

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



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פרשת שמני
כ"ו בניסן תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 9:1-11:47

After the dedication of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and the ordination of the *cohanim* (priests), two of Aharon's sons bring a strange fire before God and are consumed by fire; God then instructs Moshe and Aharon regarding which animals, fish, and birds may be eaten by the Bnei Yisrael.

Both animals and fish display physical characteristics which indicate whether or not they are kosher: a kosher animal has completely split hooves and chews its cud, and a kosher fish has fins and scales. Birds, however, are different. Twenty-four avian species are specifically prohibited in the *parasha*, including the stork, raven, hawk, and owl. Historically, a list of permissible birds was passed down orally from generation to generation until a *mesorah* (tradition) developed as to which birds were kosher.

However, what about birds like the turkey? As a relatively recent entrée, dating to the "discovery" of the New World around 400-500 years ago, the turkey has no ancient tradition governing its status. Is the turkey kosher?

[The answers below are based on an article by Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky. The entire discussion can be accessed at http://www.kashrut.com/articles/turk_part5/.]

The latest possible date for the discovery of domesticated turkeys by Europeans is the Cortez expedition of 1519. The Spanish Conquistadors brought turkeys back to Europe, where they were savored as a delicacy at state dinners. The birds were eventually acquired by other European countries, probably reaching England in 1524, and being raised domestically in Italy, France, and England by 1530. When the Pilgrims came to settle the New World in 1620 they brought the turkey back to

its native land, which is indicative of the birds' wide-spread general acceptance in Europe at that time.

As the turkey's acceptance spread through Europe, somehow, Jews also started eating it, and eventually the question of its kosher status was posed to various rabbis, who usually permitted it.

A major problem in analyzing the question of whether the turkey is a kosher bird is the confusion surrounding the turkey's name, which relates to the confusion of where Columbus had landed and where this new bird came from. In around 1530, when this new dish started appearing on English tables, it had been brought to England by merchants trading in the eastern Mediterranean. These merchants were called "Turkey merchants" because the whole area was then part of the Turkish Empire and the bird was therefore called "Turkey bird."

However, the English were in the minority when they related this bird to Turkey. Nearly everyone else thought it came from India, whereas in reality it came from Mexico, which was then known as the Spanish Indies or the New Indies. Thus, in most European languages, as well as in Arabic and Hebrew, it is called something like the "bird of India." Even in Turkey they call it *hindi*, as though it came from Hindistan, which is Turkish for India. The Modern Hebrew (תרנגול הודו – *tarnagol hodu*) and Yiddish (*hendika hen*) names both mean "Indian chicken."

So is it kosher? One argument in favor of the turkey's *kashrut* is based on the fact that the rabbis of the Talmud were able to identify all 24 of the non-kosher birds found in the biblical list. Since they did not know about turkey, it could not have been in the list. This is a fallacious argument, however, because there are other New World birds that are obviously non-kosher; examples include raptors such as the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and osprey. Presumably what is meant by the statement that Talmudic rabbis could identify the non-kosher birds is that if they were to be shown any bird, even a New World bird, they would be able to determine whether it belonged to one of the 24 categories of prohibited birds.

The *Netziv* (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 19th century Poland) posits that when the turkey was brought to Europe there were questions about its status, and for some people those questions still remain. However, since that time the vast majority of Jews have accepted the turkey as kosher. Because this is now the common practice, unless there is overwhelmingly compelling evidence to declare

the turkey non-kosher, it cannot now be declared non-kosher. The rule that birds are eaten only if a *mesorah* exists, coupled with the fact that the origins of this particular *mesorah* are unknown, are insufficient reasons to declare an accepted bird unacceptable. Rather, we treat it as if we now have a *mesorah*.

Shut Mei Be'er (Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Schur, 19th century Bucharest) is of the opinion that we accept turkey by relying on the Jews of India, the place of origin of the turkey, who had a clear tradition dating back to Moshe that the turkey was kosher. As far as he was concerned, the only question that ever existed with regard to turkey was whether Europeans could rely on the Indian *mesorah* and this, he claims, was settled in the affirmative by the *Rivash* (Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet, 14th century Spain).

It appears that all of the major *kashrut* organizations in both America and Israel treat the turkey as a kosher bird – whether it in fact originated in India or in Mexico – and it is consumed by all segments of the meat-eating Jewish world.

So there you have it. Despite not necessarily being known by the ancient Jews, turkey is kosher, and many observant American Jews are particularly happy for that around Thanksgiving time.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Why do you think the Torah mandates permissible and impermissible animals, fish, and birds? What difference does it make what we eat?
- Why might there be physical signs for animals and fish, but not for birds?
- Look at the birds listed as non-kosher [Chapter 11, verses 13-19]. Do they seem to have anything in common with each other and separate from the birds, such as chicken, turkey, duck, or quail, that we do eat? If so, what, and how might that explain their non-kosher status?