

The Meaning and Significance of the Leviathan

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Introduction

THE LEVIATHAN, a creature of immense, supernatural proportions, which the Klein Dictionary identifies as either a “serpent, dragon, or whale” is mentioned more than occasionally in our holy texts and liturgy. Sometimes the Leviathan appears on its own, and sometimes together, often in battle, with other creatures such as the Behemoth (a magnificently large ox, also referred to as the Shor HaBor) or the Ziz (a magnificently large bird). In the *Akdmut*, for example, which we read on *Shavuot*, there is mention of “the contest of the Leviathan and the Behemoth of the tall mountain,” referring to an *Aggadic* tradition that these two large beasts (the Behemoth is as tall as a mountain) will battle it out together at the End of Days, an epic confrontation which, according to tradition, will end with the death of both beasts, the flesh of which will then be served up as food for the Righteous.

I was able to trace virtually all references to the Leviathan in Scripture and in the *Meforshim*.¹ What emerges is something of an enigma. More questions than answers. Is the Leviathan a force for good in the world, or a force for evil? Why is the Leviathan associated so often with the End of Days? I would like to explore these questions, and ultimately come to a conclusion about the nature of the beast and why it is so important in our tradition.

1. An exhaustive search of all sources was made possible by sefaria.com. I would also point those readers who may be interested to Herman Melville's Introduction to *Moby Dick*, in which he lists pages and pages of references to whales and to the Leviathan gleaned from both religious and secular texts, from fiction, non-fiction and poetry. The idea of the Great White Whale as symbol is of course central to *Moby Dick*; short of reading the entire novel (highly recommended), I might point you to the chapter entitled “The Whiteness of the Whale.”

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Good or Evil?

The Case for Leviathan as a Force for Good

In determining whether the Leviathan is a force for good or a force for evil, let us first make the case for good. The first appearance of the Leviathan in the Torah is in *Bereishit* 1:21:

G-d created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And G-d saw that this was good.

Rashi explains that the “great sea monsters” (in Hebrew: “*taninim*”) are:

...the large fishes of the sea, and, according to the statement in the Aggadah, it means here the Leviathan and its consort which He created, male and female.

The Ramban concurs with Rashi:

And our Rabbis said that the great sea monsters are the Leviathan and his spouse ...

As does the Radak:

Still others believe that all the large sea monsters are known by the collective name of “Leviathan.”

In determining whether these *taninim*, which all the *Meforshim* identify as Leviathan, are good or evil, the simple reading of the text (*pshat*) is that “G-d saw that this was good.”

Rabbeinu Behaya, commenting on this same *pasuk*, takes the argument for good a step further:

The word לוייתן, “Leviathan,” means “connection.” It is a combination of the two words לויית חן, The intellect is perceived as joining the soul.

According to Rabbeinu Behaya, the Leviathan combines two important aspects of G-d’s creation which we normally consider fundamentally good: the soul and the intellect. As Rabbeinu Behaya points out, the word “Leviathan” contains the word “*levaya*,” which we typically translate as “funeral”; however, the word “*lavaya*” actually means “accompanying or escorting,” and refers to the lining up of friends and family into rows at a funeral to accompany/escort the deceased and the mourners. These ideas of *accompaniment* and *chesed* are seemingly part and parcel of the essence of the Leviathan, and can be traced back to the etymology of the word itself.

The Leviathan makes several appearances in *Tehillim*. In Psalm 148, which we recite every day at *Shacharit*, we find the following: “Praise the LORD, O you who are on earth, all sea monsters and ocean depths...” (verse 7). Once again, we see that “sea monsters” (in Hebrew: “*taninim*”) is a synonym for the Leviathan, and we note that the Leviathan, in this psalm, is praising G-d, giving thanks to Him for His lovingkindness which endures throughout the

cosmos (i.e., even into the depths of the ocean). Psalm 104, *Borchi Nafshi*, which we say as part of our *tefilla* on *Rosh Chodesh*, states: “There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport with” (verse 26). Here, in this psalm, the Leviathan is mentioned by name; the more generic term “*taninim*” is not used. And here the creature is characterized as a kind of pet or plaything for G-d, for Him to “sport with.” What better argument can we make for the goodness of the Leviathan? How can we in any way disparage G-d’s pet?

