

## Parshas Shemini 5771

### ASHREI AND THE OSPREY

Due, in part, to its frequent recital and memory-friendly alphabetical arrangement, the *Ashrei* prayer is one of the most familiar selections from *davening*. Many are quite fluent in this psalm, and can recite it by heart with little effort. Unfortunately, what is less universally known is the profound richness of the content contained within.

#### WHICH CAME FIRST?

The following set of verses provides an example. A superficial glance at the wording may leave an impression of repetition, but a closer look reveals great precision and wisdom:

יודוך ה' כל מעשיך, וחסידריך יברכוכה. כבוד מלכותך לאמרו, וגבורתך ידברו. להודיע לבני האדם גבורתך, וכבוד הדר מלכותך.

All of Your works, Hashem, will thank You, and **Your pious ones** will bless you. They will declare the **Honor of Your Kingship** and will speak of Your **might**. To inform people of His **might** and the **Honor of His glorious Kingship**.

Yes, there seems to be a lot of mention of might and honor and kingship; but it is worthwhile to focus on the placement. Notice that these verses speak of two distinct groups of people, each offering Hashem's praise: חסידריך (Your pious ones) and בני האדם (regular people). Interestingly, when it comes to the "pious ones," mention is made first that they speak of the **Honor of Hashem's Kingship**; their relating of His **mighty** deeds is listed second. By the praise delivered by the "regular folk," however, the arrangement is reversed: **Might** precedes **the Honor of His Kingship**.

This particular set-up was certainly not composed haphazardly. The *Meshech Chochmah* explains that these verses reflect differing levels of recognizing Hashem's Presence in the world, as there are two main methods of

detecting His "Fingerprints." Obviously, in those instances when Hashem wrought open miracles in which the natural processes were temporarily superseded, His intervention was readily apparent. One who observes the plethora of natural phenomena that abound in our universe can likewise discern the Divine Hand at work.

The first approach – recognizing Hashem through His miracles – requires somewhat less penetrating analysis. As such, it is the method of choice for the average individual. Even the Egyptian sorcerers afflicted by the plagues declared, "It is the finger of G-d" (*Shemos 8:15*), and the final statement issued by Pharaoh's cavalymen in the midst of the parted waters was: "Hashem is fighting for Yisrael against Egypt" (*ibid. 14:25*). It is for this reason that the Psalmist follows the order he does when speaking of the praise offered by בני האדם: it is by witnessing or hearing of Hashem's **mighty acts** (referring to miraculous salvation and supernatural events) that they recognize the existence and **the Honor of His glorious Kingship**.

However, those individuals who operate on a more elevated plateau and have more intensely developed their spiritual sensitivities need not wait for a miracle to detect Hashem's Presence. Merely observing the myriad natural wonders that surround them provides more than ample evidence of the handiwork of the Creator. From the variety, beauty, and resourcefulness of His creatures, to the breathtaking spectacles of the vast outdoors, to the complexity of operations taking place among even the tiniest seeds and organisms, there is abundant testimony to the Almighty's greatness. This situation is reflected by the fact that the **Honor of Hashem's Kingship** is mentioned in the verse *before* His **might** when speaking of the "pious ones." These noble souls detect Hashem's Power even before they contemplate His overt miracles; they see His Presence manifest in their daily lives and surroundings (*cf. Talelei*

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*Oros, Tefillah, vol. II, pp. 146-147).*

One example (from countless trillions) of such clear evidence of plan and purpose employed in Creation emerges from this week's *parshah*: specifically, the section that discusses the subject of kosher animals (*Vayikra, ch. 11*).

### GETTING A GRIP

While the Torah delineates specific signs for determining the *kashrus* (suitability) of beasts (split hooves, cud-chewing), no such identifying characteristics are mentioned explicitly in relation to birds. (Instead, the Torah provides a detailed list of species considered unsuitable). While these details are not recorded in the Written Torah, they are covered by the Oral Tradition; as we find in the Mishnah (*Chullin 3:6*):

סימני בהמה וְחִיָּה נֶאֱמָרוּ מִן הַתּוֹרָה, וְסִימְנֵי הָעוֹף לֹא נֶאֱמָרוּ. אֲבָל אֶמְרוּ חֲכָמִים, כָּל עוֹף הַדּוֹרָס, טָמֵא... רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בְּרַבִּי צְדוֹק אָמַר, כָּל עוֹף הַחוֹלֵק אֶת רַגְלָיו, טָמֵא.

“The (*kashrus*) signs of domesticated and wild animals are stated in the (Written) Torah, while the signs of fowl are not. However, the Sages revealed them, and said: Any bird that is *dores* is unfit... R’ Eliezer son of R’ Tzadok says: Any bird that ‘splits its toes’ is unfit.”

Exactly what constitutes “*dores*” is a subject of discussion amongst the commentators; for our purposes, it seems to refer to the process of securing prey (see *Tiferes Yisrael 82*). Regarding R’ Eliezer’s comment of “splitting toes,” the Gemara (*Chullin 65a*) explains this as referring to a certain posture the bird tends to adopt: that is, it places two toes in the front and two in the back (as opposed to three in the front and one in the back). The commentators add that this particular arrangement is a sure sign that the bird is of the “*dores*” type, and hence, unfit.

What relationship do “split toes” have with the action of “*dores*”? This appears to be a manifestation of the marvelous plan and purpose evident in Hashem’s Creation. In a volume aptly named *Sha’ar HaShamayim*, the father of the Rambam states that Hashem has fashioned every creature to be maximally suited to provide for itself. Thus we find that birds of prey possess long, hooked beaks and sharp talons, perfect for tearing into flesh.

One bird that sports the “split toes” arrangement is the osprey (which appears [at least according to the *Chizkuni*] to be the “*ozniyah*” listed in the *parshah* amongst the non-kosher birds [*Vayikra 11:13*]). This bird is a master fisherman, living off the fish it snatches from the water by diving feet-first. The osprey hauls its catch back to a perch, holding it all the while in its claws. Normally, transporting fish in one’s toes is a risky prospect, as the slimy prey could easily fall out. The “two-in-front-two-in-back” posture is thus remarkably utilitarian, as it serves to secure an otherwise slippery meal.

While deniers may concoct all manner of far-fetched theories of how such phenomena came about, we have seen the approach of the righteous. In such instances, the “pious ones” see a clear manifestation of the **Honor of Hashem’s Kingship**.