinks.

The Kadosh Baruch Hu never denies what is missing. But somehow He never allows what is missing to eclipse what is already good. Before He tells us what still needs to change, He reminds us of what is already worthy.

And maybe that is the most comforting thought of all: every one of us stands before the Borei Olam with shortcomings and repairs to make — yet the Torah quietly whispers that our Creator does not begin there.

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Mi K’amcha Yisrael · Parashas Re’eh