



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > Seventh Day

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Pesach

Do Gefilte Fish Get Wet?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Do fish get wet? Do gefilte fish get wet?

The answer to that odd question contains the secret to the Jew’s relationship with God – a secret which is predicated upon a new reading of an old tale: the Jews never crossed the Red Sea.

So teaches Tosafot and Maimonides.

The sea split alright, but the Jews did not cross. Instead of crossing, the Jews entered the dry sea bed, walked around in a semi-circle and exited some ways down the same beach.

If this is true, then why?

Because the Splitting of the Sea did not happen so that the Jews could run away from Egyptians. The Splitting of the Sea happened so that they could run away from old ways of thinking.

The Splitting of the Sea was about wading into the water and realizing that you yourself are water.

Torah is water, and Jews learn Torah. But it goes deeper. Jews are Torah. Jews are water.

The Splitting of the Sea was a prelude to the encounter with God at Mount Sinai, whetting the Jewish palate by showing them that water itself cannot get wet. Just like fish – gefilte fish included – cannot get wet. On some level, fish don’t get wet because fish themselves are part of the water. On some level, fish and water are one and the same. Just see what happens when fish are separated from water ... (or Jews are separated from Torah).

DO GEFILTE FISH GET WET? AND WHAT CAN THEY TEACH US ABOUT THE SPLITTING OF THE SEA?

Gut Yom Tov!

1. Going Gefilte Fishing (Humor)

A few months back, the *Washington Post's* Wonk-blog posted an article under the headline, "The story behind the funniest e-mail Hillary Clinton has ever sent."¹ It described one particular e-mail from the cache of controversial Hillary e-mails, which had the intriguing subject line: "Gefilte Fish."

Let me read you some excerpts from this article:

While combing through the most recent Hillary Clinton e-mail dump, a certain, seemingly non-political, but potentially highly controversial message stands out. The e-mail was sent to both Jake Sullivan, one of her top advisers, and Richard Verma, the former assistant secretary of state for legislative affairs. And it is brief.

The body of the e-mail is five words long. It reads: "Where are we on this?"

The subject line, meanwhile, says only: "Gefilte fish."

That one was not labeled "Top Secret," but you never know where highly sensitive intelligence may hide. The article goes on:

It's hard not to find this e-mail funny, because gefilte fish is nothing if not funny. Also, to be fair, "where are we on this" could mean so many things without context. So many amusing things. Depending, of course, on how Clinton feels about the maligned Jewish food – does she like it, or is she repulsed by it? That is, if she feels anything for it at all.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/09/01/the-story-behind-the-funniest-e-mail-hilary-clinton-has-ever-sent/>.

But the reality is that there seems to be a much more substantive explanation for why the leading Democratic presidential candidate sent an e-mail with gefilte fish in the subject line while she was serving as Secretary of State. That year, ahead of the Jewish holiday, a rather large shipment of frozen fish was held up on its way from the United States to Israel. The fish was carp, the kind traditionally used to make gefilte fish, it was farmed in Illinois, and it was going to be hit with a 120 percent [Israeli] import duty unless an exception was made...

Not “Top Secret” maybe, but clearly a big deal. It was even the subject of a lengthy passage in the memoir *Ally*, penned by Michael Oren, the former Israeli ambassador to the United States. Let me read you what he wrote about it:

My first year in office had posed successive and seemingly unsurpassable challenges ... But none of the year’s instructive experiences prepared me for this. Fish...

I tried to ... do my utmost to free the embargoed filets, but my options were in fact few. America signed its first-ever free-trade agreement with Israel in 1985, but the treaty exempted certain Israeli products liable to be eradicated by their cheaper American counterparts. Apples, avocados and oranges fell into this category, and, so, too did the carp cultivated by Galilean farmers. Which was why four hundred thousand pounds of the Illinois fish were denied entry to the Promised Land.

Still, in view of the possible diplomatic damage, I thought Israel should make this one exception ... “You think finding Middle East peace is hard,” Secretary of State Clinton blithely told reporters [at the time]. “I’m dealing with carp!” Netanyahu called to question me, “What’s all this carp stuff?” I urged him to focus on Israel’s critical issues and leave the fish to me.

Days of effort passed before a compromise was finally achieved. On a one-time, non-precedent basis, the nine containers were unloaded in Israeli ports ... [Illinois] Congressman [Don] Manzullo called to thank me and to ask, “Why do you Israelis need so much carp?”

Realizing that his question was genuine, I explained that the Jewish People would soon celebrate Passover, when they traditionally eat gefilte fish. “Carp, congressman, is the main ingredient.”²

Now this amusing anecdote brings us to today’s subject:

What lessons do gefilte fish hold for us, the people of Israel? What can gefilte fish teach us about Passover, the Splitting of the Sea, and living divinely?

2. Green Pickle, Red Sea (Joke)

And speaking of the Splitting of the Sea, what happens when you throw a *green* pickle into the *Red* Sea?

