

## **Parsha Sh'mini & Shabbat Machar Chodesh: Kosher Insects!?**

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אֶת אֵלֶּה מֵהֶם תֹּאכְלוּ: אֶת הָאַרְבֶּה לְמִינֹו וְאֶת הַסֹּלֶעַם לְמִינֵהוּ וְאֶת הַחֲרָגָל לְמִינֵהוּ  
וְאֶת הַחֲגָב לְמִינֵהוּ:  
Leviticus 11:22

I'd like to dedicate this drash to Rabbi Bochner and to my fellow students of the Thursday evening Talmud study, who have all also been my teachers.

One of the central themes of Judaism is our emulation of Adonai's work of creation by transforming the chaotic into the orderly. We do this in the realm of time in a number of ways. We order the days so that today is Shabbat, the culmination of the week. We take an otherwise unremarkable stretch of days between Pesach and Shavuot and count each of these days of the Omer with a b'racha, as we have been doing for the past two weeks. We recognize the New Moon as Rosh Chodesh, the start of a new month, as we will do tomorrow to welcome the month of Iyyar. (The Rosh Chodesh minyan will be tomorrow morning at 9:30 in the library and your participation is always appreciated.) We go further to recognize the irregular occasions when Shabbat falls on the day before Rosh Chodesh, as it does today, with a special haftara for Shabbat Machar Chodesh.

Today's parsha concerns bringing order, not to the temporal realm, but to the physical realm, as we are told which animals we may and may not eat. This listing is considered so important that it is included in our reading of Parsha Sh'mini in both the second and third years of the Triennial cycle. Whenever I read this parsha, I am always struck by one

part of this designation of which animals are kosher and which are traife. Most of the list seems perfectly normal.

- Cows & sheep?
  - Check.
- Tuna & salmon?
  - Check.
- Chicken & turkey?
  - Check.
- Grasshoppers & locusts?
  - Wait, WHAT?!

How did those get on the list of kosher animals? I assume you feel as repelled by the idea of eating locusts and grasshoppers as I do. Yet, since it is explicitly allowed by the Torah, shouldn't we be eating them?

One approach to resolve this anomaly is to look for a rational basis for the designation. It could be that locusts are kosher as an emergency measure. Imagine that all of the crops that would have provided your food have been destroyed by swarms of locusts. What are you going to eat? Locusts, since there's plenty of them around and they're very well-fed! This makes some practical sense, but this only covers one, perhaps two, of the four types of insects designated as kosher in our parsha. Arbeh, which you may remember from the list of ten plagues recited during the seder, is clearly a crop-destroying insect and chagav is possibly damaging to crops, but it appears that sal'am and chargol are more akin to the non-swarmling, non-crop-destroying crickets and grasshoppers familiar to us.

Perhaps a look at the halachic sources can shed some light on this issue. In Mishnah Brachot (Daf 40b), the question arises about what b'racha one should say before eating the crop-destroying type of locust. The majority opinion is that one says the generic blessing for food which does not grow from the ground -- "shehakol nee-ye bee'd'varo" -- "whose word creates all things". The minority opinion

of Rabbi Yehudah is that one does not recite a blessing at all, since the locust causes such massive destruction. A bit further on (Daf 54a), the Mishnah explains the majority opinion, that one does say a blessing before eating locusts, with a difficult and disturbing teaching: One is obligated to recite a b'racha for the bad just as one does for the good. Certainly a topic worthy of discussion, but I'll leave that for a darshon whose parsha includes the Ve-yahafta, which is the proof-text for this statement.

Tractate Chullin, which is about the rules of Kashrut, goes into much more detail about this topic. The Mishnah (Chullin 65a-b) seems to have no qualms about eating these creatures and goes into some detail about the physical attributes one would use to determine whether a given grasshopper is of the kosher variety. A minority opinion of Rabbi Yose is a small hint that the rabbis are not entirely at ease with the practice. Yose says that, to be kosher, the animal must be called "chagav", the last of the four named Kosher insects in our parsha. Yose's opinion has been taken variously as a further restriction – that the other three named insects should not be eaten – or to say that if one's language doesn't refer to these insects with the word "chagav", one is not allowed to eat them.

The Gemara discussing this Mishnah some 400 years later actually expands the list by playing on the parsha's use of the word l'meeno, "after its kind".

What does it mean "after its kind?" The term "after its kind" is written four times in order to include the *tsipporet keramim* and the Jerusalem *yochana*, and the *artsuvya* and the *razbanit*.

One may assume that this expansion was intended to explicitly sanction what had become a common practice of eating these additional four

insects or to clarify that they are covered by the four names given in the parsha.

In the post-Talmudic period, there seems a greater discomfort with the idea of eating insects and so greater restrictions came to be placed on the practice. One tradition required that the Hebrew letter chet had to be found on the insect's thorax in order for it to be considered kosher. Another tradition was that the practice was only allowed if no other food were available, in order to avoid famine, hearkening back to our earlier rationalist hypothesis.

So, what is the practical Halacha for us? Mishnah Chullin (6:1) and the Shulchan Aruch tell us that grasshoppers and locusts are parve, like fish. So, if one can locate a hechshered grasshopper, perhaps we'll have them included in a future Kiddush here at Netivot Shalom. In 2004, the Orthodox Union organized a conference on the outer limits of Kashrut at which fried grasshoppers were served, though there weren't many takers. The fried locusts were more popular at a similar dinner held in Jerusalem in 2010 and are said to have tasted like "tiny chicken wings". Unfortunately for us, it looks like the species of grasshoppers commonly eaten in Oaxaca, Mexico, and known as *chapuline* are not among the types allowed by either the parsha or the Talmud.

As I mentioned earlier, today is Shabbat Machar Chodesh, the Shabbat which is the day before Rosh Chodesh, the New Moon. The special haftara is clearly related to the event on a surface level, starting with

Ve-yomer lo Yonatan, machar chodesh.

Yonatan said to David, "Tomorrow will be the new moon".

(Samuel I 20:18)

But how is today's parsha, with its extensive list of kosher and traife animals, related to the coming of Rosh Chodesh? The psalm for Rosh Chodesh, found on page 78 of your siddurim, reveals the answer.

This psalm, which will be read at tomorrow's Rosh Chodesh minyan,

praises Adonai for the work of creation in bringing order out of chaos, transcending the physical and the temporal realms and also transcending the animal and the human realms. The psalm reads in part:

You make springs gush forth in torrents to flow between the hills.  
The wild beasts all drink from them.

You cause grass to grow for cattle, and plants for people to cultivate.

The trees of Adonai drink their fill – the cedars of Lebanon which Adonai planted. Birds build their nests in them; storks make their homes in the pines.

The high hills are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for badgers. You made the moon to measure the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You bring on darkness and it is night when all the beasts of the forest stir. The young lions roar for prey, seeking their food from Adonai. When the sun rises, they steal away and lie down in their dens. Then people go out to their work, to their labor until evening.

All of them look to you to give them their food at the proper time.

(Selections from Psalm 104)

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh Tov!

## On-line references

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