

Food’s Spiritual Levels (Behaalotcha)

Not eating meat is a decision, eating meat is an instinct. -Denis Leary

The Children of Israel complain several times during their desert journey. At one point they’ve had enough of the miraculous manna they’ve been eating. They cry for something more substantive and familiar, like the meat or fish they had in Egypt. God accedes, not too happily, to their demand and rains down on them literally millions of birds termed “slav” (popularly translated as quail – but it’s not clear that’s really what it was).

Why the disparity between what they wanted, fish or meat, and what they got - poultry?

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619), on Numbers 11:22, explains that the Israelite request was inappropriate. Specifically, the type of animals that they asked for. According to the Kli Yakar, meat is for people at the lowest spiritual level, which was not the case with the Children of Israel who requested it. On the other hand, fish represents the highest spiritual level, and they weren’t there either. God gave them what they needed, not what they wanted, namely fowl, which is for people at the middle level. The Kli Yakar brings as evidence of the animal’s spiritual level the way the type of animal is killed for consumption and its symbolism.

In kosher slaughter, the animal is killed by cutting what is called the two ‘simanim’ (literally “signs,” but refers to the esophagus and trachea). This represents the evil person being removed from two worlds at death, this world and the next world.

Fowl can be killed by cutting just one ‘siman’. This represents the average person who is merely removed from this world at death but does proceed to the next world.

Fish only need to be ‘gathered’ from the water (and make sure they die). This represents the righteous who depart this world with just a divine kiss.

In table form it would look as follows:

<i>Interchange</i>	<i>Food</i>	<i>Spiritual level</i>	<i>Slaughter</i>	<i>Represents type of death</i>
Asked	Meat	Evil	2 ‘simanim’	Cut off from both worlds
Received	Fowl	Middle	1 ‘siman’	Pulled from this world
Asked	Fish	Righteous	‘gathered’	Divine kiss

Though some of us may have a heavy meat diet, may we reach greater aquatic levels.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

*In memory of Eliyahu Moshe Shlomo Zimbalist hy”d, who fell in battle in Gaza.
May his family be comforted amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.*