

Shemini Dvar Torah

There is a mythical story often told on the entrepreneurial circuit of two salesmen from competing companies who were sent to a foreign country to assess the market for shoes.

The first salesman scouts around for a few days and then heads for the telegraph office to contact company headquarters. He writes: "Research complete. Unmitigated disaster. *Nobody* here wears shoes."

Likewise, the second salesman does his research and heads for the same telegraph office. Once there, he composes the following: "Research complete. Glorious opportunity! *Nobody* here wears shoes!"

Parshas Shemini contains the first detailed enumeration of all the kosher and non-kosher animals in the *Torah*. The two signs that determine the permissibility of an animal are whether it has completely split hooves and whether it chews its cud. The *Torah* singles out particular animals that one may not eat despite the fact that they possess one of the two signs of permissibility. The camel (*gamal*), despite the fact that it chews its cud, is not kosher because it does not have split hooves. The same is true with the *shafan* (hyrax) and *arneves* (rabbit). The pig (*chazir*) is forbidden because although it has a split hoof, it does not chew its cud.

The *Midrash* points out that in regards to all four animals, the *Torah* first mentions its kosher sign and only then mentions the sign that disqualifies it. Why does the *Torah* do this? Why not just get straight to the point? The kosher sign is really irrelevant, given the other disqualifying characteristic. Additionally, from a young age, we are taught that the *Torah* is usually written in a concise matter, never wasting extraneous words. This rule seems to be violated here.

The *Midrash* comments: Even when the *Torah* tells us that a pig or camel is not kosher, it only begins by stating its praiseworthy characteristics. Even when the *Torah* says something is *treif*, the *Torah* goes out of its way to present a positive description first.

The point of the *Midrash* is that if G-d feels that even when discussing impure animals, He nevertheless sees fit to find something laudatory to say about them, how much more so should we spy out the positive side of people and situations. Often, when thinking, speaking and looking at others, we see them, first and foremost, with all of their failings and shortcomings. *Hashem* is modeling for us

the correct way to observe and live. Look to praise and applaud. Not to belittle and ridicule.

Let's accentuate the positives and see the value in a person or situation before we become totally dismissive.

One of my all-time favorite stories hammers home this idea as well. Though it has been told before, it deserves repeating here.

Years ago, Simon Wiesenthal, the famed Nazi-hunter, spoke at a conference of European Rabbis in Bratislava, Slovakia. The Rabbis presented the 91 year-old Wiesenthal with an award, and Mr. Wiesenthal, visibly moved, told the rabbis the following story:

He related how he was in Mauthausen after liberation and was visited there by Rabbi Eliezer Silver, one of the leading rabbis in the United States, who had come to help and comfort the survivors. Rabbi Silver also organized a special service, and he invited Wiesenthal to join the other survivors in praying. Mr. Wiesenthal declined, and explained why.

"When I was in the camp, I saw many different types of people do things. There was one religious man of whom I was in awe when I saw that he smuggled a *siddur* into the camp. I was amazed that he took the risk of his life in order to bring the *siddur* in. But then, the next day, to my horror, I realized that he was taking this *siddur* and renting it out to people in exchange for giving him their last piece of bread. This man was so thin, that when he started eating so much from the people renting out his *siddur*, he died before everyone."

Mr. Wiesenthal continued: "I was so angry with this Jew — how could he take a holy *siddur* and use it to take a person's last piece of bread away? So I am not going to pray, if this is how Jews behave, if this is what they do with something that is supposed to be a prayer book."

As Wiesenthal turned to walk away, Rabbi Silver tapped him on the shoulder and gently said in Yiddish, "*Oy na'ar, na'ar* (silly boy). Why do you look at the Jew who rented out his *siddur* to take away people's last meals? Why do you look at that Jew? Why don't you look at the dozens of Jews who gave up their last piece of bread in order to be able to use a *siddur*?"

What an unbelievable financial opportunity – no one wears shoes!

Pigs are *almost* kosher. They have split hooves!

Starving Jews were willing to forgo their morsel of bread to procure a siddur to daven from!

Applauding, cheering and focusing on the positive should be our default position. It doesn't solve every problem – just many of them.

Good Shabbos!