The *Gemara*, in *Bava Batra* 75a recounts two powerful *mesorot* involving the Leviathan, which, yet again, seem to link the mighty sea creature to goodness and holiness:

Rabba says that Rabbi Yohanan says: In the future, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will make a feast for the righteous from the flesh of the Leviathan, as it is stated: “The chaverim will make a feast ...”

And Rabba says that Rabbi Yohanan says: In the future, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will prepare a sukkah for the righteous from the skin of the Leviathan, as it is stated: “Can you fill his skin with barbed irons [besukkot]” (Job 40:31). If one is deserving of being called righteous, an entire sukkah is prepared for him from the skin of the Leviathan; if one is not deserving of this honor, a covering is prepared for his head, as it is stated: “Or his head with fish-spears” (Job 40:31).

The first *mesorah* that the *Gemara* cites is that the Leviathan (along with the *Shor HaBor*) will be served up as food for the righteous in the End of Days.² As the *Kedushat Levi* (*Kedushat Levi*, Numbers, Beha’alotcha 5) explains:

Our sages promised us that in the future, G-d Himself will invite the tzaddikim to a meal where both Leviathan and the Shor HaBor will be served. As a beverage, there will be wine saved for the occasion from Gan Eden.

According to tradition, at the time of creation, the Leviathan was originally created both male and female, but it soon became evident that given the chance to multiply, the species would wreak havoc on the world by consuming all its resources. G-d therefore killed the female Leviathan and salted it away for the aforementioned feast. There is an opinion that the more freshly killed male Leviathan will also be available for the Banquet, but Jews apparently prefer salted fish to fresh fish (cf. *Bava Batra* 74b), so the female Leviathan meat will be more in demand. This *Aggadah* has been interpreted allegorically by the *Akeidah*

2. As both the meat of the Leviathan and the meat of the *Shor HaBor* will be served at the Banquet for the Righteous, the *Gemara* in *Chullin* 67b discusses whether these are indeed kosher animals. The *Gemara* quotes from *Sefer Iyov*: “His armor is his pride” (Job 41:7) and “sharpest potsherds are under him” (Job 41:22) to prove that the Leviathan is a kosher fish, with scales (“armor”) and fins (“sharpest potsherds”). The *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Shimini* 7:1) also confirms that even though the *Shor HaBor* will be killed with a blow from the Leviathan’s tail, the Sages rule that it is nonetheless a “kosher slaughter.” And on a final somewhat humorous note, Rabbi J. David Bleich in *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, Vol. VI, Chapter 8, quips: “[there is] a tradition to the effect that both the Leviathan and the *Shor Habor* will be featured at this banquet. A folk witticism has it that the Leviathan will be available to those who will request fish since even then they will be unwilling to rely upon the *kashrut* of the meat.”

Yitzchak (51:1:7) to mean that what will be served to the *tzaddikim* are: Torah (well-aged wine) and *Mitzvoth* (the salted meat of the female Leviathan).

The second *mesorah* mentioned in the *Gemara* has to do with the skin of the Leviathan, which is clearly associated with a *mitzvah* (i.e., making a *sukkah*), and, again, with a reward for the Righteous in the End of Days. Surely if the Leviathan were not a holy creature, it would not qualify for such a use. Tangentially, the *Shnei Luchot HaBrit* (*Torah Sh'Bikhtav, Toldot, Torah Ohr* 114) cites a *Midrash* which states that the skins used to make the *ketonot ohr* for Adam and Eve, to cover their nakedness, were taken from the original female Leviathan; again, a use of the skin for a holy purpose (i.e., *tzniut*).

