

REEH (DEUTERONOMY 11:26-16:17)

The Goose Slayer

2013 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

ELUL

Next Wednesday will be the first day of the Jewish month of Elul. The month of Elul is traditionally a time of introspection and preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. After services every weekday morning, we sound the Shofar as a reminder that Rosh Hashanah is a mere month away. Our prayers get a little longer and become a little more sincere. We use this time to get our spiritual act together in time for the New Year when G d will decide our fates for the coming year.

“The Goose Slayer”

This Shabbos we’re serving something special.

Every Shabbos is celebrated with special foods. We are supposed to honor Shabbos by bringing the physical enjoyments of the world to a spiritual plane. Someone I know once pointed out that the amount of effort that the typical secular family puts into one meal on a Thursday in November is what we do every week. There is wine, Challah, Gefilte fish, Kugel, soup, chicken, etc.

But this Shabbos we’re serving goose!

Goose? Where are you going to find Kosher goose? In the park?? No, those annoying Canadian guys who mess up our parks don’t qualify as Kosher.

Why not?

This week’s Torah Portion tells us, *You may eat every Kosher bird.* (Deuteronomy, 14:12)

That’s all it tells us. Then the Torah goes on to tell us not to eat non-Kosher birds. How do we know which bird is Kosher? May we eat pigeon? Quail? Pheasant? How about peacock?

Actually the Torah makes it relatively easy. The next verse tells us *...and these are the ones that you may not eat...* (verse 13)

Basically, the way it works is that if a bird is on the banned list, you may not eat it. Eagles, which are on that list, are non-Kosher. Chickens, which are not on the list, are kosher.

Embden and Toulouse geese may be eaten. Canadian geese may not be eaten. Why not? Are they on the banned list?

We don't know for sure. You see, the Commentaries disagree about the identities of some of the birds on the list. So we're not sure what they are. In fact, the Artscroll translation of the Torah leaves the words untranslated. So it tells us that we may not eat the *nesher*, *the peres*, and *the ozniah*. But it doesn't tell us what they are.

For what it's worth, the Living Torah translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, tells us that they are the eagle, the ossifrage, and the osprey. In fact, let me give you the rest of the list according to Rabbi Kaplan -- *the white vulture, the black vulture, the kite, the entire raven family,, the ostrich, owl, gull, and hawk families, the falcon, the ibis, the swan, the pelican, the magpie, the cormorant, the stork, the heron family, the hoopoe and the bat.*

Now did you see the Canadian goose anywhere on that list? So why don't we eat them?

Since we don't know for sure which birds are on the list, as a result, we also don't know for sure which birds are NOT on the list.

So how can we eat ANY birds?

Very simple. I eat chicken because my mother fed me chicken. She eats chicken because her mother fed her chicken.

Those birds which we have a tradition to eat are acceptable. If we have no tradition to eat them, we may not eat them. (See "Kosher Legs = Kosher Eggs".)

(I have been attending a course in Shechita, Kosher slaughter, given by Rabbi Chaim Loike, the Kosher bird expert at the Orthodox Union. Part of the course has focused on introducing us to the various breeds of birds which are acceptable and which are not. He is actively involved in research, tracking down traditions of Jewish communities all over the world, trying to identify birds which were known to certain communities to be Kosher. One "candidate" that he's working on confirming is the peacock!)

So we eat Embden and Toulouse geese because we have a tradition that they've always been known to be a Kosher bird. Is a Canadian goose actually Kosher? Probably, but since we don't know for sure based on tradition, we must err on the side of caution and consider it non-Kosher.

I had never eaten goose. It is very hard to find commercially available Kosher-slaughtered goose. And when you do, it is quite expensive. (How does \$27 a pound sound?)

I decided I was going to raise my own. After several years raising chickens, (see “Yerachmiel’s Ark”) I was branching out. Four years ago, I ordered 10 Embden new-born goslings from a hatchery. Two weeks later they were all gone. The raccoons got ‘em. Three years ago I bought more. Two weeks later, all but two were gone. The raccoons got ‘em again!

By the way, I didn’t just leave them out there unprotected. Raccoons are very crafty little pests. They have very dexterous fingers, and they can open things we’d never expect an animal to be able to open. It took me two seasons to figure out how they did it! (I REALLY, REALLY hate raccoons! I told a Chassidic friend of mine that if I ever show up in shul with a coonskin Shtreimel and a big smile on my face he’ll know why!)

Two years ago, I had them better protected in an enclosed hutch. A freak flash flood in my back yard drowned them all. The breeding season wasn’t over yet so I bought more. Once they outgrew the hutch, I put them in the coop with the previous year’s two survivors. Those lousy raccoons found their way into the coop and killed all but one of the babies. (They wouldn’t start up with the adults. They were too mean!!)

So the following season I was the proud owner of 3 adult, egg-laying geese. Now it was time to build a family. Someone sold me a gander, and in due time, nature began to take its course. No more ordering from the hatchery. I was the hatchery. I took the eggs and put them in an incubator. I successfully hatched about a dozen goslings. In 12 weeks they’d be ready for slaughter and mealtime.

