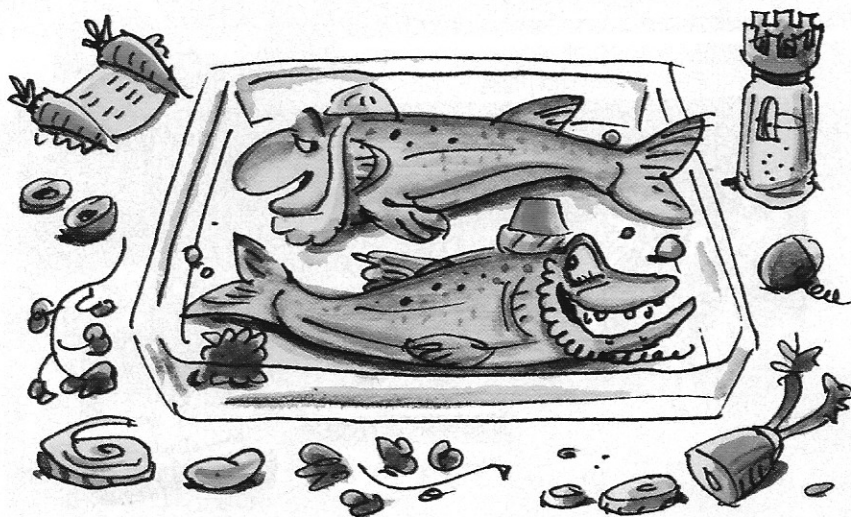


Commentary

Talmudic Fish Tale

By Ilana Kurshan



It is Friday afternoon, two hours before Shabbat. I am preparing salmon in my Jerusalem studio apartment, listening to a recorded lecture on my computer about today's page of Talmud. ♡ In the cycle of Daf Yomi, a program in which thousands of people worldwide learn a single

page of Talmud each day, we are up to the 75th page of the tractate *Yoma*—a word that is Aramaic for “the day” and refers to Yom Kippur. Most of the tractate is about the observance of Yom Kippur in the Temple: the slaughtering of goats, the sprinkling of blood, the donning of gold and white vestments with breastplate and tinkling bells. But now we are in the final chapter, about Yom Kippur as we observe it today. I listen to the rabbi on my computer explain the page as I unwrap the salmon from its plastic packaging.

The fish is frozen—I still can't bring myself to buy the scaly, slimy creatures that flap around in the big wooden buckets of the Mahane Yehuda market, happily oblivious to their

dead relatives hanging to dry just above them.

I rinse the soft pink flesh under the tap, but the running water makes it hard to hear the voice coming from my computer, which seems, suddenly, to be talking about fish:

“We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt for free” (Numbers 11:5).

THE TALMUD IS FAMOUS FOR ITS discursiveness, but how did we get from Yom Kippur to fish? On Yom Kippur, we are commanded to engage in self-affliction. The manna we ate in the desert was a form of self-affliction as well, since the children of Israel had to have faith in God that new manna would fall every day. Instead of the manna,

the Israelites really wanted fish, which is the reason that they complained to Moses.

But did they really get free fish in Egypt as they claimed? Weren't they slaves? The Talmudic rabbis Rav and Shmuel try to make heads or tails of the verse. While listening to their dispute, I slice the salmon fillet in two halves. I sprinkle some garlic and lemon juice on the one I dub Rav and put him in my little toaster oven; Shmuel will have to wait on the counter for a while.

Rav says, “Fish means fish.”

Shmuel says, “Fish means illicit sexual relations.”

I close the toaster door, but they keep at it.

Rav continues, “It says ‘the fish that we ate’—this must be a literal reference to food.”

Shmuel counters, “It says ‘for free’—did we really get free food in Egypt? It must mean the illicit sexual relations that the Israelites were free to engage in before they received the Torah.”

Rav defends himself, flapping his half-tail vigorously.

“When the Israelites were in Egypt,” he argues, “they used to dip their jugs into the Nile. God would cause a miracle to happen: Fish would get swept into the jugs as well, and they would have food to eat.”

Shmuel insists that eating is a euphemism for something else. He quotes a verse from Proverbs: “Such is the way of the adulteress. She eats, wipes her mouth and says, ‘I have done no wrong’” (30:20).

Shmuel, what a dirty mind you

have, I scold the piece of fish lying limply on the counter. I cover him up with a piece of aluminum foil and hope that my neighbors cannot hear.

Rav, modestly browning in the toaster oven, has his comeback prepared.

"The daughters of Israel were not adulteresses!" he rebuts. "They were not loose women! After all, as it says in the Song of Songs: 'A locked garden is my beloved bride'" (4:12).

Shmuel is not so sure: "But it says that when the Israelites were in the desert, they were crying for their families! What do you think that means, 'for their families' (Numbers 11:10)? They were bemoaning the fact that now that they had the Torah, they could not just sleep around with any woman they wanted."

"Bing!" The toaster tells me Rav is ready to come out. I unwrap Shmuel and rest him gently on the oven tray, where he begins to bake while I continue learning.

"*Ha ve-ha havay*," says the voice from my computer, making peace between the pieces. So it is. The Israelites were crying both because they missed the fish *and* because they missed the illicit sexual relations they enjoyed in Egypt.

"*Ha ve-ha havay*," I sigh placatingly once Shmuel is ready, placing the two pieces of fish side by side in a Pyrex dish. I pick up the phone to call a friend. "Do you want to come over for Shabbat dinner tonight? I just made fish." **H**

Ilana Kurshan works for a literary agency in Jerusalem, where she sells translation rights to publish books in Hebrew. She also serves as the books editor for Lilith magazine and studies Talmud at the Conservative Yeshiva. This piece, which was written after studying Masekhet Yoma, is published in the spirit of Purim.



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