

Kosher conundrums



A PLAGUE on your plate?

(Marc Israel Sellem)

**Tired of chicken on Friday nights?
Fancy a pheasant and guinea fowl pastry instead?
How about quail in caramel sauce?
Tender cow udder, or fried locusts?**

In an age when old rabbis and ritual slaughterers – who remembered which local birds and locusts were kosher – were passing away, two men set out on a quest to collect their chains of tradition via oral, video and photographic evidence

• GIL HOFFMAN
PHOTOS BY DAVID WILNER

In the Jerusalem Talmud's tractate *Ta'anit*, Rabbi Hananya son of Rabbi Abahu said that there were 700 species of kosher fish and 800 species of kosher grasshoppers and an uncountable number of birds in the Land of Israel, and all of them went with the nation of Israel into the Babylonian exile and later

returned with it, except for one fish called the *shibuta*.

For years there was a dispute about the identity of the *shibuta*, which the tractate *Hulin* suggests had a brain that tastes like pork. Some thought it was the mullet or the sturgeon until Bar-Ilan University neurology professor Ari Zivotofsky proved in a scientific journal that the *shibuta* was a freshwater Iraqi fish in the Euphrates River bearing the contemporary

Arabic and Farsi name *shabut*.

Last Thursday, more than 250 people feasted on the *shibuta* at a special meal at Jerusalem's Eucalyptus Restaurant opposite the Old City walls, marking what was apparently the first time that the fish was eaten in the Holy Land in some 2,600 years. The fish were brought here from Turkey, where a Muslim professor who read Zivotofsky's article had obtained them for him.



CHIEF RABBI Shlomo Amar checking the kashrut signs on a buffalo



A 'DELICIOUS' plate' of kosher locusts

The shibuta was just one of 18 courses at the “mesora dinner” cooked by renowned chef Moshe Basson and organized by Zivotofsky and Jerusalem dentist Ari Greenspan in an effort to pass along the chain of tradition of which animals, birds, fish and locusts are kosher and which are not, a quest the two Aris have been working on for the past 28 years.

The quest began when Zivotofsky and Greenspan were 18-year-old students at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Alon Shvut and were invited to study *shehita*, ritual slaughtering of animals. When someone newly religious asked them to slaughter a pheasant that she recalled was tasty, they found out that the world’s top arbiter of Jewish law, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, had forbidden eating them, because there was no chain of tradition about what bird a pheasant really was.

Because a bird is kosher only if there is a chain of tradition called a *mesora* that it has always been kosher, each community had its own customs regarding whether local birds were permitted to be eaten.

Shortly after learning about Feinstein’s rejection of the pheasant, the two Aris overheard a Yemenite student in the yeshiva talking about how the top rabbi of Yemenite immigrants, Yosef Kappah, had spoken that week about slaughtering that very bird, which the Talmud says should be on the table of kings.

Zivotofsky and Greenspan went to the North during the First Lebanon War and bought two pheasants,

There are many myths about why observant Jews do not eat giraffes, most notably that its neck is so long that there is a question about where to cut it

which Kappah and Greenspan slaughtered while Zivotofsky took pictures. Kappah signed a document that said he saw great rabbis slaughtering the bird in Yemen, and the chain of tradition was formally passed on.

“This was a real eye opener for us,” Greenspan said in an interview at his dental office in the capital’s Malha Technological Park. “We realized that now we had the mesora and the great Rabbi Moshe Feinstein didn’t. The mesora is a link in the chain and now we were a part of it.”

Feinstein died before he could hear about the discovery, but his son-in-law, Rabbi Moshe Tendler, later came here and ate pheasant with Greenspan and Zivotofsky.

THE TWO ARIS realized that in an industrial food age, the old rabbis and ritual slaughterers (*shohetim*) who remembered which local birds and locusts were kosher were passing away. So they began interviewing these holders of tradition and collecting their chains of tra-

dition via oral, video and photographic evidence.

“We understood that we were on the cusp of Jewish history,” Greenspan said. “The Jewish state brought together old shohetim from around the Jewish world, but they were disappearing while everyone was only eating chicken. So after we made aliya, we started to visit these old men and women and learn from them.”

From the pheasant, Greenspan and Zivotofsky moved on to birds like the partridge and the guinea fowl. Then they started working on locusts, controversial fish like the swordfish and then on mammals like red deer and water buffalo.

The meal Tendler attended was the first “mesora dinner” at Eucalyptus in 2002. The restaurant’s location at the time had room for 70 people, but double showed up, including top rabbis from around the world, who listened to lectures about the history of each animal as they ate them.

“That meal made us realize how important what we were doing was and how much interest there was in

Jewish vegetarians oppose 'mesora meals'

Not everyone is happy about Ari Greenspan's and Ari Zivotofsky's efforts to maintain the chain of tradition for birds and other animals.

The Jewish Vegetarians of North America protested outside the Orthodox Union dinner in Los Angeles organized by the two in 2007. The organization's president, Staten Island College Professor Emeritus Richard Schwartz, was dismayed to hear about the Mesora Dinner in Jerusalem.

"This event, involving the eating of so many of God's creatures, completely contradicts our mandate to be *rahmanim b'nei rahmanim* [compassionate children of compassionate ancestors] and to imitate God whose mercies are over all of His works" (Psalms 145:9), said Schwartz, author of *Judaism and Vegetarianism*.