There a custom when we leave the *sukkah* for the last time on the last day of *Sukkot* to recite the following prayer:

May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that just as I have fulfilled [the mitzvah] and dwelled in the sukkah, so may I merit in the coming year to dwell in the sukkah of the skin of Leviathan. (Artscroll siddur, page 725)

Indeed, the Rema cites this as a widespread custom. (cf. *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, siman* 667).

I believe I have provided a number of compelling arguments in favour of the thesis that the Leviathan is very much a symbol of goodness and holiness. As one might imagine, this idea is corroborated in numerous Chassidic and mystical sources. I will suffice to mention two. The *sefer Shaar HaEmunah V'Yesod HaChassidut* by Rav Gershon Chanoch Henoah of Radzin, states (7:2): “Leviathan represents the highest levels of *Hokhmah* – Wisdom, which are concealed in the upper waters.” And the *Likutei Moharan*, which is attributed to Rav Nachman of Bratslav, proclaims: “Leviathan alludes to *Malkhut*” (Part II, 7:10:10). *Hokhmah* and *Malkhut*, both emanations of the *Sefirot*, are, from a Kabbalistic perspective, all good!

The Case for Leviathan as a Force for Evil

Let's now present the opposing argument: that the Leviathan is a force for evil in this world. We begin by going back to the *Gemara* that we cited earlier, a little bit higher up on the same page, *Bava Batra* 75a:

When Rav Dimi came from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia, he said that Rabbi Yohanan said: When the Leviathan is hungry, he produces breath from his mouth and thereby boils all of the waters in the depths And if the Leviathan placed its head in the Garden of Eden, no creature could withstand his foul smell, as it is stated: “He makes the sea like a seething mixture ...”

We have in this *Gemara* an idea that the Leviathan is evil in spite of itself. Large and powerful as it is, it is by nature destructive. Therefore, its breath boils the water and its foul smell is unbearable to other creatures. These may be unintentional vices, but they are destructive nonetheless.

The Leviathan figures prominently in two books in *Tanach*: indirectly in *Sefer Yonah* and directly in *Sefer Iyov*. Even though “a big fish” (i.e., the one that swallows Yonah) is of course a

central character in the story in *Sefer Yonah*, this “big fish” – which has its own set of *Aggadic* traditions attached to it – is not the Leviathan.³ The Leviathan does not actually appear in *Sefer Yonah*, but the *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Nach* 550:2) relates the following curious *Midrash*:

The fish [that swallowed Yonah] said to Yonah, “Don’t you know that my day has come to be fed into the mouth of the Leviathan?” The fish brought him to the Leviathan, and Yonah shouted to him, “Leviathan!” The Leviathan saw Yonah and fled from him a distance of two days’ journey. Then Yonah said to the fish, “I saved you from the mouth of the Leviathan, now show me everything which in the seas and the depths.”

The Leviathan is presented in this *Midrash* as a frightening beast, a bully if you will, that instills fear and trembling in the “big fish” that has swallowed Yonah. Yonah’s ability to save the big fish by scaring away the bigger fish ultimately inspires a debt of gratitude which Yonah requests payment on.

In *Sefer Iyov*, which the *Gemara* that we cited earlier quotes, the Leviathan is portrayed as wild and untameable. Only G-d has the power and strength to tame it. As such, G-d challenges Iyov, saying (Job 40:25): “Can you draw out the Leviathan by a fishhook? Can you press down his tongue with a rope?” Whereas the *Gemara* argued that these verses are an allusion to the *sukkah* that will be made from the beast’s skin, the *Malbim* has a very different reading of these verses. For him, they demonstrate that both the Leviathan (and the Behemoth) are not only wild and untameable, but actually have sinister intentions. Here is a condensation of the *Malbim*’s commentary on Job 40:15–25:

Continuing the charade, G-d asks Iyov how he intends to deal with the two most powerful and imperious beasts He created, the Behemoth, that consumes all vegetation, leaving nothing behind for the other land beasts, and the Leviathan, which preys on all the other sea creatures Beyond discipline or training, the Leviathan is the embodiment of ferocious and ungovernable violence, and it knows it, and does not care.

