

Letter to the Editor: The Identity of the *Shafan*

by Rabbi Natan Slifkin

In “The Identity of the *Shafan* and *Arnevet*” (DIALOGUE No. 3), physicians Isaac Betch and Obadia Maya attempt to argue that the *shafan* of Tenach is the rabbit and not the hyrax. Their article is lengthy, includes a copious number of footnotes, and the authors claim to have corresponded with “the greatest specialists in the relevant disciplines.” Yet they fail to even mention, let alone address, the reason why virtually every scholar of Biblical zoology in the last century has agreed that the *shafan* cannot be the rabbit. It is the most basic principle of Biblical zoology and botany: that of geographical distribution.

Different animals live in different parts of the world. Hashem knows everything, but the animals that He mentions in Torah, and certainly those that the prophets describe in Nevi'im and Kesuvim, are those that are familiar to the Jewish People. They all either live in the region of Eretz Yisrael, or were brought there (such as the monkeys and peacocks given as gifts to King Shlomo).

Drs. Betch and Maya describe certain species of rock-rabbits as hiding amongst rocks, as the *shafan* is described in Tehillim and Mishlei. What the authors inexplicably do not mention is that these rabbits live only in the southern part of Africa. There are rabbits native to Spain (which do not live in rocks), which were later transported to North Africa. But rabbits do not and did not live in Eretz Yisrael. Nor is there the slightest reason or evidence to believe that the rabbits of southern Africa or Spain were ever imported to Eretz Yisrael. Conversely, hyraxes, which live in Israel (and are called by a variant of the name *shafan* in local Arabic dialects), do not live in Europe.

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There are two crucial ramifications of these facts. First is that when David HaMelech and Shlomo HaMelech describe the habits of the *shafan* in the wild—e.g. “The high hills are for the ibex, the rocks are a refuge for the *shefanim*” (*Tehillim* 104:18)—they are clearly not describing the rabbits of southern Africa, which neither they nor their audience ever saw. *Borchi Nafshi* is about the wonders of all creation—from the perspective of a Jew living in Eretz Yisrael. David HaMelech and Shlomo HaMelech do not speak about the natural habits of penguins or pandas or polar bears. They speak about the animal life that was familiar to people in Eretz Yisrael—the storks nesting in the trees, the lions which (at that time) lived in the forests, the whale in the Mediterranean. When David HaMelech sang about the ibex that live on the high hills, and immediately follows this by saying that the rocks are a refuge for *shefanim*, he was describing the animal that lives in the immediate vicinity of ibex and hides in the rocks—the hyrax. Note that in *Shmuel I* 24: 2, it relates how David HaMelech spent time in Ein Gedi amongst the ibex. Visitors to Ein Gedi today still see the two most common and visible animals in the reserve: ibex and hyrax. Drs. Betech and Maya would have us believe that David HaMelech neglected describing the hyrax which hides in the rocks in the very same area as the ibex, in favor of describing the natural habits of the rock-rabbit that lives in South Africa—which just so happens to be called by the same name that hyraxes are called in other local languages!

Why on earth would they interpret the verses in such a bizarre way? Drs. Betech and Maya desire to “uphold the tradition” that the *shafan* is the rabbit. But this brings us to the second ramification of zoogeographical distribution. We are not referring to a tradition from Sinai—and nor to a tradition from Jews in the Middle East. Instead, the authors are referring to a specifically European tradition. But what reason is there to uphold a *European* tradition about the identity of an animal that lives in Eretz Yisrael?

Europe has very different animals from those of Eretz Yisrael, and the names of animals in Tanach were transposed to local equivalents. For example, the gazelle of Israel perfectly matches all Scriptural, Talmudic and Midrashic descriptions of the *tzvi*. While Jews in north Africa, which also has gazelles, had a (correct) tradition that the *tzvi* is the gazelle (and that the deer is the *ayal*), there were no gazelles in Europe. As a result, the name *tzvi* in Europe was transposed to the deer (*hirsch*). This led Rashi, in his commentary to *Chullin* 59b, to note that the creature traditionally called *tzvi* in Europe (i.e.

the deer) is not the *tzvi* described by Chazal. Thus, Rashi himself observes that European traditions regarding the identities of animals mentioned in the Torah are not accurate.

Not only Rashi, but other Rishonim and Acharonim made similar observations. Ramban (to Bereishis 35:16) discounts his own former support of Radak's view regarding the distance from Kever Rachel to Bethlehem, stating that when he travelled from Spain to Eretz Yisrael, he realized that the facts on the ground were otherwise. Rabbi Yosef Karo (*Kesef Mishnah, Berachos* 8:5) discounts a ruling of the *Tur* regarding sugarcane on the grounds that sugarcane did not grow in his region and he was unfamiliar with how it is eaten. Radvaz (*Shailos u'Teshuvos* 6:2:2026) negates the view of R. Eliyahu Mizrahi (and effectively many others) regarding the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael, pointing out that they were unfamiliar with the geographical reality, due to their living in Europe. *Tosafos Yom Tov (Bava Metzia* 9:8) discounts the view of various Rishonim regarding a statement in the Mishnah about agriculture, noting that they did not live in Eretz Yisrael and were not familiar with its agriculture. Many more examples can be brought of this phenomenon, which explains the divergent traditions amongst different Jewish communities regarding such things as the identity of *maror* and the size of the *kezayis*. Halachic practice is not necessarily affected by all this, but if we are talking about the actual identification of the flora and fauna of Tanach, it makes no sense to attribute authority to scholars who had never seen the flora and fauna of Eretz Yisrael.