It gets wet.

3. Getting Wet

Let us, for a moment, talk about getting wet. Conventional logic would have you believe that when you throw an object into a body of water – such as a pickle into a sea – that object gets wet.

But does it always? If you were to pour a cup of water into an ocean would that water get wet? In other words: Does water itself get wet?

To extend the question even further: Do water creatures get wet? Do fish get wet? Do the carp farmed in Illinois, or those by Galilean farmers, get wet?

² https://twitter.com/Yair_Rosenberg/status/638531234587656192/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

And what better time to discuss this moist subject than today, *Shevi'ee Shel Pesach*, the seventh day of Passover, the day when the sea was split?

It is time, my friends, to jump into the sea and get wet. Or maybe not get wet...

4. The Jews Did Not Cross the Sea!

One of the great biblical tales relates how the Jews crossed the Red Sea which split to save them from advancing Egyptians. But some say this did not happen at all! While the sea did split, the Jews did not *cross*.

Let me hasten to add that this isn't heresy. The revered Tosafot commentary to the Talmud³ says this outright. Indeed, the Tosafot insists that the Jews did not *cross* the Red Sea, rather, they waded in (walked around the sea bed for a bit) and exited again on the same side.

Indeed, if you take out a map you'll see that there is no need to cross any water when traveling from Egypt to Israel. God actually led the Jews southeast, out of the direct path to the Promised Land, just in order to perform the miracle of the parting sea!

As we all know, the popular perception of the narrative is that the sea split in half and the newly freed Israelites crossed from one side to the other. But the Tosafot says that's not true: the crossing was more akin to a 180-degree semi-circle – the Jews entered on one side and emerged on the same side, some distance down the beach. They kind of drew a rainbow with their footsteps on the sea bed.

Maimonides⁴ concurs, adding that each tribe drew its own rainbow for a total of twelve, one within the other.

This immediately brings to mind a number of questions:

³ Tosafot on Erachin 15a.

⁴ In his commentary on Avot 5:4.

- If this is indeed what happened, what was the point of the exercise? We know that God does not perform superfluous miracles, so why would He split the sea if the Jews were not going to cross it?
- And what about the pursuing Egyptians? How does splitting the sea save the Jews if it brings them back to where they were fleeing from?

Perhaps the Splitting of the Sea is less about getting to the *other side* than understanding what's *inside*. Perhaps the Splitting of the Sea is less about getting away from the Egyptians and more about *ourselves* – about getting our feet wet.

Perhaps all this has more to do with water than with dry land.

5. About Water

We will understand this by probing the way Torah looks at water. Let's consider what the Talmud says about a *mikvah*, the ritual pool of living water used by Jews for purification of bodies and vessels.⁵

The Talmud says that the *mikvah* must be devoid of any foreign substances. It discusses various items that may or may not be considered foreign to the living waters of the *mikvah* (a *chatzitzah*), such as objects which might fall into the waters.

Then Raban Shimon ben Gamliel says something rather fascinating: "All that is a creature of water is pure."⁶ Meaning: objects that are foreign to water get in the way between the pure water and the person (or vessel) immersing. But fish, which are of the water itself, are not foreign but part and parcel of the water and, therefore, are not considered to get in the way and create a separation.

⁵ Mikvaot 6:7.

⁶ Though the Halachah is not like Rashbag. See R. Ovadia Bartenuira's commentary ad loc, and sources cited in Likkutei Sichot vol. 17, p. 75 fn. #42. See also Zvachim 11a, which seems to uphold Rashbag's statement.

Put another way: some things fall into, or are dipped into, or are immersed into water; but other things *are* water or part of the water.

On some level, fish don't get wet, for fish themselves are part of the water. On some level, fish and water are one and the same. Just see what happens when fish are separated from water ...

6. Jews and Fish (Talmudic Story)

The Talmud, in a famous story, compares Jews to fish and Torah to water. This is the story:

Once, the wicked government of Rome decreed that the Jewish people were forbidden to study Torah. Pappus ben Judah saw Rabbi Akiva convening gatherings in public and studying Torah. Said he to him: "Akiva, are you not afraid of the government?"

Said Rabbi Akiva to him: "I'll give you a parable. A fox was walking along a river and saw fish rushing to and fro. Said he to them: 'What are you fleeing?'

"Said they to him: 'The nets that the humans spread for us.'

"Said he to them: 'Why don't you come out onto the dry land? We'll live together, as my ancestors lived with your ancestors.'

"Said they to him: 'Are you the one of whom it is said that you are the cleverest of animals? You're not clever, but foolish! If, in our environment of life we have cause for fear, how much more so in the environment of our death!'

"The same applies to us. If now, when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is said [in the Book of Deuteronomy] *for it is your life and the length of your days,*⁷ such is our situation, how much more so if we neglect it."⁸

⁷Deuteronomy 30:20.

