

ZOHAR AMAR

The Eating of Locusts in Jewish Tradition After the Talmudic Period

The purpose of this article is to trace the process through which the tradition of eating locusts was either preserved or interrupted in Jewish communities from the talmudic period up until our own times. This study is based primarily on written sources, most of which deal with halakhic matters. Additional material of significance was collected in the course of interviews held with hundreds of people, particularly those of Yemenite and North African origin, who were accustomed to eating kosher locusts (until the 1950's) based on an oral tradition which they had held for generations.¹

The Torah considered various types of insects kosher, and permitted their consumption according to clearly defined signs of cleanliness:

Yet these may you eat of every winged swarming thing that goes upon four, which have legs above their feet to leap with upon the earth. These of them you may eat: the locust (*arbeh*) after its kind, and the *sal'am* after its kind, and the *hargol* after its kind, and the *hagav* after its kind (Lev. 11: 21-22).

ZOHAR AMAR is senior lecturer in the Department of Land of Israel Studies at Bar-Ilan University. He is an expert on the flora and fauna of the land of Israel, the material culture and realia of the Middle Ages, and the history of medicine. Among his publications, which include several books and dozens of monographs and scholarly articles, are *Agricultural Products in the Land of Israel in the Middle Ages* (2000), *Physicians, Drugs and Remedies in Jerusalem from the 10th-18th Centuries* (with E. Lev), and *The Book of Incense* (2002).

The rabbinic sages listed the signs that determine if an insect is kosher (*Hullin* 3:7), and other signs were added according to a tradition.² *Ḥazal* also dealt with the identification of the kosher locusts mentioned in the Torah, since by their time locusts were no longer widely known by their biblical names and therefore had to be identified and named using contemporaneous terminology:

The Rabbis learned: These may you eat, etc. The locust—this is *govay*; the *sal'am*—this is *rashon*; *ḥargol*—this is *nipol*; *ḥagav*—this is *gidan*. What does it mean “after its kind?” The term “after its kind” is written four times in order to include the *zipporet keramim* and the Jerusalem *yoḥana*, and the *arzuva* and the *razbanit*. . . . And doesn't the *zarzur* have four legs and four wings that bend and its wings cover its body? Perhaps it is permitted? We learn: *ḥagav*. Its name is *ḥagav* (*Hullin* 65a-b).

In total, Rambam notes eight types of insects considered kosher according to the Torah and the rabbinic tradition.³ These names, however, do not necessarily refer to specific species of insects in the sense of contemporary scientific nomenclature, but rather to groups of insects with specific characteristics as indicated by the rabbinic literature (*Hullin* 65a-b).

The custom of eating locusts was clearly very widespread during the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud and is documented in many sources. I will bring only a few examples here. The earliest text documenting the eating of insects in the Land of Israel during the Second Commonwealth is found in the book *Berit Damesek*. This work, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls written by a Judean Desert sect independent from the Pharisees at the end of the Second Commonwealth, quotes the following rule: “And all of the grasshoppers of their kinds shall be brought in fire or water while still alive for this is the law of their creation.”⁴ A discussion is brought in the Mishnah dealing with the question of what blessing is to be recited upon eating the locust, *govay* (*Berakhot* 6:3). Locusts were to be treated like fish, in that they are not involved in any of the prohibitions concerning milk and meat (*Hullin* 8:1). Locusts were considered among the basic foodstuffs of humans⁵ and could be preserved for long periods of time. Locusts were prepared for consumption by detaching their wings with a knife and peeling them as one peels the scales off fish.⁶ From rabbinic sources we learn that locusts were boiled or pickled in salt and vinegar to preserve them.⁷ The Mishnah also describes the preparation of a “locust soup”: “Non-kosher locusts which were pickled with kosher locusts are not ruled as making the sauce unfit. Rabbi Z̄adok ruled that the sauce of non-

kosher locusts is pure.”⁸ Locusts were pickled in special barrels known as *gevonta* from the word *govay*—locusts.⁹ Locusts were also stored in *heftek*, which Rashi explains as: “the storage place for salted locusts.”¹⁰

The modern attempt to identify the types of kosher “winged swarming things” is problematic. Only the *arbeh* (in Arabic, *garad*) has been clearly identified as the locust, while the other kinds cannot be defined with certainty. “Locust” is the name given to the types of grasshoppers that tend to appear in vast swarms, and the term refers mainly to the desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*). Most suggestions for identification accept that the *sal’am*, *hargol*, and *hagav* mentioned in the Torah are types of insects in which the swarming instinct does not develop.¹¹

