You Can Learn a Lot From A Fish

by

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*Remember, a dead fish can float downstream, but it takes a live one to swim upstream*

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Fish are… well, different. They are certainly unlike the land animals we are most familiar with and relate to in so many ways. Unlike land animals, in matters of *kashrut*,fish require no elaborate characteristics to be deemed kosher, they need only scales and fins. And, unlike land animals that require ritual slaughter, fish are simply caught and eaten.

No *shechita*.

We intuitively grasp that fish are the more spiritual of God’s creatures. Unlike land animals, which engaged in all manner of bestiality prior to the *mabul*, fish maintained their purity from the moment of Creation and so, when God brought the flood to destroy creation, fish were exempt from destruction!

The Talmud teaches that, “All [fish] that have scales also have fins [and are therefore kosher]; but there are [fish] that have fins but do not have scales [and are therefore not kosher],” raising two interesting questions. One, why are *these* two characteristics the ones that determine that a fish is kosherand, perhaps more fascinating, why are fins listed separately as a necessary characteristic when the Talmud itself notes that *all* fish with scales also have fins.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson wrote in his journal in 1941, long before he assumed the leadership of Chabad, why both characteristics are important. “As the armor that protects the body of the fish, scales represent the quality of integrity, which protects us from the very many pitfalls that life presents….” (Cited by Rabbi Y. Y. Jacobson -Chabad.org “Fins and Scales”) And regarding fins, he taught that they are, “… the wing-like organs that propel fish forward, represent[ing] ambition.”

So, together these attributes of fish represent integrity *and* ambition which work hand in hand in defining who we are. Just as we know that there are non-kosher fish that possess fins but no scales, we know there are people who have ambition but no integrity. But what is integrity without ambition? Hubris. Ego. Selfishness. We needn’t look very hard to find sports heroes, business leaders and political leaders who are like non-kosher fish, swimming in our world, lusting for power and riches, willfully blind to the damaging consequences of their attitude and behavior.

Integrity is important, but integrity alone is not enough. Our integrity – our “scales” – shield us; they protect us. The Talmud (Shabbos 31a) compares *yiras shomayim* – fear of God – to just such a protective layer. Without *yiras shomayim* all that one does, learns, and hopes to achieve is easily threatened. Therefore, it is the scales, not the fins, which ultimately determine whether a fish is kosher or not.

*Yiras shomayim* will, in and of itself, make for a good and pious Jew but it is not enough alone to achieve the life we are directed to live. For that, we still need “fins”; we still need the means to propel ourselves forward.

Yes, a fish can be identified as kosher if it has scales and fins. But the Talmud goes even further by suggesting that if a fish is swimming upstream it is *by definition* a kosher fish.  (The converse being that a fish that is unable to swim upstream is *not* kosher.)  What a powerful message this teaches about the symbolism of fish and, even more, why that symbolism resonates so powerfully for the Jewish people.

In Bereishit, God blesses the fish, saying, “…Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas.”  Fish are symbolic of our own mandate to be fruitful and multiply. When Yaakov blesses Ephraim and Menashe, he says, “…and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.” In blessing them, Yaakov uses the term, v’yidgu (to multiply). How interesting that the term used here is derived from the Hebrew word, dag, that is, fish. Yaakov is blessing them, “May you be like fish!”

And not just in your procreation. We know that the water covering fish protects them from the evil eye and that, like God, their own eyes never close – symbolizing God’s constant protective gaze. In the Kabbalistic version of the Zodiac, fish is associated with the month of Adar, the month of Purim – the happiest month of the year.

Fins. Scales. These define the kosher characteristics of fish. But there is so much more to fish that instructs the Jew, both as an individual Jew and as a nation. When the Talmud teaches that any fish that swims upstream is kosher it is telling us something about the deep holiness of moving *against the current*. Indeed, that characteristic, the ability to move against the current, is the secret to our survival. It speaks to a strength that is often unaccounted for by those who would harm us.

The Talmud in Avodah Zarah (39a) considers the argument that fish that cannot fight the rapids do not have a spinal cord, so they cannot exist in the rapidly flowing waters. Instead, they are carried away by the current. They are spineless, without strength.

The Talmud (Shabbat 145b) further uses the image of these fish when it discusses our return from the exile in Babylonia. Our tradition assumes that all returned from the Galut including all fish except for the kolyas ha’ispania whose spine was not strong enough to ascend these water courses.

The lesson is clear. To overcome such currents, one must have a spine!  Lacking spine is to be cowardly. It is a spine, courage and strength, which allows one to move in the “right direction”, to be able to stand up for what is right and noble.

The Ba’alei Ha’Musar interpreted these Talmudic passages to refer to a *talmid chochom* – a “fish with a spine” who possesses the spiritual strength to swim against the current, in contradistinction to the spineless individual who has no da’at and was not only incapable of swimming against the currents, but he likely *preferred* to remain behind in Babylonia with the poor kolyas. He just “went with the flow”, even if it meant not returning from Galut!

At every turn and in every generation, the tides of history have broken against us. Were we swept away? No! Spines firm, we swam! We acted against the harsh and cold currents. We endured. We continue to exist – to thrive – today not in spite of the currents that have broken against us but *because* of them.

Abraham was known as Avraham ha’ivri, usually translated as Abraham the Hebrew. But *ha’ivri* really means “on the one side”. Abraham, the first Jew, was on one side. He was *ivri*. The rest of the world was on the other side.

He swam against the current.

The world said one thing. Abraham’s faith in the One God said another.

God said, “Go! Leave your father, leave your family, leave your home. Go to a land I will show you.”

Abraham did not say, “It’s hard, to swim against such a current.” No, he went!

God tested Abraham. He said, “Take your son, the one you love, take Isaac…”

Abraham did not say, No. He did not insist upon floating comfortably on the easy current. He swam against the harsh and harder current.

How much easier to “go with the flow” and float comfortably, letting the current take you wherever it will. But that is not the way of the righteous; it is not the way of the Jew. We swim *against* the current. For two thousand years, during our long *galus*, we swam and swam, fighting against the swirls and eddies of the world’s currents.

We swam against the current. We stayed kosher. As a nation, as a people. And as individuals. For how often have our individual dreams been challenged or broken? How many times have life’s travails taken us off our preferred path? How many have had businesses, homes, learning plans thwarted due to Covid? How many are seeing their dreams shattered.

It is hard.

But we are Jews. We are like fish, girded with scales and fitted with fins. We are fish with spines. We can swim against the harsh tide. Ours is the blessing and challenge of *v’yidgu*. We must grow and thrive even in the face of the greatest adversity.

We are commanded that we fill “…the waters of the sea” as kosher fish, swimming upstream, against the current, into history.