A little about slaughter and mealtime. Some people think that I must be a cruel, heartless person. “How can you eat your pets?” they ask.

First of all they are not pets. While I can understand how someone could become emotionally attached to a dog, or even a cat, that is not the case with poultry. They are not affectionate at all; in fact, they are nasty, and sometimes vicious. Even to each other.

But more importantly, we have to understand, vegetarianism is not a Torah concept. *“Be fruitful, and multiply. Fill the earth and conquer it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every beast that walks the land.”* (Genesis, 5:28)

Noah only needed two each of lions and tigers and bears. They would mate and refill the world. Why did he need seven pairs of cows and sheep and geese? Some were for sacrifices, and some were for dinner!!!

A chicken, or a sheep, or a salmon fulfills its G-d-given purpose in the world by sustaining mankind. All the more so if it serves the physical/spiritual purpose of providing sustenance at a Shabbos or holiday table. I have served goose at Shabbos Chanukah, Purim, and Passover meals.

(It's also important to point out that goose feathers make great quills for writing Torah scrolls.)

Of course, we are required to treat animals well. We must feed them each day before we feed ourselves. We are enjoined to avoid causing them any unnecessary pain or discomfort. (In fact, one vegetarian I know told me that while she would never eat "factory-raised" poultry, she would eat my birds because she knows they are raised humanely.) Kosher slaughter is done in a quick and efficient fashion in which the animal loses consciousness almost instantaneously.

So no, we don't at all subscribe to the opinions of the crazies at PETA who see animals as our equals. My birds are treated well, with the end goal of serving man (and G-d!) at a Shabbos or Holiday meal.

Back to my baby geese. Every time I hatched a new one, I kept it in my home under a heat lamp until it was ready to go outside. I had another coop, separate from the adults. Every few days I added another gosling or two to the coop. But since they scurried around a lot, it was hard to count them. Yet, it seemed that I was missing some. Eventually, I discovered a loose panel in one of the walls of the coop; just loose enough for Rocky Raccoon to pull it back, walk in, and pick up dinner. In the process, one of the surviving goslings broke a wing.

I repaired the wall, but the damage was done. Not only had I lost more geese, but the 6 remaining ones could no longer be considered to be unquestionably Kosher. They might now be *Treif*!

Treif is one of those misunderstood words in the Kosher lexicon. People think it means non-Kosher. That is only partially true. Pig is not *Treif*; it is unclean. A *Treifa* is a kosher animal that has sustained an injury that will not allow it to survive for 12 months. When a vicious animal such as a raccoon is known to have entered an enclosure, the animals in that enclosure are feared to have sustained an undetected injury that will kill it within 12 months.

There is only one way to resolve this question. Wait 12 months. If it is still alive after 12 months, it is now verified that they are not *Treifos*, and they may be slaughtered and consumed. My goslings had a new lease-on-life!

The suspected attack took place sometime in June of last year. Instead of slaughtering them last fall, I had to wait until July 1 of this year.

In the interim, they caused a lot of additional work on my part. I had to feed them for another 9 months. I spent more in goose food than the goose meat was worth. I had to heat their water in the winter. They screamed at night. (Geese make good “watchdogs.” Really!) They were smelly. Every time I went into the coop to feed them they would pile into a corner as far from me as they could get.

One good thing that came out of their survival was that they had a chance to mate and produce more offspring. Those guys will, I hope, be slaughtered in the fall. (If I can keep the raccoons away!!)

July 1 came and went. It was time. I made arrangements to bring them to a slaughterhouse to be killed and prepared. This past Monday, I brought 5 big boxes (one goose had died in the interim) out to the coop. Again they got as far from me as they could. As I loaded them into the boxes it occurred to me that this was it; no more honking in the middle of the night. No more smelly stuff to shovel into garbage bags. No more hissing and snapping at their own offspring, whom I had made the mistake of introducing.

Would I miss them?

Of course not! This was the fulfillment of a 4-year project! I had finally managed to breed, raise, and bring to slaughter geese for my Shabbos table. This is a good thing. That’s what they’re for! That’s why G-d made geese!

I loaded the 5 boxes into my car. (I also loaded several bags of “home-made fertilizer.” Rabbi Franklin, the man who owns the slaughterhouse, has a farm, and he would use it for his crops. Between the 5 boxes and the bags, my car smelled delightful!!) Monday was a quite a warm day. I turned the air conditioning up all the way. I was uncomfortable; it was too cold. But sitting in their boxes they might still be hot.

Once I arrived at slaughterhouse, I opened the car windows and went inside. A few minutes later I came out to check that it wasn’t too hot. I peeked into one of the boxes ...straight into the pale blue eyes of one of G-d’s proud, magnificent creations...

(Gulp...) I had to admit it... I felt bad... just a little.

What about the fact that G-d created geese to sustain His children? What about the fact that they were going to enhance my enjoyment of Shabbos? Why should I feel bad bringing these birds to their ultimate purpose in the Creation? Does this mean I’m a heretic?

I don’t think so. I think it means I’m human.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