The main conclusion that emerges from these studies is that many types of kosher insects had formerly been identified through a tradition; some of them were destructive and appeared in swarms or groups, while others existed as individual insects. However, over the generations the tradition regarding most of the types was forgotten, and in practice only the “locust after its kind,” *arbeh*, has been eaten in the past several centuries.¹² The tradition regarding the locust was preserved due to its importance as food in contrast with the other types of winged insects, and the centrality of the locust as a staple also explains why it is mentioned first in the Torah among those permitted as food. The process through which the tradition was lost regarding the other types (*sal’am*, *hargol*, and *hagav*) was prolonged and gradual, and apparently began after the talmudic period. However, over time there has been an erosion among Jewish communities of the tradition for identifying the locust as well.

It should be noted that the term “*hagav*,” although originally used to refer to an unidentified type of insect, was later used as a synonym for *arbeh*, the type identified as the locust.

Ashkenaz and Provence

By the early Middle Ages, the Jewish communities in Ashkenaz and Provence were no longer familiar with the names of the kosher locusts. Discussion in the writings of the halakhic authorities of Europe reveals a gradual process of erosion in the tradition of identifying locusts for the purpose of eating them. The *rishonim* note this process only concerning their own locale, apparently acknowledging that the eating of kosher locusts was accepted practice in other regions in their time, but we find that the *aharonim* did not know that this tradition was practiced at all.

Rashi's words lead us to conclude that he knew of the types of locusts commonly found in the areas of Europe with which he was familiar. However, the Jews of his time and place did not have a tradition allowing them to distinguish between the characteristic signs of the kosher and non-kosher types of locusts.

And there are many among us in our place, such as those that are known as *langosta*. However, we lack expert familiarity with them, for they had four signs of ritual purity: four legs and four wings, jointed legs, and wings covering most of the body. These signs are present in those found among us, but there are some with a long head and some that have no tail, and its name should be *ḥagav*. In this sense, we do not know how to differentiate among them (Rashi, Lev. 11:21).

Rashi calls the locusts *langosta* (this is their name in Spanish today), and the same term is used later by Jacques de Vitry (1220) to describe the locusts eaten in the East by the natives. De Vitry, who was of French origin, went to Israel during the Crusader Period and served as the Bishop of Acre. In an essay, he referred to the Christian tradition that notes that John the Baptist ate locusts (Matthew 3:4). According to de Vitry, this did not actually refer to locusts, but rather to *langosta*, which is also the name of a plant.¹³ This interpretation indicates that, at that time, locusts were not a common item in the typical food basket in France, and eating them was considered unusual.

R. Menaḥem ben Shelomoh ha-Meiri (1249–1316), one of the greatest talmudic commentators in Provence, noted the absence of a tradition of locust eating in his day. As a commentator also aware of the contemporary Spanish traditions, Meiri contrasts the Sefardi tradition of eating locusts with the practice in Provence:

There are those who permit eating them according to the four signs, even though they are not known by the name of "*ḥagav*," and in many places in Spain, they are eaten on the basis of the four signs according to what the *aḥaronim* testified, and not necessarily by the tradition that they were known as "*ḥagav*." And in these countries we have seen that the sages, the *aḥaronim*, testified that they checked them and found them to possess the four signs; however, it is not the custom to allow them to be eaten since we have not been informed that they are included under the name of "*ḥagav*."¹⁴

In the *rishonim* we detect an apologetic tone for the lack of a tradition for identifying kosher locusts in their countries, in contrast with other locales, such as Spain; among the *aḥaronim*, however, the phrasing is much sharper and clearer. An explanation for the lack of familiar-

ity with the various species of locust in Provence is offered by R. Levi ben Gershom (Ralbag, 1288–1344) in his commentary on the Torah: “. . . these are the types that are difficult to know, and all the more so for us, due to our lack of expertise in the Holy Tongue at this time in which we live.”¹⁵ In contrast, R. David Shemuel ha-Levi (1588–1667) wrote in his commentary on the *Shulḥan Arukh*: “And now the custom is not to eat any locust even when it is known that its name is ‘*ḥagav*,’ because we are not knowledgeable about their names.”¹⁶

