

This may you eat from everything that is in the water. (11:9)

Mikol asher ba'mayim, “from all that is in the water,” implies that an amphibian which has *simanei taharah*, signs of purity/*kashrus*, may be eaten. “A fish is a fish”; the question is only whether it is a kosher fish. Its status as amphibian is not relevant. The *Mishnah* in *Meseches Keilim* 17:13 appends this idea when it says anything in the water (utensils made from amphibious creatures) are *tahor* (utensils are considered *tahor*, ritually pure) except for the *kelev ha'yam*, sea dog (possibly the otter), since it flees to dry land.” In other words, a sea dog maintains the status of a land creature, since it flees to the land when threatened with capture. No other sea creature possesses this disposition. Thus, the proclivity of the sea dog to turn to the land when imperiled renders its land-animal status. Accordingly, utensils formed from the skin or bones of a sea dog are susceptible to *tumah*, ritual impurity.

Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl, derives a powerful lesson from this *Mishnah* (interpretation is based on the commentary of *Rav Ovadiah Bartenura*). A person is defined by his disposition, his inner proclivities – not by his actions. The sea dog lives in the water. It is his home, his life. He breathes his air in the water. When compelled to leave the water, he turns to the dry land for his safety net, returning later to his life source – the water. Yet, since for those moments of security, he seeks out the land, his entire “personality” is redefined from sea-creature to land animal. Why? Because, for a few moments, it deferred to its inner disposition, a disposition that defines its inner essence.

This land is not his home. To the sea dog, dry land is foreign. His home is in the water. Yet, if it can return to the land when necessary, it is no longer a water creature. Let us now apply this concept to intelligent, observant, moral and ethical man. He spends his time ensconced in the world of Torah learning and living, surrounded by Torah scholars and holy personages. One would think that such a person has “made it,” has achieved the mantle of *ben Torah*. This *Mishnah* does not seem to think so. It does not matter where his body is; rather, where his impulses, tendencies, deep-rooted devices, and core disposition lie, defines him. It is where he turns when he must run, where he goes when he must escape – how he acts under the duress of changing his position when he is no longer in his comfort zone – that personifies him.

One's deeds may be enviable; his performance on behalf of *Klal Yisrael* and his *chesed*, lovingkindness activities, may earn him extraordinary accolades, but, if within him lurks a tendency to the inappropriate, a disposition toward the immoral and unethical, then this is his true self. The external is only a façade – a sham – concealing his true essence. If, deep within himself, he longs for honor, is filled with envy, seeks revenge on those who disagree with him, then he is a flawed person, an individual to be characterized by his disposition – not by his overt achievements. How careful we must be of falling into the trap that has foiled the lives of those who think that positive deeds and service to Hashem will cover up and atone for a sinister mind and flawed heart.