⁸Berachot 61b (translation courtesy of chabad.org).

Sure, Jews *study* Torah. But it's much more than that: Jews *are* Torah.⁹ They are one with, inseparable from the Torah's waters.

Just as one cannot separate a human being from his or her life force, without which he or she ceases to be, so too one cannot separate the Jew from the Torah.

When you take a fish out of the water, it ceases to be. Taking a Jew out of the Torah is akin to taking a fish out of water.

From where did this profound concept originate? How did an enslaved people, confined and asphyxiated, suddenly acclimate to a reality where fish and water are one?

This happened at the Splitting of the Sea, as a prelude to their encounter with God at Mount Sinai.

7. Why the Splitting of the Sea

The Splitting of the Sea was not so the Jews could run away from the Egyptians and get to the other side. God could have saved the Jews in a plethora of ways; the Splitting of the Sea was not necessary for such purposes. Rather, it had a much deeper and fundamental purpose. The Splitting of the Seas came to connect Jews with their watery essence – as a prerequisite to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.¹⁰

The Splitting of the Sea was not about crossing a geographical impasse; the Splitting of the Sea was about crossing a spiritual impasse, about opening up the hidden mysteries of the sea to reveal to the Jews that we are one with the water, one with the Torah, one with Godliness.

⁹ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 17, p. 75 and fn. #42.

¹⁰ See Likkutei Torah, Tzav/Pesach, p. 16aff; Torah Ohr, Beshalach p. 62b; Vehechrem, 5631, at beginning; Vayolech Hashem Et Hayam 5704 (p. 179); Vehechrim 5713; et al.

For this reason, the Jewish people entered and exited on the same geographical side of the sea. It wasn't about getting to the other side, it was about revealing how the sea isn't an obstacle but part and parcel of their fiber and essence.

This also explains a strange passage in the *Haggadah*. The 6th stanza of *Dayeinu* goes, "If He had split the sea for us, and had not taken us through it onto dry land – it would have been enough! *Dayeinu!*" How in heaven's name would that have been enough? Splitting the Sea for us and not taking us through it onto dry land seems completely arbitrary.

But if the Splitting of the Sea was not essentially an act of salvation but one of revelation (i.e. not saving the Jews from the Egyptians but rather opening the Jews up to a new reality), then certainly Splitting of the Sea alone is enough, *Dayeinu!*

8. Personal Lesson

Exactly 3,328 years ago the sea split for the first time, as a prelude to Sinai, demonstrating that the Jews and Torah are like fish and water.

The ramifications here are mind-blowing and earth-shattering: A Jew cannot choose to swim or not to swim. Like a fish in water, a Jew has to swim. The only choice is where to swim, how to swim, how well to swim, and how far to swim.

Today, more than ever, Jews struggle with Jewish identity – who are we, what we are, are we part of this world or another? Are we different, the same, somewhat different, somewhat the same?

But think about it: Is the entire world celebrating Passover or only Jews? If I eat gefilte fish does that make me different than my neighbor? What is my Jewishness about? Am I more a Jew if I study Torah? Am I less a Jew if I, for whatever reason, don't?

Comes the Splitting of the Sea to answer this modern-day identity crises: you are a fish in water, period! You are a spiritual entity traveling through a physical world. Torah is you, whether you like it or not (and, for some ironic reason, many Jewish fish do not relate well to the water that is them).

Even if we are not accustomed to thinking of ourselves this way (or may even be troubled by it), this holiday helps open us up to this reality. On Passover, especially on this 7th day of the holiday, let us all allow the “sea to part” in our personal lives – by appreciating that a Jew is inseparable from Torah; that we are fish, fish that are one with water.

That is all that the Splitting of the Sea asks of you – to be wide open to the possibility that you and the water are one.

Dip your toe in and see what happens. Even if you do just that, *Dayeinu*, it is enough!

Of course, we shouldn't suffice with that and continue to travel and grow. But the mere splitting of the sea, allowing us to recognize that we are not land mammals, but “fish” in the sea, opens up all the possibilities.

9. Not Getting Wet (Conclusion)

Gefilte fish don't get wet. The carp and pike and white fish – whether from the farms of Illinois or the Galilee – that make up the majority of the “fish” part of “gefilte fish” (don't ask me what the “gefilte” part consists of) are one with the waters in which they live.

And so are we.

That is perhaps why we begin our holiday meals with eating fish...

Those carp had to wait to get into the Promised Land. But they made it.

And so must we. The greatest step we can take toward making the prophecy of “Next Year In Jerusalem” come true is to jump right in and realize that we can never get wet, never mind drown, for we are the water, we are the sea, we are the Torah.

So, next time you bite into a piece of gefilte fish, remember that you are like a fish in water, and becoming one with the water is what you need to do to enter the Promised Land.

Chag Sameach and a Happy Pesach!

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