The closer we draw to modern times, the greater the reservations of the *posekim* of Ashkenaz regarding the eating of locusts. By the nineteenth century, most of these *posekim* did not know that there was still such a tradition in the countries where Islam was dominant, and many seemed to accept that this tradition had become obsolete. This is what emerges from the writing of R. Yeḥiel Epstein (1835–1905):

And now we do not eat any kind of locust, even those that possess all of the signs, and even those that are known by the name of “*ḥagav*.” And we have never heard that there was a place where locusts are eaten.¹⁷

Spain

We first hear of the tradition of eating kosher locusts in Spain from R. Shelomoh ben Aderet (Rashba 1235–1315), one of the greatest authorities in Spain, who was born in Barcelona and was active there his entire life:

. . . therefore, in these countries, although there are those which have four signs, they are eaten only according to the tradition that they bear the name of “*ḥagav*,” but they are eaten according to a tradition, as the case is with fowl. And there are many places in Spain where they are eaten according to a tradition.¹⁸

From the words of the Rashba one may deduce that there were also regions in Spain where there was no tradition of eating locusts. This may also be concluded from the words of R. Nissim Gerondi (Ran, d. ca. 1375). In his commentary on *Hullin*, in discussing whether it is necessary for the locust to be called “*ḥagav*,” he comments: “. . . and they did not eat them since they were not familiar with their names, and it was not proper to eat them except according to a tradition.”¹⁹ Following this line, the Andalusian physician Ibn Zuhr (Aven Zoar 1092–1162) in his book *Foodstuffs*, attested that in his time they did not eat the common locust in Spain.²⁰

One may also learn of the absence of a tradition in Spain for the signs used to identify kosher locusts from the words of R. Avraham ben

David (Ravad, 1120–1198) who was active in Narbonne and Provence. Addressing Rambam’s ruling that we blow the *shofar* upon the appearance only of certain insects,²¹ Ravad comments: “And now that we do not know the different species, we must sound the warning with reference to all of them.”²² However, R. Shelomoh ben Shimon Duran (Rashbash, 1438–1510) expressed surprise at this argument and rejected it out of hand: “As to the kind that appears here, it is known that when a few appear, many more will follow. Therefore when we see a few, we immediately blow the trumpets.”²³

The comment of the Rashbash is of great importance in light of the fact that both he and his son, R. Zemaḥ Duran, had a tradition for eating the locust based on the tradition of locust eating in Spain. The father of this rabbinic dynasty, R. Shimon Duran, left Provence and settled in the Isle of Majorca just off Spain before coming to North Africa in 1391. Thus, the Duran family was certainly well versed in Spanish custom, and the tradition of eating kosher locusts must have been familiar to them. It is therefore understandable that the Rashbash could differentiate between different types of locust. The contradiction between the Rashbash and the Ravad is elucidated if we assume that during their time the tradition of locust eating was accepted only in certain regions or communities in Spain, while it had been forgotten in others.

North Africa

The geographical connection between Spain and North Africa, the immigration of the Jews, and the scholarly influences of these two centers on each other assuredly had a decisive impact on the continuity of the tradition of locust eating. This is reflected in the words of R. Mosheh Toledano (1724–1773), one of the greatest scholars of Morocco in his day, who defended the tradition of eating locusts and the tradition of the signs of ritual purity that had been handed down to the residents of his city by their forefathers. From his words, one may understand that the tradition of locust eating was known in the Castille region of Spain, and the Jews who were expelled from there carried this tradition with them to North Africa: “that our fathers had received the tradition from their forefathers who were expelled from Castille, where these locusts were known as *ḥagavim*, and the community acted on the basis of their instruction.”²⁴

The question of the tradition of locust eating in North Africa is first mentioned at length in a question addressed to R. Zemaḥ Duran (fifteenth century) regarding the *kashrut* of locusts which had been collected and cooked by non-Jews. The assumption of both the questioner and

the respondent was that locusts collected and cooked by Jews were definitely permitted.²⁵ The grandson of R. Zemaḥ, in his comments at a later period, added further details, among which we find that the tradition of eating locusts was accepted in various countries and regions of North Africa: in Libya (Tripoli), Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. In rebutting those who expressed doubts about this tradition, he cited as support Rashba's comment regarding the tradition in Spain, and added that this was the custom in North Africa as well: "And therefore, no one can prevent them from practicing this custom, and as such let the custom of each of these countries continue to exist. . . ."²⁶

The most famous response is that of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar (1696–1743), born in Sallee, Morocco, who in his time forbade the Jews of his city from eating locusts. According to his account, many consequently refrained from doing so:

I intended to give my opinion on what I see: that the people of our city are accustomed to doing so in those years when locusts descend on the cities of the west, and it is a great blow to the crops; and I saw our people stretch out their hands to eat them. . . . From now on one must not follow this custom which has been treated as permissible, because it is not a proper one. . . .²⁷

R. Ḥayyim ben Atar wrote similar words in his commentary on the Torah: "Therefore let every pious and God-fearing person take care not to stretch out his hand to this abomination and let him protest against those who do."²⁸

Without entering into his halakhic argumentation, which is primarily based on an understanding of Rashi's commentary to Lev. 11: 21, one may learn from the words of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar himself that the eating of locusts in Morocco was very common among the Jews. According to testimonies that he collected, the custom of eating locusts began in one of the years of famine that broke out during that time, and it was only after this event that the Jews adopted this custom. It must be noted that in most Jewish communities, usually during famine years, the custom of eating locusts was practiced. However, the eating of locusts in Morocco was not a new phenomenon. As stated previously, it is mentioned in the writings of R. Zemaḥ Duran,²⁹ who is not quoted by R. Ḥayyim ben Atar.

R. Ḥayyim ben Atar's halakhic ruling, which carried significant rabbinical authority, represents a major landmark in the tradition of locust eating in Jewish communities. Almost everyone who did not have the tradition or who was opposed to it based himself on this authoritative source. Thus, for example R. David Pardo (1718–1790), a native of

Venice who was active in Jerusalem and who more than once expressed reservations about the words of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar,³⁰ tended to agree with him on this subject. In his commentary on the *Tosefta*, R. Pardo even tries to use the *Tosefta* to support the prohibition: “And if we are sincere in our commentary, we have found support for his conclusions from this *tosefta*.”³¹

R. Ḥayyim ben Atar’s halakhic ruling had a marked influence on the tradition of eating locusts which was prevalent in Tunisia. More precisely, he influenced those who issued the rulings, *posekim* who accepted his opinion without question. This emerges from a letter sent by R. Aharon Perez of Djerba (d. 1766) to R. David Eliyahu Hajaj from the city of Kafsa in the south of Tunisia. From this letter we see that during R. Aharon Peretz’s time, locust eating was an accepted practice. It was also accepted by the eminent rabbis of Djerba, among them R. Nissim K’iat, and R. Aharon Perez himself attests that “I, too, used to love to eat it more than any other delicacy.” Then a copy of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar’s book, *Peri To`ar*, came into his hands, and after reading it, R. Perez was convinced that it was right, and that the eating of locusts should be forbidden. R. Aharon Perez stopped eating locusts but refrained from publicizing his decision, since it was still accepted practice to eat locusts in Tunis. When the prohibition against eating locusts was publicized in Tunis (a city whose rabbinical court was considered to have the higher authority), R. Aharon also issued a declaration in Djerba.³² The prohibition against eating locusts is also quoted in later sources. R. Mosheh Kalfon ha-Kohen (1864–1950), in his essay on the customs of Djerba, supports R. Aharon Perez’s reform but alludes to the fact that there were regions of Tunisia where the locust was still eaten:

We do not want to hear and we should not wish to permit what our forefathers have forbidden. For if there was only a doubt, then it must be judged stringently; and furthermore, concerning things that were permitted but which others ruled forbidden, you are not allowed to permit them. And although there are a few regions where they are still eaten, we will do it our way and they will do it their way, because in our region, everyone considers them to be creeping unclean things.³³

In contrast, other Jewish communities in Yemen and Morocco, where there was a tradition of locust eating, did not accept R. Ḥayyim ben Atar’s ruling. There were those who considered the ruling an obstacle that challenged a tradition that they had held for generations. This was particularly true regarding the Jews of North Africa, to whom R. Ḥayyim ben Atar’s ruling had been addressed. A considerable number

of rabbinical scholars in Morocco did not agree with this ruling, and they came out against it sharply, hoping to defend the tradition of eating kosher locusts, and they especially wished to dismiss the impression that their forefathers had eaten unclean insects and creeping things. In their responsa they prove that the tradition was a reliable halakhically well-founded one held throughout the generations, and shared by many Torah scholars and various extensive communities.

