

Becoming Fish

Category: Bamidbar, Be'halos'cha

Where does gefilte fish come from, and what makes a fish so Jewish?

A Fishy Question

Last week after services, a seven-year-old boy approached me with his mother. He had a question: Is there a commandment to eat gefilte fish on Shabbos?

I must admit that it was a breath of fresh air. Adults want to talk about the war in Gaza or the rising anti semitism in the United States, so talking about gefilte fish was a pleasure.

I answered that it is customary to eat fish on Shabbos, but it doesn't have to be gefilte fish. I don't want a Jew to lose his connection to Judaism because he doesn't like the smell of gefilte fish. The tradition of gefilte fish stems from Eastern Europe, where Jews were desperately poor and they needed to divide a small fish between an entire family. They began making fish patties which resembled meat patties — they would mix it with flour, onions and eggs, and there would be enough to go around.

But eating fish on Shabbos is actually a mitzvah. Jewish law says that “it is good to eat fish at every meal, unless fish are not healthy for you or you do not enjoy them (Hilchos Shabbos 242:7)”

What is the source of this custom? On a basic level, it stems from the Talmudic era, when fish was the cuisine of the wealthy. It was considered more of a delicacy than meat, and it was more expensive. Since it is a mitzvah to enjoy delicacies on Shabbos, it became customary to eat fish, and it seems to have been the main course of the Shabbos meal.

Indeed, throughout Jewish history, Jews have made every effort to have fish on Shabbos. The mitzvah was so precious to the Jews that they made sure to settle in coastal cities where fish was more readily available. The Talmud tells miraculous stories about people who went out of their way to do this mitzvah, and the non-Jewish fisherman, who also knew about the importance of the custom, would raise

the prices each week.

These are nice stories, but we still don't have a satisfactory explanation for eating fish on Shabbos. Why indeed is it so important to eat fish? What makes fish unique?

The Deeper Fish

G-d created fish on the Thursday of the Six Days of Creation. They were the first living creatures to be created, and G-d blessed them to be "fruitful and multiply and fill the waters (Bireishis 1:22). On Friday, G-d created Man and blessed him as well, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land" (1:28). Then, on Shabbat, "G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it" (2:3). When we eat fish on Shabbos, we unite all three blessings: man, fish and shabbos.

Additionally: The numerical value of fish (גף) is 7. Therefore, we eat it on the seventh day of the week, Shabbos.

A third factor is that our forefather Jacob compared us to fish. In his blessing to his grandchildren, he said, "*Veyidgu larov*, may they multiply like fish throughout the land" (Vayechi 48:16). One reason we are compared to fish is because of our relationship with Torah. Just as fish cannot live without water, a Jew cannot live without Torah. Interestingly, when it rains, fish come to the surface and stick their mouths out of the water, attempting to catch droplets. Likewise, even a Jew steeped in Torah is always searching for ways to learn more. And Shabbos is the time to learn Torah — if only because it is the day of the week the Torah was given.

And then there is the Kabbalistic reason:

Judaism believes in reincarnation, and Kabbalah tells us that the souls of the righteous are reincarnated in fish. Why fish?

Fish have a unique "extra-kosher" status. They do not need to be slaughtered, they do not need to be salted, and we don't check their organs for faults that could create kosher problems. A fish could be eaten as-is, and there is no possibility that a *shochet* will 'mess up' and make the fish unkosher. Kosher species of fish are fundamentally kosher — it is not something that can be taken

from them.

And on Shabbos, a Jew receives an extra “additional soul” with the spiritual power to elevate the souls in the fish that he consumes at the Shabbos table.

Remembering the Fish

This week, in Parshas Behaaloscha, we find a surprising turn of events. In the first half of the parsha, all is well. Moshe prepares the people to enter the land of Israel, and he invites his father-in-law to join the trip: “Moshe said to Chovav his father-in-law, ‘We are traveling to the place which G-d promised to give us. Come with us and you will benefit, because G-d promised lots of good...’ (Behaaloscha 10:29). Moshe sounds very optimistic.

But in chapter eleven, everything seems to turn over: “The people were complaining,” they became cantankerous. “Who will feed us meat? We remember eating fish for free in Egypt; we are sick of this rotten bread!”

The people wanted 4th-of-July steaks; they were sick of eating manna day in and day out. They began waxing nostalgic about the fish they received for free in Egypt. If it was free, you can already imagine its quality, but with the passage of time they began to recall it as a delicacy.

In the end, they received their meat. G-d said, “Get ready, you will have meat for a month — until it comes out of your noses!” They were given the quail, but the whole business didn’t end well.

Despite all this, there was one thing they didn’t receive in the desert: fish. On Shabbos, when we eat fish, we thank G-d for delicacies which we didn’t even have in the desert, at a time when we had food made in heaven — quite literally. In the desert it was a reason to complain, but today it is a reason to be grateful.

But there is something more profound as well.

The Talmud says that the sea is like a parallel universe: everything on land has a counterpart in the sea (Chullin 127a). The difference is that the land creatures live out in the open. They live independently, and each feels like he exists because of his own self-worth. Creatures of the sea, however, live concealed lives. We can’t easily see them, and more importantly, they are fundamentally tied to the

water for their sustenance and existence. In Kabbalah, the physical world is called “the revealed world” and is compared to land, while spiritual worlds, where G-dliness is more apparent, is compared to the sea and called “the concealed world.”

This is the true shabbos-fish connection:

During the week, you go to work and employ your own wisdom and business acumen. You are a know-it-all and capable business person. But on Shabbos, you close your phone, take off your work clothes and enter the Shabbos atmosphere. You disconnect from the world and jump into the water, where all the noise is gone. Underwater is silent and peaceful. You enter a meaningful world where G-d is more revealed and a more fundamental part of our lives.

It's a world that is concealed from the outside. The non-Jews can't comprehend the beauty of Shabbos; they don't understand how we Jews can eat gefilte fish and even enjoy it. What they don't realize is that we are not enjoying the gefilte fish per-se but the “additional soul” that is represented in the fish.

On Shabbos, we are like fish in water.