"Even if ritual slaughter is performed flawlessly, consistent with Halacha, we should not ignore the severe violations of Jewish law occurring daily on factory farms. We should fulfill our charge to be 'a light unto the nations' by helping to lead the world away from a diet that is so harmful to people, the environment and animals to one that is far more consistent with basic Jewish values, especially at a time when animal-based diets are causing an epidemic of disease in the Jewish community and other communities and when animal-based agriculture is a major contributor to global warming and many other environmental threats to all of humanity."

Schwartz said he would respectfully invite Greenspan, Zivotofsky or any other Jewish scholar to a debate on whether Jews should be vegetarians. He said such an event would be a *kiddush Hashem* that would show the relevance of Judaism's eternal values to current issues.

— G.H.



A YEMENITE enjoying his pita and locusts

it," Greenspan said. "It's not about an orgy of slaughtering and meat. It's about tradition and part of the experience is eating the food. All of this craziness is just to teach about the mesora."

The next mesora meals were held in New York in 2004 and Los Angeles three years later at the request of the Orthodox Union, America's top kosher certification organization. The meals were held following well-attended conferences in each city in which Zivotofsky and Greenspan presented their findings about

the animals, including the shibuta, which debuted at the meal in LA.

Thursday's meal was the culmination of years of research studying the chain of tradition and months of work in obtaining the animals around the world, slaughtering them and preparing them.

For instance, after failing to find adult pheasants here, Greenspan and Zivotofsky received them from the rabbinate in Rome. After Israeli locusts being raised for the meal died a week before it due to the



LOCUST PLAGUE, Jerusalem, 1915

heat wave, Greenspan's cousin brought 250 from a research institute outside London.

Other attendees at the meal brought kingclip fish from South Africa. Water buffalo for a carpaccio dish came from a farm in the Negev and were slaughtered at Tnuva's slaughterhouse in Beit She'an. The deer was tested for disease at the Veterinary Institute in Beit Dagan.

The feast also included a pheasant and guinea fowl pastry, quail in caramel sauce, cow udder, fried locusts and *shiluah haken* soup. The soup commemorated the mitzva of sending away the mother bird, because it featured a *fleishig* egg that was extracted from a slaughtered hen inside a noodle nest in sparrow, dove and pigeon broth.

"The amount of work that goes into such a meal is incomprehensible," Greenspan said. "I'm a full-time dentist, but this was also a full-time job. Normally you go to a restaurant, and the chef makes what you order. We had to find all the animals and provide everything for the restaurant."

The food also had to meet the highest kosher standards. To that end, Greenspan and Zivotofsky received assistance from Rabbi Shlomo Machfud, a respected and very busy Yemenite haredi arbiter, who is in charge of all Tnuva slaughtering.

When asked whether it was a problem to mix traditions of Yemenite, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, Greenspan noted that the top work of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Aruch*, says that if one community does not have the tradition on one bird, it can rely on the tradition of another.

"It's not a custom like *kitniyot*," Greenspan said, referring to legumes that Sephardim eat on Pessah while most Ashkenazi rabbis forbid them. "It's a

eaten by Jews in Mediterranean countries and later the US.

In 1951, Tendler ruled it unkosher, because scientists at the time thought swordfish had scales as juveniles but not as adults, and for fish to be kosher, they must have fins and scales. The Chief Rabbinate here and the Conservative Movement in the US never accepted the ruling, which created schisms.

"We have examined them on several occasions in different places and they have always had scales," said Zivotofsky, who urged participants at last

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function of testimony."

YET THERE ARE still controversies regarding Zivotofsky and Greenspan's efforts, with the most emotional issue being the swordfish. For at least 350 years, the swordfish was treated as kosher and

giraffe. They have tried unsuccessfully to purchase giraffes in African countries where it is neither an endangered species nor a protected one.

The problems with giraffes include the strength of the animals, which can kill a lion with one kick; their expense; their lack of taste that is indicated by the fact that Africans do not eat them; and their sheer beauty.

"It would turn too many people off," Zivotofsky. "But at some point in the future, we still would like to."

The mesora for the giraffe could include Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon's translation of one of the permitted animals listed in the Torah as giraffe and stories about wealthy Jewish families eating giraffes at the turn of the century.

Other animals that could be eaten at future mesora meals include the kudu, a southern African antelope whose horns are used for shofarot, and peacocks, which currently lack a mesora, but there is evidence were once considered kosher. The Aris hope to find elderly Persian Jews with knowledge about the bird being slaughtered and eaten in Iran, but they fear it might be too late to find them.

Some of the animals in question are pheasants, partridges, guinea fowl, locusts, swordfish, red deer and water buffalo

Thursday's meal to consider whether to eat the fish.

At the meal, a 300-page source book was distributed, which contains Tendler's explanations and several articles and letters validating the swordfish as kosher.

One animal that was noticeably absent from the feast was the giraffe. There are many myths about why observant Jews do not eat giraffe, most notably that its neck is so long that there is a question about where to cut it or because it is considered an endangered species.

Greenspan and Zivotofsky, who dissected giraffes that died at the Ramat Gan Safari, said they knew exactly where to cut their necks, but there were other reasons why they had never slaughtered a

Greenspan and Zivotofsky stressed that their goal was simply to maintain the mesora, not to make rare animals marketable enough to end up regular guests on Shabbat dinner plates. They both stressed that they were perfectly happy eating chicken every Friday night.

"Unfortunately, the era of finding elderly scholars from the old world has passed," Greenspan said. "That part of history is over, and we were lucky to tap into it. It was a privilege to be at the right place at the right time and that God gave us the gift to record such important information. We will continue traveling and learning and use the knowledge we gain to continue to enlighten the people of Israel." ■