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FISH AND JUDAISM

"I am to my beloved as my beloved is to me (*Shir HaShirim* 6:3)." As a major theme during the month of *Elul*, this phrase represents the loving relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. As *Rosh HaShanah* approaches we must cry out to G-d as our tears will wash away all of our sins. Through this cleansing of our souls we are attempting to influence the events of the upcoming year. *Rosh HaShanah* is the climax of our *teshuvah*. We attain a level of closeness to G-d, as His willingness to accept our prayers and tears bears no bounds. The ten days of repentance mark the connection between *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur* in that we are building ourselves up to that epic most climactic moment of our *teshuvah*, namely *Yom Kippur*. On this dynamic, G-d fearing, and most awesome day, G-d seals the fate of each and every Jew, in either life or G-d forbid, death. Within these high holidays, some powerful symbolism exists which ostensibly focuses around the major themes of the Jewish nation. A fascinating role is played by fish in reminding Jews of the significance of this holy period.

Fish play a significant role in the traditions of Judaism. For example, on *Rosh HaShanah* fish are an important source of food and their presence is symbolic in the *Tashlich* services. Many parables, as well as symbolism, associate fish with the Jewish people and illustrate the special relationship between the Jewish people and the Torah. It is customary to eat foods on *Rosh HaShanah* which symbolize our hope that the year will bring good fortune and success. *Rosh HaShanah*, one of the holiest days of the year, is the "head" of the year for the Jewish people. Fish are eaten on *Rosh HaShanah*; just as they multiply very quickly, we request from G-d that we too shall be fruitful and multiply.¹ Furthermore, fish are submerged under the water and thus are protected from the *ayin hara*, the evil eye. We pray that G-d should protect us from the evil eye, as well.² Gefilte fish is eaten because the word "gefilte" means filled and we hope all of our needs are fulfilled. Other Jewish communities eat cross fish, as its Hebrew translation, *karot*, means to cut off, in the hope that our enemies are cut off from the Jewish nation.³ Another Jewish custom is to eat the head of the fish, as part of the prayer that Israel be at the head of the nations, and not the tail. The head of the fish also represents the hope to be the "head", pious, and exemplary for all. In contrast, the Moroccan Jews avoid eating fish, on *Rosh HaShanah*. This is due to the similarity between the Hebrew word for fish (*dag*) and the Hebrew word for troubles (*daagah*).

The throwing away of our sins is symbolized in the *Tashlich* services by the tossing of bread crumbs into a body of water. *Tashlich* is recited near a body of water that contains fish. The presence of fish is symbolic, as it states in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 129:21, "Just as fish are caught in a net, we are caught in the net of death and judgment. The realization of this concept should make us think of repenting."¹ The emptying of pockets during *Tashlich* represents the passing over of our sins to the fish. *Midrash Rabbah Parshat Vayeichei* states: "Just as fish who live in water nevertheless drink with thirst every drop of rain that falls as

though they had never before tasted water, so too, Israel, who thrive on the waters of Torah, nevertheless drink with thirst each new saying of Torah." Therefore, through this comparison, during the *Tashlich* services while standing before water containing fish, we pray that Israel merits in its "thirst for Torah learning."⁴ During the dangerous times of Roman persecution, in defending the study of Torah, Rabbi Akiva used this parable: A fox tried to convince some fish to come onto the shore because they were in danger in the water as it was filled with nets. The fish replied that if they were not safe in their own natural habitat, how safe could they possibly be on the shore?⁵ All the more so, Rabbi Akiva explains to his students that the study of Torah is a tremendous part of our life and without it the danger is unmatched. Rabbi Akiva said that just as fish cannot live without water, he could not live without Torah. Without Torah he would be just like a fish out of water. The following statement is another significant prayer during the *Tashlich* services: Fish have no eyelids therefore their eyes are always open. We pray that the eternally compassionate eye of G-d will always watch over us and guard us from evil.⁶ Observant Jews go to a river containing fish because, "Man is likened to a fish who may be caught in the net of troubles if he fails to watch his conduct." Just as fish are prey to nets and hooks, so too, we are in danger of the hooks and nets of the *yeitzer hara* (evil inclination). Without Torah observance we are defenseless. The ultimate freedom from these hooks and nets of sin lies in sincere repentance.⁴ Rav Moshe Isserles saw the *Tashlich* ceremony as a tribute to G-d, because fish were the first witnesses to His work of creation, which began on *Rosh HaShanah*.⁷