For the *Malbim*, the Leviathan and Behemoth are archetypes of beings that exploit their power over others for their own purposes. And, in his interpretation, this evil is done consciously and intentionally.

We can now understand the prophecy of punishment in Isaiah 27:1:

3. There is a popular misconception that the big fish (*dag gadol*) that swallowed Yonah was indeed the Leviathan, but this is not supported by the *pshat*. The fish in *Sefer Yonah* is never referred to as *Tanin* or *Livyatan*, the terms that, as we have seen, are most commonly used to refer to the Leviathan, but only as a *Dag Gadol*. As well, none of the major *meforshim* mention that this *dag gadol* is the Leviathan. The *ArtScroll Book of Yonah*, which draws on the Vilna Gaon’s *Aderes Eliyahu*, interprets Yonah’s time in the belly of the fish as a metaphor for the soul’s journey into *Gehinnon*, which facilitates Yonah’s repentance, and “re-birth” when, in an act resembling child-birth, the fish spits him out onto dry land. His time inside the belly of the fish serves as a purification process for Yonah, where he can properly repent for the sin of trying to evade his prophetic mission. Here we see a big fish – even if it’s not the actual Leviathan – acting as a catalyst for repentance and purification, which would certainly support the argument that big fish (like the Leviathan) were created as forces for good in the world!

In that day, the Lord will punish - with His great, cruel, mighty sword - Leviathan the Elusive (or Stretching) Serpent and Leviathan the Twisting (or Crooked) Serpent. He will slay the Dragon of the Sea.

Here the Leviathan is clearly described in negative terms, and is deserving of punishment. It also appears that there may be two versions of the Leviathan ... the Twisting or Crooked version and the Elusive or Stretching version. Based on their descriptors, neither version seems to be too appealing. Our previous conception of the Leviathan as a good and holy creature seems to have been shattered. But it gets worse.

The Ibn Ezra on this *pasuk* in Isaiah states:

Some are of the opinion that the Leviathan, the stretching serpent, and the Leviathan, the crooked serpent, are both land animals, and are used figuratively for the kings of the land: Assyria or Babylon.

In other words, the two variations of the Leviathan are symbolic of two evil empires (Assyria and Babylon), both of which historically wreaked havoc on the Jewish people. Moreover, the *Midrash Tanchuma* on *Parshat Va'era* 3:2, compares the Leviathan to Egypt, yet another evil empire which inflicted harm upon the Jews, arguing that both Pharaoh and the Leviathan possess the qualities of a snake.

The *Akeidat Yitzchak* (60:1:3), commenting on *Bava Batra* 74, sums up the case for the Leviathan as a force for evil, as the embodiment of materialism and animalistic desire:

If the most powerful union of body and spirit in this universe, Leviathan, would be allowed to roam completely unfettered, it could destroy the entire civilisation, G-d forbid. [Similarly] if human intelligence were to be used exclusively to advance Man's materialistic aspirations [and animalistic desires], the results could be disastrous.

Therefore, it is fitting that this evil creature be punished, as we have already seen in Isaiah 27:1. This is reinforced in Psalm 74:14, where we note that G-d "crushed the heads of the Leviathan." All this violence emanating from G-d and directed at the giant sea creature must be an indicator that it is evil and sinful! Perhaps even the skinning of the Leviathan at the End of Days which, we previously argued, seemed to be a proof of the Leviathan's inherent goodness and holiness (in that his skin was being used for a *mitzvah*) needs to be revisited, since there too the end is violent (i.e., the Leviathan is skinned).

A Possible Conclusion

So is the Leviathan good or evil? Perhaps it's not so simple. Perhaps the message is that things in our world are not so clear cut. Good and evil can co-exist in the same creature.