Therefore, when Drs. Betech and Maya give a long list of descriptions of the *shafan* given by various Rishonim that match the rabbit rather than the hyrax, this is irrelevant. These Rishonim were all from France and Spain, where the name *shafan* was naturally transposed to the closest local equivalent. Of course they thought it was a rabbit!

Since the *shafan* cannot be the rabbit, which did not live in the region of Eretz Yisrael, the only available candidate is the hyrax. This is identified as the *shafan* by Rav Saadiah Gaon, as well as the Septuagint and Vulgate, and more recently by Malbim, Rabbi Dovid Tzvi Hoffman, Rabbi Yosef Schwartz, Professor Yehuda Feliks, and all other academic scholars of Biblical zoology. Any difficulties raised with descriptions of the *shafan* are not reasons to disqualify the hyrax, since there is no other remotely reasonable candidate. If David HaMelech were to describe the *shafan* as "bouncing," we would be challenged with understanding how this refers to the hyrax; it would not mean that David

HaMelech is referring to the kangaroo! But let us address the difficulties that the authors raise (ignoring those about the hyrax not matching the description given by the French/Spanish *mesorah*).

One is that the hyrax is not a ruminant. This is an old question, also applicable to the hare, that has already been addressed in a variety of ways. Rabbi Dovid Tzvi Hoffman and Rabbi Menachem Kasher, for example, argued that the lateral, gyratory chewing movements of hares and hyraxes resemble those of a cud-chewer, and the Torah's description follows such appearances, as per the principle of *dibra Torah k'lashon bnei adam*, "the Torah speaks like the language of men." This is the same principle via which we justify the Torah describing the sun as moving around the earth, the dew as descending, and the kidneys as providing counsel.

Some zoologists, however, have observed that hyraxes do in fact regurgitate small quantities of food for remastication—a behavior that I have managed to film in my own captive hyrax. Accordingly, it is even easier to describe the hyrax as *ma'aleh gerah* than it is to give this description to the hare and rabbit. With the hare and rabbit, interpreting *ma'aleh gerah* as caecotrophy requires going against all classical interpretations of *ma'aleh gerah*. To be sure, caecotrophy is similar to rumination from a nutritional standpoint, but it is different from rumination in precisely the way that the Torah describes rumination, i.e. *ma'aleh gerah*. Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni, Radak, and Rashbam all explain the word *gerah* to be related to the word *garon*, "throat," and thereby to refer to that which is brought up by way of the throat, as Rashi also describes the process. Of course, it is not impossible to adopt the approach of Drs. Betech and Maya that these Rishonim were all wrong in their explanation of the word *gerah*, but what reason is there to say this—after all, these Rishonim were familiar with rabbits! And why, if the authors are so reluctant to reject the view of the French and Spanish Rishonim with regard to the identity of the *shafan*, are they so quick to dismiss their view with regard to the explanation of *ma'aleh gerah*—not even mentioning it? In any case, it is certainly easier to apply the description of *ma'aleh gerah* to the hyrax.

The second objection raised by Drs. Betech and Maya is that the hyrax, unlike the rabbit, is a *sheretz* rather than a *chayah*. This is an astonishing statement, considering that hyraxes are nearly twice as big as rabbits! In addition, the hyrax moves with its body further from the ground than the porcupine and *chuldas sena'im* (be it mongoose or marten), which are rated in the Mishnah (*Kilayim*

8:5) as being *chayos* rather than *sheratzim*. Rashi defines a *sheretz* as a creature whose legs cannot be clearly distinguished as it walks; this is certainly not the case with the hyrax. I understand that, like the Rishonim of Spain, Drs. Betech and Maya of Mexico may not be especially familiar with the hyrax. However, having kept and studied both rabbits and hyraxes for many years, I can attest that the hyrax is at least as much of a *chayah* as a rabbit, if not more so.

Drs. Betech and Maya cite a single author, Richard Estes, who describes the hyrax as moving with a “creeping” motion. However, they fail to mention that this author uses the same term to describe the motion of pottos and lorises (which are long-legged primates, somewhat similar to monkeys), as well as chimpanzees! As the author explains on p. 475, he uses the term “creeping” to refer to a “slow, stealthy” motion. Thus, his usage of this term in no way indicates that the hyrax is a *sheretz*. Hyraxes, even during this “creeping” motion, hold their bodies higher from the ground than rabbits do; and much of their motion involves leaping from rock to rock. My own hyraxes regularly take leaps of several feet in height.

In any case, all this is only to show that the hyrax is not a *sheretz* even according to Rashi’s definition of the term *sheretz*. What Drs. Betech and Maya do not mention is that Rashi’s definition is disputed by Ramban, based on Targum Onkelos, who defines a *sheretz* as something that is in constant scurrying motion—certainly not applicable to the hyrax. Hirsch, on the third hand, defines *sheratzim* as being the most primitive and lowest forms of animal life, which is likewise inapplicable to the hyrax. It seems that there is no unequivocal, clear definition of the difference between a *sheretz* and a *chayah*; indeed, Beis Shammai themselves express doubt as to which animals fall into each category (*Kilayim* 8:5). But if one is considering even a little rabbit to be a *chayah*, then all the more so can a hyrax be rated as a *chayah*.

I have discussed all these issues at much more length in my full-length study *The Camel, The Hare And The Hyrax*. But to reiterate the main point: When David HaMelech writes that “The high hills are for the ibex, the rocks are a refuge for the *shefanim*,” he was not describing the behavior of animals from southern Africa. Instead, he was referring to the animal in the immediate vicinity of the ibex, which characteristically hides under rocks: the hyrax.