

Shemini

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This week a big chunk of the Torah is devoted to the animals, birds, and fish that we are and are not allowed to eat. For ages people have been trying to discover one theory that explains the animals that are kosher and those that are not. I have seen theories about hygiene (but there are separate guidelines in Jewish law about eating anything unhealthy). There are theories about needing to preserve transporting and working animals and that is why horses and camels are “out”. There are theories about avoiding animals that feed in the dirt, likes pigs and shellfish. Some claim it is to do with aggression and that is why we cannot eat sharks and birds of prey. Yet others suggest it all has to do with sacred animals. This is fine for Egyptian sphinxes but what about the holy bull of Babylon? And so on. But no theory fits all the variations; the Bible is pretty good at defying classification. So what are these laws all about?

The one theme that seems to run consistently through the Bible is that people should think about their actions. The difference between a thinking human being and an animal is that a human thinks before acting and, if he or she has a moral code, then sometimes self control and self discipline may prove stronger than simple desire or natural tendencies or even instinct. On the other hand, some humans act just like animals and do give in entirely to indulgence and desire.

So it is this ability to reflect that is crucial to humanity. Most of the Biblical laws are designed to get us to think before we act. Some of them are abstract, like thinking what it is like to be poor or a slave so that we may be more charitable and caring. But others get us to think before mundane actions like eating. Bearing in mind that we all tend to eat pretty regularly at some time every day, regulating our eating habits is a good way of getting us to think and value what we do on a regular basis. This attempt to raise eating to a higher plane and to add a spiritual dimension is what is really behind the kosher laws.