The comparison of fish with the Jewish people and their future is of great significance. Fish live in the depths of the sea, therefore they are considered intriguing and mysterious. Because fish lay many eggs they are associated with fertility. Jacob blesses Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Menasheh, saying: "Let them multiply in the midst of the earth." The Hebrew word for "multiply", *veyidgu*, is obtained from fish (*dagim*).⁶ When Jacob blessed Joseph's two sons and all of their descendants he compared them to fish. As it is stated in *Gemara Berachot* 20a, just as the fish are protected and camouflaged by the sea, keeping away the evil eye, so too, the evil eye has no affect over the "seed of Joseph," the Jewish people, because of this blessing.

Fish, human beings, and the Sabbath, are linked as a foundation of blessings in the story of creation, Genesis 1:22, as follows: "And G-d blessed them." It is a household custom to eat fish on the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week as the numerical equivalent of "*dag*" is seven.⁶ The largest of all the sea creatures that G-d created is the Leviathan. The Sages state that in the future G-d will feed the righteous from the flesh of the Leviathan. The Leviathan fish symbolizes the hidden Torah concepts which will be revealed to the righteous by G-d. These new revelations, which have never been discussed with anyone since the six days of creation, will be enjoyed by the *tzadikim*.⁸

Fish also bring good luck. Pisces, which is the Zodiac sign for the month of *Adar*, is also when the lucky and joyful holiday of *Purim* takes place. Eastern European boys were named Fishl, which is a name considered to be lucky and keeps away the evil eye.⁶

The great *tzadik*, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, inspired people to avoid the terrible sin of *loshon hara*, evil gossip and slander. He noted that even if one is righteous, as well as scrupulous in all areas of mitzvah observance and Torah learning, if he speaks ill of others, "He will not escape the hook of punishment." Man and fish are compared as follows. When a fish sticks its tongue to grab the bait, it is immediately hooked. The body of the fish may still be dangling

freely, yet, the more the fish wiggles the deeper it is hooked. The fish's death is sealed by its tongue.⁵ A message well delivered.

In *Sefer* Jonah - the "great Fish" was created by G-d to save Jonah from drowning, as well as from himself. When Jonah was trying to flee from G-d's eyes, a great fish acting as G-d's messenger swallowed him. According to Rav Tarfon, Jonah's entrance into the great fish was compared to entering a synagogue. Jonah stood in this great fish in order to pray comfortably for G-d's mercy. Jonah resided in the fish's belly for three days and three nights until he accepted his mission from G-d. Rashi mentions that Jonah was originally swallowed by a male fish whose insides were quite spacious. Being comfortable, prayer did not readily enter Jonah's mind. This angered G-d and the male fish was commanded to spit Jonah into a pregnant female fish, in which Jonah was uncomfortable because of the lack of space due to the abundance of eggs. Jonah, now uncomfortable, finally began to pray. However, according to Rabbi Elazar, Jonah was never transferred into another fish. The only difference was that "*dag*" refers to a live fish where "*daagah*" refers to a dead one. Jonah, comfortable in the live fish, did not feel a need to pray. Since Jonah failed to pray, G-d killed this fish, making it food for the other fish. Consequently, Jonah prayed. According to Rav Bachya, when it says G-d designated a "large Fish," this refers not to the size but to the age of the fish. This specific fish was formed during the six days of creation.

Thus, it is clear that fish have played an important role in Jewish tradition and mysticism. Fish have been, and will continue to be, more than just an important source of food. Everything in this world has a purpose, and through Torah learning we can appreciate the many different roles that creatures, such as fish play in the Jewish lore.

NOTES

1. "The Celebration of *Rosh HaShanah*," *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* p. 525.
2. Aaron Levine, *The New Rosh HaShanah Anthology* (Zichron Meir Publication, 1990), p. 74.
3. *ibid.* p. 75.
4. *ibid.* p. 130.
5. *ibid.* p. 131.
6. Ellen Frankel and Betsy P. Teutsch, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1992), p. 55.
7. *Torat Ha-Olah* (1858) 48b.
8. *Artscroll Sukkot* p. 34.