Or perhaps it's not an issue of good versus evil at all. It could be that we missed the point, the most obvious point, that the message of the Leviathan is related not to its moral character but to its size. The Leviathan is big! Big beyond our comprehension. Beyond our imagination. Beyond our ken. It is so large that it extends outside the limits of our perception

and apprehension; we literally cannot take it all in at once, it is beyond the scope of our peripheral vision. The *Gemara* (*Bava Batra* 74b) describes the reaction of Rabbi Yehoshua to seeing the eyes of the Leviathan, peeking out over the surface of the water:

The Sages taught: There was an incident involving Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, who were traveling on a ship, and Rabbi Eliezer was sleeping and Rabbi Yehoshua was awake. Rabbi Yehoshua trembled, and Rabbi Eliezer awoke. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: What is this, Yehoshua; for what reason did you tremble? Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: I saw a great light in the sea. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Perhaps you saw the eyes of the Leviathan, as it is written: "And his eyes are like the eyelids of the morning" (Job 41:10).

If witnessing the eyes – just the eyes – of the beast provokes this type of reaction, one can only imagine the type of reaction one might have from seeing the entire body, if indeed it is even possible. With awe and wonderment and terror, we might exclaim: how is it possible? how is it possible?

And so we find ourselves repeatedly asking the same question, with the same feeling of terror and awe, in the context of our lives and our history. How is it possible ... the Holocaust? How is it possible ... *tzaddik v'rah lo* (i.e., that bad things happen to good people)? How is it possible ... *rasha v'tov lo* (i.e., that good things happen to bad people)? How is it possible ... the suffering and death of innocent children? And so on, and so on. Questions that don't have an answer. Questions so big that we can't fathom them. Many Rabbis, including the Rambam,⁴ have struggled with these questions. I would like to suggest that the symbol for these big, unfathomable questions is the Leviathan. And, just as the Leviathan, as we have argued, embodies both evil and good, it is a symbol not only for the large, disturbing questions but also for the large delightful questions, such as: how is it possible ... the creation of the world in all its glorious detail and splendor? and how is it possible ... the birth of a perfectly formed human being? and so on. Like the magnificent sea creature, these questions are beyond our comprehension, beyond our imagination, so large that they simply boggle the mind.

But G-d promises us that all of these questions will indeed be answered, that everything will become crystal clear and illuminated to us at the End of Days, in the time of the *Moshiach*, as we read in *Tehillim* 36:10, "in Your light we will see light." As the *Nevi'im* write:

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d, as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:9)

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d's glory, as the waters cover the sea. (Habakkuk 2:14).

This "knowledge," promised to us at the End of Days, is the knowledge that we seek, the "knowledge of G-d's glory," the vast knowledge, vast like "the sea," of things that are currently unknown and unknowable to us. In the time of the *Moshiach*, we will, *kav'yachol*, see the world through G-d's eyes; He will give us the requisite knowledge and awareness to make

4. See Rambam on *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:1:1.

sense of these large and difficult questions, which in our current state are impenetrable to reason. And how will G-d effect this? How will he open our eyes? Fittingly, by feeding us the flesh of the Leviathan at the Banquet of the Righteous.⁵ The great sea creature, which, as I have argued, is the living embodiment of our big, unfathomable questions, will be cut up into small, digestible servings for us to ingest and digest. In other words, metaphorically, the big questions in life will be broken down and made comprehensible to us. We will literally get under the skin of these questions; when we sit in the sukkah made out of the skin of the Leviathan, we will come to know the Leviathan outside-in and inside-out; we will, in a sense, be fully immersed in the Leviathan. So, too, will we, in the End of Days, basking in the glow of Divine knowledge, be fully enlightened to all the mysteries of the universe, and merit a brand new understanding of all the large questions, the painful and perplexing questions, in our lives.

5. Reinforcing my idea that the meat of the Leviathan will be our conduit to understanding “G-d’s glory” is Rabbeinu Behaya’s long commentary on *Bereishit* 1:21, in which he posits that the Banquet of the End of Days will provide both material and spiritual pleasure. As he writes: “We know that spiritual forces are awakened and strengthened through the intake of physical food. The idea behind this feast therefore is that ... it would be extremely satisfying from a gastronomic point of view, [and] the spiritual benefits derived from it would be commensurate.”