It seems that the first to express reservations with respect to R. Ḥayyim ben Atar's ruling was R. Kalifa ben Malka, who lived at the same time as Ben Atar and even knew Ben Atar's father personally.³⁴ R. Mosheh ben Toledano, who was active in the city of Meknes (where R. Ḥayyim ben Atar was active as well), also attested to the custom of eating locusts in his city and then attacked the words of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar:

And to hear the words of Rabbi R. Ḥayyim ben Atar in his book *Peri To'ar*, 65, an indictment of the people of the Maghreb who always ate locusts, and [for him] to hurl accusations at them which are not fit to be spoken even about a young school boy! Although I am not the person to answer, and I am not the equal of even the humblest of his students, yet zeal for God will speak out; and the time has come to speak up in defense of my fathers and forefathers who since ancient times have been leaders of the community and whose renown precedes them to all the countries near and far, attaining such heights that in their times the entire Jewish world practiced the custom of eating locusts. . . .³⁵

One of the chief opponents of the ruling of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar was R. Petaḥyah Mordekhai Birdogo, one of the prominent *posekim* of North African Jewry in the last third of the eighteenth century. R. Birdogo refutes the words of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar point for point; we will quote only the beginning and end of his text. It should be noted that in his rebuttal of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar, R. Birdogo used atypically harsh and acerbic language (quoted here only in part). Apparently, he used this technique to reinforce his words and to encourage the tradition of eating locusts in Morocco, a practice that had begun to decline in consequence of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar's ruling:

I saw in the rabbi's arguments that there are reasons for forbidding their eating, but there is not sufficient evidence to change what is known and accepted from venerable rabbis as well as their sons after them in every generation, guardians of the law, distinguished scholars and men of intellect. No one has raised his voice to protest those who act as their forefathers did what was permitted to them . . . God forbid that we should believe his words. . . . In conclusion we continue to see these as permitted and we leave it as it has been, that they are totally permitted.³⁶

R. Avraham ben Mordekhai Anakawe (b. 1810) also wrote at length on the tradition of eating locusts in North Africa. He, like R. Ḥayyim ben Atar, was a native of Sallee in Morocco. He explicitly attested that he had never eaten locusts, but not because of the prohibition against doing so. Moreover, there were rabbis who openly and publicly ate locusts, apparently because of the need to relieve the apprehension caused by R. Ḥayyim ben Atar's ruling: "It is eaten publicly in several communities, and is served as a delicacy."³⁷ Among the later critics of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar's ruling was R. Yedidiah Monsoniego, a native of Fez who died in 1868: "And the righteous rabbi caused the world to tremble with this and there was much bitter complaining. . . . In my humble opinion, whoever acts according to the strict decree of the rabbi of the *Peri To'ar* should do so in private."³⁸

Several accounts of locust-eating by the Jews of North Africa were brought by travelers and scholars who visited this region at the end of the nineteenth century.³⁹ It became clear through interviews that I conducted that locust eating by the Jews of North Africa was very widespread until the 1950's and 60's. This practice was quite common in the towns and cities along the strip bordering on the Sahara Desert. This region was a focus for locust invasions, which periodically struck the area. The inhabitants of the region also suffered from other natural disasters, including years of drought and famine, and consequently the locusts were received gladly as a source of food by Moslems and Jews, who bought them from the Bedouins in great quantities. Locust eating was especially accepted in southern Algeria and in certain places in Morocco, although there were many Jews who refrained from eating them.

Yemen

A clear tradition of eating locusts was accepted by all factions of Yemenite Jewry. The Jews of Yemen were expert at identifying the different types of locust, and they used to eat the kosher types whenever the opportunity presented itself. Thus R. Yosef Kafih wrote: "The Jews of Yemen would collect locusts and eat them, but not all of the kinds, just the known kinds which they received as a tradition from their forefathers according to a tradition passed down from person to person, defining those which are ritually pure. . . ." ⁴⁰

The first written accounts of locust eating among the Jews of Yemen are mentioned in the essay written by R. Yeḥia ben Yosef Salah (Mahariz, 1745-1805), the head of the rabbinical court in Sanaa in the eighteenth century,⁴¹ and the words of R. Yeḥia Bashiri, one of the prominent

posekim of Yemen who lived in the seventeenth century. The eating of locusts in Yemen is also noted by R. David Masharki (Mizrahi, ca. 1691–1771). In his commentary on the *Shulḥan Arukh*, in the chapter on the signs of the locust, he wrote: “And in these places they eat the type accepted by tradition.”⁴² The tradition of eating locusts is also described in the book by R. Amram ben Yehia Korah (1871–1953). He also described the manner in which it was collected and prepared for eating:

It is a tradition passed down from previous generations in all the regions of Yemen that the locust, renowned for its tremendous numbers and known in Arabic as *garad* is a kind of *ḥagav* and is kosher. And when they see the wing of it, they rejoice at its coming. Even though they are sorry about the damage it causes in consuming the grain of the country, nonetheless they take momentary pleasure in it. Towards evening, they look over the roofs where the locust has alighted, and though it be a walk of an hour or two, they rise early before dawn, while the land is still frozen with the cold, and leave the city, man, woman, and child, and every one is carrying a bag. They collect whatever comes to hand. Whoever has a donkey fills sacks and loads them onto his donkey, and they come back to the country joyful and happy, like someone who has found great treasure.⁴³

There are many more accounts of the tradition of locust eating by Yemenite Jewry. This practice was maintained by thousands of Yemenite Jews who emigrated to Israel in 1949, and they constitute a living testimony of the practice and an authentic and reliable tradition. There are only several hundreds of Jews left in Yemen today, and they continue to eat locusts whenever the insects appear in Yemen.⁴⁴

The Land of Israel

The impression that emerges from the rabbinical sources is that during the mishnaic and talmudic periods there was still a tradition in the Land of Israel of eating all the species of locusts mentioned in the Torah. When the writing of the Talmud was completed, there were fewer sources noting the customs of the Land of Israel in general, and, in particular, the custom of eating locusts. Lone echoes of this may be found in the remnants of the halakhic literature and the *piyyutim* that were written after the closing of the Talmud in the Land of Israel. In a halakhic essay written in the Land of Israel ca. 700, there is a reference to the dispute between the people of the land of Israel and those of Babylon concerning locusts boiled by non-Jews: “The people of the east [Babylon] permit the consumption of beans, as well as locusts, that were

boiled by a non-Jew, while the people of the land of Israel forbid it since they mix the liquid of the meat with the liquid of the fruit".⁴⁵ A comparison to the rest of the laws in which there is a dispute between those living in the land of Israel and those in Babylon suggests that this was not just a theoretical halakhic discussion but referred to actual practices during those times. If this is so, then it is also the last account we have of the custom of eating locusts in Babylon.

More explicit information about locust eating in the Land of Israel may be found in the Karaite literature written in Jerusalem in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Yafet ben Ali and Yeshua ben Yehudah (known by the name of Abu al-Farg Farkan), among the pre-eminent Karaite scholars, forbade the eating of locusts, including "the locusts (*garad*) of all kinds," because of the absence of a clear tradition. However, Saḥal ben Masliaḥ (known by the name of Abu al-Seri) wrote explicitly that "the locust—*garad* in Arabic—is eaten by all the Jews."⁴⁶ From the words of Yeshua ben Yehudah it also seems that the general populace of Karaites did not eat "any locust of any kind," but only those kinds for which there was a tradition: "You should know that *arbeh* in Hebrew and *garad* in Arabic are two names given for various types of 'winged swarming things' which had jointed legs; there are those which the common people forbid and there are those that they permit."⁴⁷ At any rate, in the fourteenth century all Karaites avoided eating locusts, as noted by one of the greatest of the Karaite sages, Aharon ben Eliyahu of Nicomedia (1300-1369): "And now that we are ignorant of the names, they are all considered forbidden."⁴⁸ In a similar vein the Karaite sage Eliyahu Bashaizi (d. 1490) wrote: "And throughout our exile, we did not know their names, as happened to us with the fowl: therefore, we should abstain from eating them."⁴⁹

We have no clear-cut information whether the Jews in the Land of Israel ate the rest of the species known as "winged swarming things" (*sal'am*, *ḥargol*, and *ḥagav*) during that period. Nonetheless, what is clear is that over the generations, the tradition about the species was lost and most Jews only ate the locust "*arbeh—garad*," while this tradition had totally disappeared among the Samaritans⁵⁰ and the Karaites.

