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Discover the Joy
of Shabbos

A Separate Species

By HaRav Eli Mansour (shiur E11)

Do you feel at home in your world? Do you sense yourself as separate from the mundane world around you? Let us learn how from the fish.

Learning from customs

There is a lesson hidden in every Halacha, and often a lesson hidden behind every Minhag, as well. Let us try to understand the implications behind the מנהג to eat fish at the Shabbat meals. Early sources refer to eating fish on Shabbat. There is even a popular expression כל האוכל דג ביום ד"ג ניצול מד"ג, which translates to whomever eats fish on the 7th day (ד"ג=7) will be saved from the judgement of Gehinnom (דינו של ד"ג=גיהנם). And while this expression has no source and seems rather unreasonable (were that it was so easy to be saved from judgement), it reflects the simple assumption that Jews eat fish on Shabbat.

Incidentally, in addition to דג, many of the foods that are often consumed on Shabbat relate to the number 7. יין=70 (7+0=7), בשר=502 (also =7), חלה=43 (again 7), מרק=340 (once again, 7).

While the Halacha requires that one eat foods that one enjoys on Shabbat, and fish has been a staple good food for all time, there is no requirement to eat fish if one does not have a taste for it. Still, the association of Shabbat and fish bears exploration.

The secret, we will discover, is that fish live in and represent a separate world.

A People That Dwells Apart

If we had to describe the Jewish People in one word it would likely be 'separate.' We dwell apart even when it appears to the bystander that we are but a part of larger society. Our strength lies in our deep core where we are connected to eternity, not to the mundane. And the time where that connection is strengthened is on

Shabbat. So, when could there be a better time for fish?

The fish dwell apart

All the animals perished in the Great Flood. All, that is, except for the fish. The other animals were impacted by the corruption of society. They also lost their moral path and they needed to be destroyed.

Fish, however, live in a separate world. The שפת אמת points out that the underwater world is not an extension of land, it is a world unto itself. The fish, therefore, were not subject to the decadent influence of society and they were thus spared the destruction. Human corruption could not 'reach' the fish.

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The otherworldly nature of Shabbat

Our mission is to unplug from the world. We are meant to recall, always, that we are here for a unique calling. We must never lose track of our mission and blend into the 'calling' of society at large. But it is hard to walk, talk and live in the larger society and keep the separate mission in mind.

And that is where Shabbat comes in. On Shabbat we unplug and disconnect from anything that even remotely connects us to our mundane lives. No business – we do not even speak about it. No money – we will not even touch it. We even set aside our everyday clothing in favor of clothing that we only wear on Shabbat. We affirm, with every moment of Shabbat, that we are like fish; we dwell apart. We unplug from עולם הזה and plug into עולם הבא.

The Olam HaTorah

When we think of those who are immersed in the study of Torah, we immediately refer to the 'Yeshiva World' or to the Olam HaTorah – the world of the Torah. Why not just speak of those who learn or those who attend a Yeshiva?

The answer is that learning Torah places a person into a different world. A Jew is either part of that world, in whatever role he can play, or he is out of that world and is dumped back into the mundane world of chasing after materialism.

Being like a fish

When Yaakov Avinu is blessing his precious grandchildren, מנשה ואפרים, he prays that ויִדְגּוּ לָרֶב (they will be like fish).

בְּקָרֵב הָאָרֶץ – that they be like fish – always in a different world. You do not have to eat fish. You do not even need to enjoy fish. But you must learn how to live apart, like a fish. The other choice is the spiritual oblivion of the surrounding culture.

The Torah is not part of the world

When the Gemara refers to a Halacha that is agreed upon by the Rabbis, they say כּוֹלֵי עוֹלָמָא לָא – פּוֹלִיגִי – the whole world agrees that... The whole world? Why not just say that the Rabbis agree unanimously? That would describe the fact that they are not arguing over that Halacha. But the Gemara is imparting far more. The Gemara is enclosing us in the surrounding walls of the Torah. Torah is our whole world. And if there is agreement on a certain Halacha then the whole world agrees. And even if nearly everyone else living on the planet has no idea what the argument or the agreement is, we must know that the 'whole world' agrees to this Halacha. Torah is the whole world, something that Shabbat comes every week to remind us.

Fish do not have eyelids

The זוֹהַר הַק' points out the spiritual significance of the fish whose eyes never close. They speak of the secret of Hashem's הַשְׁגָּחָה as being the עֵינַי פְּקִיחָה – the ever-open and watchful eye.

But there is another aspect to the eyes-open approach of the fish. In the underwater world there is nothing that needs to be shut out. Fish do not need blinders in their world; they can take it all in. We, by contrast, need eyelids. How else can we shut out the materialism of the world in which we walk about? So, too, on Shabbat, we



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take it all in. There is nothing about Shabbat that we wish to filter out. We want every bit of Shabbat.

Shabbat – our refuge like the water

We escape into Shabbat just as we escape into Torah. The fish offers us a perspective that there is another world. It is a handbreadth away, but you must go into it. You cannot experience water while remaining on dry land and you

cannot experience Shabbat while remaining in weekday mode.

The clever fox cannot outsmart the fish

In the language of חז"ל, the fox always has something clever to say. Always, that is, until he is outfoxed by the fish. 'Why don't you come on dry land?' asks the fox of the fish. The fox tries to entice the fish onto dry land because he knows that the success of the fish is owing to their being in their own world.

Takeaway: On Shabbat I will try to think about the fish to enable me to be here in the physical world but plugged into the world of Torah and eternity.

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