

NOACH (GENESIS 6:9-11:32)

A Pig by Any Other Name...

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

A Shul recently brought me a Torah scroll to repair. In addition to adding ink to chipped letters, the congregation requested a computer scan of the Torah. This inspection led to the discovery of a few misspelled words that had to be corrected. The misspellings were minor errors, extra letters that didn't change the meaning or pronunciation of the words, (An approximate example in English would be "colour", instead of "color"). However, the Torah was invalid for use until the mistakes were fixed. Since each and every letter in the Torah is essential, a single extra letter or missing letter is an error that must be immediately repaired.

This rule creates a question in this week's Torah reading. The Torah, which is extremely concise, never uses a superfluous phrase, word, or letter. Yet, in the following verse, the Torah seems to deliberately use too many words:

The clean animals and the animals that were not clean . . . came . . . to the Ark. (Genesis, 7:8)

A brief Hebrew lesson: The Hebrew word for clean, in the context of Kosher animals, is 'Tahor', or 'Tehorah'. The Hebrew word for unclean, or non-Kosher, is 'Tamei', or 'Temeiah'. What the Torah actually says in the above verse is "*the 'Tehorah' animals, and the animals that were not 'Tehorah' . . . came . . . to the Ark.*"**

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, quoted in the Talmud, is bothered by this unusually wordy phrase utilized by the Torah. In Leviticus, Kosher animals are referred to as 'Tehorah', while non-Kosher animals are called 'Temeiah'. Why doesn't the Torah simply say "*the Tehorah animals and the 'Temeiah' animals came to the Ark?*" Why does the Torah refer to them as "*animals that were not 'Tehorah'?*"

(To simplify the question, without the Hebrew lesson, there are two types of laundry -- clean laundry and dirty laundry. Would you reclassify these two categories as clean laundry and laundry that is not clean?!)

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi answers with a very important ethical lesson. "Let a person never allow a coarse word come out of his mouth, as we see that an additional eight letters were written in the Torah rather than using coarse language." (Pesachim, 3a)

After the Flood, humans were, for the first time, permitted to eat meat. Kosher laws, which only apply to Jews, were not relevant to Noah's diet. Why are pigs and rabbits and horses called "*the animal which isn't 'Tehorah'*", clean, rather than being simply called 'Temeiah', dirty? Because by calling them dirty, the

Torah would not be speaking respectfully about Noah's food. The Torah, which is so careful about every word and letter, went out of its way to use a terminology that was more gentle and refined when describing something that people eat. (In Leviticus, when telling us what NOT to eat, the Torah didn't object to using the more negative description of '*Temeiah*'.)

How careful are we with the language that we use? Do we make sure that the expressions we use reflect the respect that we are required to show to every person? Do we make sure that we scrupulously avoid saying anything that could cause distress or discomfort to another human being? (It goes without saying, of course, that profanity is strictly forbidden.)

The Torah doesn't waste words. There is too much wisdom that can be derived from every word to say things without reason. Let us make sure that our words are used to build, encourage, and inspire. Any other use of our words would be simply . . . *Treif!*

Have a great Shabbos.

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