The clearest and latest account we have about locust eating in the Land of Israel was brought by R. Shimon Bekhar Ya'akov who was sent as a rabbinical emissary from Safad to the countries of Europe. In 1694 when in the city of Frankfurt-am-Main, he met a German naturalist by the name of Job Ludolf. This scientist thoroughly interrogated the emissary from the Land of Israel about the locusts in the country. That same year he published a book on locusts and there, in Hebrew, his questions

appear verbatim along with the answers given by R. Shimon Bekhar Ya'akov:

Who eats them? The people who eat them are Turks and the common people, and also some Jews who are of the common folk, and they cook them in water.⁵¹

It appears that R. Shimon Bekhar Ya'akov, in writing "some Jews who are of the common folk," was referring to the community of Musta'rabs. These were Jews who had been living in the Land of Israel from ancient times. From the time of the expulsion from Spain until the end of the seventeenth century, their status had steadily declined and they frequently lived in the shadow of the Sephardic community. This trend was reflected in a gradual decline in their numbers and the small number of Torah scholars that the community produced. At the same time, they had different customs and arrangements than the Sephardim. Their social status was also more lowly; many of them were from among the rural sector and resembled the Arabs in outward appearance.⁵² Apparently as early as the eighth century the tradition of locust eating had disappeared among the Musta'rabs because of the geographical and halakhic dominance of the Jews living in the Land of Israel, both Sephardim and Ashkenazim, who did not have this tradition. It is possible that the emigration of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar to the Land of Israel in late 1741 and his acceptance as a great *posek* and Kabbalist contributed to this process.

The custom of eating locusts was reintroduced to the Land of Israel by Jews who emigrated from North Africa. Testimony to this effect is brought by R. Yehosef Schwartz in 1838, when a locust plague hit the country: "The Arabs and Ishmaelites roasted them and ate them, as did the Jews who come from the Barbary States (North Africa), saying that it was accepted by them that this species was the *ḥagav* and permissible for eating. . . ."⁵³ Additional testimony of locust eating in North Africa is brought in 1866 by R. Yehiel Brill, editor of the *Levanon* newspaper. He mentions the letters that ostensibly were found on the locust and used to identify it as kosher, as he heard from Jews who immigrated to Jerusalem from Algeria:

Those who come here from Algeria (because the locust struck there, too) tell that the locusts have Hebrew letters on their wings, and I remember being taught as a young child by my mother and father, who also told me that last year, too, when the locusts struck Jerusalem, they saw Hebrew letters on them. On some of them they saw the letter '*het*' and on some of them, the letter '*bet*.' And our brothers the Jews of Maghreb eat the

locusts with the letter ‘*het*’ and they regard as an abomination those which bear the letter ‘*bet*.’⁵⁴

The latest accounts of locust eating in the Land of Israel by the Jews of North Africa are from 1956. In that year, the Land of Israel was struck by a plague of locusts and some of the Jews of Morocco rushed to collect the locusts and prepare them for food.

The Jews of Yemen, like those of North Africa, brought with them to the Land of Israel the tradition of locust eating beginning with the year 1882. Whenever a plague of locusts darkened the countryside, the Jews of Yemen would go out and hunt and eat them according to the tradition that they had been taught in Yemen. R. Avraham Mosheh Lunz (1856–1918), one of the renowned scholars of Jerusalem, noted in the year 1900 that “the Jews of Yemen who are living in Jerusalem also would eat of the type that was known to them according to a tradition that they held.”⁵⁵

Those of Yemenite extraction did not miss the opportunity that came their way during the harsh locust plague that struck the Land of Israel in 1915. The Yemenite Jews who had settled in Rehovot, Jerusalem and other places took advantage of the opportunity and happily went about collecting the locusts, while the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews stood by in wonder at this phenomenon.⁵⁶ This, for example, is how Yisrael Aharoni described it:

The Yemenite Jews welcomed the coming of the locusts and received them joyfully, as our forefathers had received the quail in the desert. They set out for the almond orchards carrying large sacks which they filled with the tasty treasure, which was like sweets to the palate of a child.⁵⁷

The last accounts of locust eating in the land of Israel by the Jews of Yemen are from 1952 and 1956, during the last locust plagues which struck the country.

The Ethiopian Community

In recent years many Jews have come to Israel from Ethiopia. From various inquiries I made, it seems that the Ethiopian community did not eat locusts, due to their lack of knowledge of the signs of the permitted types. Beyond the halakhic aspect, there were some members of the community who considered the eating of locusts to be loathsome. Exceptions to this were the inhabitants of Tigre in eastern Ethiopia, who did eat locusts.

