WHAT ANIMAL WAS THE *TINSHEMET*? (LEVITICUS CHAPTER 11)

MOSHE RAANAN

An animal named *tinshemet* is mentioned in the Torah in two contexts. The first time as one of the unclean species of fowl: *The tinshemet, the ka'at* (cormorant) *and the rahem* (great owl) (Lev. 11:18), and the second time as one of the species of vermin: *The following shall be impure for you from among the things that swarm on the earth: the mole, the mouse, and great lizards of every variety*, *the gecko, the land crocodile, the lizard, the sand lizard, and the tinshemet* (Lev. 11:29-30). In this article we will explore the traditional approach to identifying the *tinshemet*.

In the Torah, the common denominator between the two species is that they have the same name. TB *Hullin* 63a gives another common denominator; they are both termed "ba'ut." "The Sages taught: The *tinshemet* (Lev. 11:18) is the ba'ut among birds . . . It is also taught in this way with regard to the creeping animals: *tinshemet* (Lev. 11:30) is the ba'ut among creeping animals." Both creatures called *tinshemet* have been assigned the title "ba'ut" but the question is what does the term "ba'ut" mean?

Different answers were given to this question, related to the different versions that are found in various manuscripts and sources for this passage in the Talmud. In the Munich manuscript the word is written "ba'vot," other manuscripts have "ku'at," and the early Talmudic dictionary the *Aruch* has "bu'at." There are multiple ways that this word is vowelized in different sources as well. Even if we cannot determine with certainty the exact version of the word in this text, its general meaning may be deduced from the comments of Abaye found immediately after the discussion of the *tinshemet*, "Abaye says: The ba'ut among birds is the kifof. The ba'ut among creeping animals is the kurpedai." Abaye is apparently providing the Aramaic terms for the bird *tinshemet* in Leviticus 11:18 (kifof) and the vermin *tinshemet* in Leviticus 11:30 (kurpedai), explaining the preceding statement of the sages.

This is the understanding of Rashi who in his commentary to TB *Hullin* 63a uses the French word chouette (owl) for both "the ba'ut among birds" and Abaye's term "kifof." Rashi explains that it is "a bird that screeches at night." Rashi also provides an alternative interpretation of chauve souris, a bat, for kifof, "similar to a mouse that flies at night." Rashi translates kurpedai as taupe, a mole. R. Solomon Luria (1510-1573) in his commentary to the Talmud *Chochmat Shlomo* explains that the term ba'ut is an adjective meaning "disgusting." Marcus Jastrow in his *Dictionary of the Talmud* explains that the term refers to a nocturnal creature. Both of these explanations of bu'at fit with Rashi's identifications of tinshemet.

Dr. Moshe Raanan is a biology lecturer at Herzog College and Michlalah College for Women and an expert in flora and fauna of the Land of Israel. *This article was adapted and expanded from the original Hebrew version which appeared at* https://www.daf-yomi.com/DYItemDetails.aspx?itemId=43406

Abaye uses the term kifofa in an unrelated discussion in TB *Nidda* 23a, where the Talmud provides an explanation for the approach of R. Meir that a woman who has a miscarriage that has the appearance of an animal or bird is ritually impure. "Rabbi Yannai said: This is the reason of R. Meir is because the eyes of (these animals) are fixed in the front (of their heads) like those of a human." Abaye explains that R. Meir is referring to a kifofa, which Rashi there again translates as a chouette, an owl, "that screeches in the night and whose face looks like a cat and his eyes face forward."

Onkelos translates the *tinshemet* bird of Leviticus 11:18 (also mentioned in Deuteronomy 14:16) as "bavta" which is related to the Proto-Indo-European word for owl, "bew," and the Greek buas, used for the owl family. In Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Leviticus 11:18 *tinshemet* is translated as "utya," which appears to be related to the Greek otos and Latin otus, meaning a horned or eared owl. The tufts some owls have on the sides of the head are indeed similar to horns or ears, for example the Eurasian eagle-owl.

Dr. Menahem Dor (1901-1998) explains that the word *tinshemet* is connected to the Hebrew term for breathing (neshima), as owls have heavier breathing sounds that other nocturnal predator birds, sometimes described as rasping or snoring.[1] The Sanskrit term for the barn owl means "one who makes a guttural or snoring sound."[2]

Regarding the vermin *tinshemet* in Leviticus 11:30, Targum Onkelos renders it ashuta, a mole. This is also the translation found in the Septuagint and Vulgate, and as we have seen the interpretation of Rashi as well. In modern times this has been identified in particular with the Middle East blind mole-rat, which may be called *tinshemet* due to the respiratory adaptations that this animal has allowing it to survive in low oxygen underground environments.[3]

Taking all this together, what is it that the two tinshemets have in common? The owl and the mole are both creatures that are active in darkness, the owl at night and the mole in underground tunnels. This is probably the sense that they are "ba'ut," particularly disgusting. This makes the owl a much better identification for *tinshemet* than the Septuagint's πορφυρίωνα (red-billed swamp hen) or the Vulgate's cygnum (swan)

NOTES

1. Menachem Dor, Fauna in the Times of the Bible, Mishna and Talmud (Tel Aviv: 1996), pp. 107-108 (Hebrew).
2. K. N. Dave, Birds in Sanskrit Literature: With 107 Bird Illustrations (Delhi: 2005), p. 173.
3. See for example, Terry A. Vaughan, James M. Ryan, Nicholas J. Czaplewski, *Mammology* (Burlington, MA: 2015), p. 431.

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