

Sacred Monsters: Mysterious and Mythical Creatures of Scripture, Talmud and Midrash

By Natan Slifkin

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Unicorns, mermaids, dragons, and phoenixes may feel at home in fantasy literature, but references to these and other mysterious creatures go back much further in history. The Bible, Talmud, and Midrash refer to many such strange creatures. In this beautifully designed and richly illustrated book, Natan Slifkin, the famed "zoo rabbi" and author of *Seasons of Life*, *Nature's Song*, and *The Challenge of Creation*, examines a host of mythic and not so mythic creatures from both their Torah descriptions and modern zoological research, giving us a new perspective on the interface between science, myth, and Torah thought. Greatly expanding on a prior book, *Mysterious Creatures*, Rabbi Slifkin explores conflicts between the Talmud and science in the context of Torah mysteries of zoology. The Talmud and Midrash discuss a wide range of bizarre creatures, including mermaids, unicorns, griffins, dragons, sea-serpents and phoenixes, as well as strange biological concepts such as spontaneous generation. *Sacred Monsters* discusses these cases in detail and brings a range of different approaches for understanding them. It is an essential book for any student or educator who has ever struggled with conflicts between the Talmud and science. Strikingly designed, and including extraordinary photographs and illustrations, this is a truly stimulating work. The goal of this book is not merely to persuade readers that the Talmud and Midrash are worthy of their interest. It is important to discuss these creatures for the same reason that the Sages of the Talmud and Torah scholars throughout the ages saw fit to discuss them — namely, that they are also part of Torah. Torah is not just about history, religious ritual and laws of interpersonal conduct. It is an extremely broad field of study that encompasses many different topics. Some areas of the Torah are more popular or more relevant than others, but we should not neglect the others. The animals of this book are discussed in classical Jewish literature for a variety of reasons. With some, such as the tachash, it is a matter of understanding the construction of the Tabernacle. With others, such as the mermaid, the goal is to clarify a matter of law. And with yet others, such as Leviathan, the point is to convey various theological messages. Furthermore, there is a particular pressing need for a book of this nature. When people encounter references to such creatures in the Talmud, they can be left with anything from gnawing questions to a severe crisis of faith. Did such creatures really exist? Did the Sages of the Talmud really believe in

such creatures? What are we to make of it? This book studies the history of the various approaches that have traditionally been taken by Torah scholars in resolving such issues.

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Editorial Review

Review

Rabbi Natan Slifkin's new book, *Sacred Monsters*, is a very impressive work, combining exceptionally broad scholarship in such varied fields as science, classical literature, and the Jewish tradition. It provides fascinating insights into the literature of legendary creatures and their possible origins. In this particular book, the author has managed to avoid the many pitfalls awaiting anyone treating the intersection between science and Torah. --Professor Yehudah Leo Levi, Rector Emeritus, Jerusalem College of Technology, Author, *Torah and Science*

Rabbi Natan Slifkin's newest book is a delightful mix of Talmudic teachings, zoological science, and historical investigations. Anyone who ever doubted the comprehensiveness of our Torah will now be convinced that *kulah bah* -- there is a place in it even for 'sacred monsters.' Rabbi Slifkin is to be commended for once again offering us a work which answers questions, informs, and, in this case, even entertains. -- Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersch Weinreb, Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

References in the Talmud and Midrash to curious zoological phenomena are often more mystifying than the creatures themselves. Rabbi Slifkin's thorough scholarship, so well proven in his previous works, comes through once again. Even more important than providing answers to thorny questions surrounding the subjects of the book's title, this work helps the student plot a steady course through the sometimes churning waters of the Sages' science. How much did they rely on the science of their day? When did they--and when did they not--mean to be taken literally? Rabbi Slifkin provides answers consistent with the spirit of our *mesorah*. By doing so, the profundity of the Torah of our Sages shines with even greater brilliance. --Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, Author, *Maharal: Be'er HaGolah*

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About the Author

Born in Manchester, England, Rabbi Natan Slifkin studied there at Yeshivas Shaarei Torah. He then moved to Israel, where he spent many years in study, at Yeshivas Midrash Shmuel and the Mir Yeshivah. He then taught Talmud and Jewish philosophy at Ohr Somayach Institutions, where he received ordination, and now teaches an extensive Zoo Torah course at Yeshivat Lev HaTorah and Midreshet Moriah Seminary for

Women. Rabbi Slifkin has written extensively for the Daf Yomi Advancement Forum and many newspapers, websites and journals. He has been invited as guest lecturer to Bar Ilan University and to numerous synagogues worldwide. Several years ago, Rabbi Slifkin began teaching about the relationship between Judaism and the animal kingdom at the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo. He then developed the Zoo Torah program, which he has since successfully operated in New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Baltimore, St. Louis, Atlanta, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and San Diego. This program has led Rabbi Slifkin to be featured in television and radio shows as well as in countless newspapers and journals. Rabbi Slifkin has a lifelong fascination with wildlife and has kept a wide variety of exotic pets, including iguanas and tarantulas! His studies of wildlife have led him hiking extensively in Israel, scuba diving to coral reefs in Eilat, on safari in Kenya, whale-watching in California, and behind the scenes at numerous zoological facilities worldwide.

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