A Fishy Mystery

May one write the Torah chapters for tefillin on the skin of a fish?

This question was put to Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak by the Sage Mar, the son of the Sage Ravina. It appears in the gemara’s discussion of which living things are considered as having a layer of skin covering their flesh and the ramifications of this for one who wounds such a creature on Shabbos.

Rabbi Nachman’s response was that while it is obvious that a fish has a skin, we will have to wait for the Prophet Eliyahu to reveal to us whether the inherent uncleanness of this skin is removed in processing it for parchment. Since we have not yet merited Eliyahu’s arrival, Rambam rules that we may not use fish skin for tefillin.

A simple reading of the gemara suggests that the physical uncleanness is the putrid odor of fish skin. But it is difficult to understand why we need a prophet to reveal to us something which we can determine with our own sense of smell.

Rabbi Nissim (RaN), one of the early commentators, offers another perspective. The gemara (Shabbos 146a) tells us that when the primeval serpent persuaded Chava to sin by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, he instilled a spiritual uncleanness into the entire universe. The Jewish People, and the spirits of their future generations and converts, which stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, were purified of this uncleanness. All animal life, except for fish, was there as well, adds Rabbi Nissim, and was likewise purified. The question remaining for Eliyahu to solve is whether this spiritual uncleanness disappears during the processing of the skin.

A more recent commentary, Sfas Emes, suggests that only animal life requiring shechita, such as animals and fowl, were granted release from spiritual uncleanness, to the exclusion of fish which do not require shechita. Only Eliyahu will tell us whether processing achieves the same effect.

When Word is Work

Shabbos is different!

Since this day is holy, our Sages taught us that we must show our respect for this difference in a variety of ways. Not only must the clothes we wear on Shabbos be different than those we wear on the weekdays, and the manner in which we walk be different from how we move about on the weekdays, but even our talk on Shabbos must be different from our talk on the weekdays.

Rashi explains this ban on weekday talk as referring to discussion of weekday business and calculations, activities which are forbidden on Shabbos. Tosfosef rejects this approach because discussion of business comes under another category of activity previously mentioned in the gemara. Rabbeinu Tam, one of the leading Tosafists, suggests that the aforementioned curb on speech relates not to the subject but rather to the quantity of talk, even about permissible things.

In support of this point he cites a Midos which tells of the extremely talkative elderly mother of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. On Shabbos the Sage would remind her that it was Shabbos and she would become silent.

A further support is the Jerusalem Talmud which relates that the Sages stretched the law to its limit in order to permit us to say “Good Shabbos” to one another.

The reason for all of this caution in regard to talking on Shabbos, says Maharsha, is that in regard to Shabbos, word is equivalent to “Good Shabbos” to one another.