

Spice of Shabbos

Reasons for eating fish at each of the Seudos Shabbos

In this week's parsha, Vayechi we learn from Yakov's bracha to Ephraim and Menashe (48:16) that the malach who protects him from all evil should bless them and they should be called by his name and the names of Yitzchok and Yakov: **וידגו לרוב בקרב הארץ** and they should multiply like the fish. Rashi explains that they should be like the fish that multiply **ואין עין הרע שולטת בהם**, the evil eye has no effect upon them.

This is an appropriate week to start discussing the custom to eat fish on Shabbos, a custom which has its source in the Gemara (Shabbos 118B) which discusses the possuk in Yeshaya (58:13): **וקראת לשבת ענג**

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav that whoever gives pleasure to Shabbos is granted all of his wishes as the posuk says: **והתענג על ה' ויתן לך משאלות לבך**, how do we give pleasure to Shabbos? Rav Yehuda says in the name of Rav, by eating certain foods including fish. Rav Chiya bar Ashi says in the name of Rav that even a small thing done to honor Shabbos is Oneg such as "kasa dharsana" which Rashi explains are small fish fried with flour.

We see how significant this custom to eat fish is. Even someone who can't afford a big fish should prepare small fish. We all remember the story of Yosef Mokir Shabbos (Shabbos 119A) who always bought a large fish for Shbbos and merited tremendous wealth as a reward. Great Tzadikim were very careful to keep this custom, in fact many even salted the fish themselves. The source for this is the Gemara in Shabbos (119A) that says **רבא מלח שיבוטא** Rava salted the fish. More recently the Kamarner rebbe ((Nesiv Emuna 6:5) describes how Moreinu Yakov Yitzchok of Lublin taught his student, the Kamarner's uncle Rabeinu Zvi Hirsh of Zidichov, the secrets to salting the Shabbos fish.

The brachos of the Shabbos fish are like a 3 ply rope

The Bnai Yisochor (Shaboso 1:11) explains the reason for eating fish on Shabbos. In Creation bracha only appears for three things and on three consecutive days. First, the fish were created on the 5th day. As the possuk (1:22) says: **"ויברך אותם אלקים לאמר פרו ורבו ומלאו את המים"**. Second, man was created on the 6th day, and as the possuk (1:28) says: **"ויברך אותם אלקים ויאמר להם אלקים פרו ורבו ומלאו את הארץ"**. Third, Shabbos which was created on the 7th day, and the possuk (2:3) says: **"ויברך אלקים את יום השביעי ויקדש אותו"**.

So on the 7th day man who was created on the 6th day eats fish which was created on the 5th day. This brings together Shabbos, man and fish each of which have bracha mentioned when they were created, this fulfilling the possuk (Koheles (4:12): **"והחוט המשולש לא במהרה ינתק"**, bringing a large bracha onto the man.

The Bnai Yisroel adds a beautiful thought from the pesukim in Tehilim (23:2) which we sing in the Shabbos Zmiros: "בנאות דשא ירביצנו על מי מנוחות ינהלני" - דשא represents דגים. When we combine all three then we can enjoy the special menucha of Shabbos.

Bnai Yisroel are compared to fish which can't live out of the water

I'd like to add a new reason for eating fish. The Gemara in Avoda Zara (3B) explains the possuk in (Chavakuk 1:14): "ותעשה אדם כדגי הים" – You have made men like the fish in the ocean. Why are humans compared to fish? Because just like fish if they leave the water they die, similarly man if he stops learning Torah and doing mitzvos, dies.

This Gemara fits beautifully with the Gemara in Berachos (61B) there was an evil decree against the Jews forbidding them from learning Torah, Papus ben Yehuda found Rebbe Akiva gathering Jews to learn torah with them. He asked Rebbe Akiva why he wasn't afraid of the decree.

He answered with the parable of the fox on the shore of the river watching the fish running from place to place. He asked them what they were afraid of and they explained they were afraid of man's nets. He suggested that they come on land and live together with him as their ancestors had done.

They told him: Are you the animal that is considered the smartest animal? You are a fool – if we are afraid when we are where we live, if we leave here and go to a place where we would die, we would certainly be afraid. Similarly, when Jews learn torah which sustains them they are certainly safer than when they stop learning.

The fox's Ayin Hara cannot prevail over Bnai Yisroel

When Yakov said וידגו לרוב בקרב הארץ, Rashi explains: "כדגים הללו שפרים ורבים ואין עין" הרע שולטת בהם. Perhaps we can explain this as follows, the fox was walking along the shore of the river trying to convince the fish to leave the water is like the Yetzer Hara trying to get us to stop learning. So Yakov gave a bracha to Ephraim and Menashe that they should be like the fish that multiply and the Ayin Hara of the fox should not prevail over them, that they should not stop learning Torah which is what keeps them alive.

In the Medrash Rabbah (97:3) on this posuk: "וידגו לרוב", it says that just like fish that live on water, as soon as a drop of water reaches them, they absorb it as if they were so thirsty that they had never had water before, so too Bnai Yisroel who live in the waters of Torah, when they hear a new Torah thought, they absorb it like it was the first Torah they ever learned.

Perhaps that is why Moshe Rabeinu who taught us the Torah was born in Adar, the month whose mazal is fish, because the essence of his Neshama is Torah and his whole life was only Torah as the posuk in Shmos (2:10) says he was called Moshe because he was drawn from the water.

We all know that Shabbos is a special time to learn Torah, as the Tur (OC 290) says The Torah asked Hashem what will happen to it when the Jews go into Eretz Yisroel and they are given fields and vineyards? Hashem said I have a special partner for you called Shabbos and on Shabbos the Jews won't work and will be busy with you.

We eat fish on Shabbos to show that even though we work all week, we must learn Torah on Shabbos. We eat fish at each of the Shabbos Seudos as a reminder of the gemara that we are compared to fish, because just like fish cannot survive out of the water, if we stop learning Torah and doing Mitzvos we cannot exist.

The Neshomos of Tzadikim return as fish

Another reason that people know for eating fish on Shabbos is based on the Megaleh Amukos in Vasechanan, based on the Zohar, that the Neshomos of Tzaddikim that have to return to this world for a tikun, come as fish because fish can be eaten without being slaughtered, a procedure through which they could become a nevaila. The Zohar says it is because the Chachomim are referred to as "Asifa"

But why do we have to provide their tikun specifically on Shabbos, why not during the week? We can understand the reason by looking into the words of the Zohar cited by the Megaleh Amukos. Fish do not need shechita, they just need to be gathered and can be eaten as it says (Beraishis 49:33) **ויגוע ויאסף אל עמיו** . Fish live in water and Talmidai Chachamim live in Torah and if they leave Torah they die.

The Zohar is teaching is that Talmidai Chachamim return as fish who can get their tikun without the pain of shechita because fish live in water and this provides a meritorious defense for these Zadikim whose lives were immersed in Torah.

As we said in the previous reason, we eat fish on Shabbos because they live in water to remind us that we are compared to fish since we can only live with Torah. We eat fish on Shabbos for a tikun for Neshomos of tzadikim that return as fish since Shabbos is a day when we can really devote ourselves to learning, so by eating fish that remind us of learning Torah, we can be mesaken the neshomos if the tzadikim who learned Torah and now only need the smallest tikun.

This Shabbos when we eat the fish, we should remember that we are incorporating the bracha of Creation, protecting ourselves from Ayin Hara and helping to be mesaken the neshomos of Tzadikim. We should of course also remember that it is not only eating the fish and the other Shabbos delicacies that is important but also using out extra free time to learn Torah.