Summary

The practice of eating insects or, more precisely, certain species of kosher locusts, is an unusual phenomenon in the Jewish world. Although very much accepted in ancient times, the practice declined among a considerable part of Diaspora Jewry due to the absence of a tradition and the lack of knowledge surrounding the various types of “winged swarming things” mentioned in the Torah. A reliable tradition was preserved until our own times only regarding the *arbeh* (locust) and only among the Jews of Yemen and some of the Jews of North Africa. Today, the practice of eating locusts has nearly disappeared entirely as a result of two central factors. The first is the disappearance of locusts in recent years as a natural disaster commonly occurring in many regions of the world, thanks to efficient extermination methods achieved by international cooperation. The second factor is that eating of locusts and insects in general is not accepted nearly anywhere in the modern world where a western orientation is found. The cultural difference and difference in mindset has brought about a situation in which some of the Jews who in the past had eaten locusts with relish refrain from doing so today.

Notes

1. Due to space limitations, this article will relate only to written historical accounts up until the mid-twentieth century, when most Oriental Jews made *aliyah* to Israel. Later accounts will be presented in another framework.
2. One of these is the appearance of the letter *‘het’* on the thorax of the locust. See further Hanan Seri and Zohar Amar, “The *Kashrut* of the Locust,” *Teḥumin* 19 (1999): 283-299; Aharon Gaimani, “The Locust in Yemenite Communities” (Hebrew), *BDD* 10 (2000): 17-37.
3. Cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Ma’akhalot Asurot*, 1: 22-23.
4. Damascus Document XII. See the discussion in Adolph Buchler, “Schechter’s ‘Jewish Sectaries,’” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 3 (1912-1913): 444-445.
5. *Mekhilta de-Rashbi* 18: 9; *Gen. Rabbah* 67: 2.
6. *Tosefta Ukkezin* 2:16.
7. *Tanḥuma Va-yera*, 14; *Ex. Rabbah* 13: 7; *Avodah Zarah* 40b.
8. *Terumot* 10: 9; *Eduyot* 7:2; *Tosefta*, *Eduyot* 3:1.
9. *J.T. Terumot* 10:7, 47b; *J.T. Avodah Zarah* 2: 9, 42a; commentary of the *Penei Mosheh*, s.v. *zevinta*.
10. *Avodah Zarah* 2: 7; *Avodah Zarah* 39b.
11. For identification of the various types of winged swarming insects, see the following studies: Yisrael Aharoni, *The Locust* (Hebrew) (Jaffa, 1920); Yehuda Gur, “*Roshan-rashon*”, *Leshonenu* 13 (5704): 56; Yaakov Palmoni, “Names of Locusts in the Bible” (Hebrew), *Sinai* 27 (5710): 283-287; Yehuda Feliks,

- Fauna and Flora in the Torah* (Jerusalem, 1984); Menaḥem Dor, *Fauna in the Times of the Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1997).
12. This is with the exception of part of Yemenite Jewry, which had a tradition regarding the eating of certain individual grasshoppers in addition to the locust (*garad*), as revealed in information received from many informants. One of these species is *Anacridium aegyptium*.
 13. Jacobus de Vitriaco, "Historia Orientalis", in: *Gesta Dei per Francos*, ed. J. Bongars (Hanover, 1611), 1075.
 14. R. Menaḥem ben R. Shelomo ha-Meiri, *Beit ha-Beḥirah*, A. Liss Edition, (Jerusalem, 1974), on *Hullin* 65.
 15. R. Levi ben Gershom, *Commentaries on the Torah* (Y.L. Levi Edition), 3 (Jerusalem, 1997), on Lev. 11:22.
 16. *Turei Zahav*, *Yoreh De'ah* 85:1.
 17. *Arukh ha- Shulḥan*, *Yoreh De'ah* 85: 5.
 18. *Torat ha-Bayit ha-Arokh*, (Jerusalem, 1923), *Bayit Shelishi, sha'ar rishon: Hiddushei ha-Rashba* to *Hullin* 65a; also quoted in R. Zemaḥ Duran, *Responsa Yakhin u-Boaz*, I, #64; and also Meiri, *Beit ha-Beḥirah*, *Hullin* 65.
 19. Ran, *Hullin*, 23a.
 20. Abu Marwan, 'Abd al-Malik b. Zuhr, *Kitab al-Agdiya*, ed. G. Sanchez, (Madrid, 1992), 29.
 21. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Ta'anit*, 2:10.
 22. Ravad, ad. loc. and the *Shulḥan Arukh*, *Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 576:9, also gave a similar ruling.
 23. R. Shelomoh ben Shimon Duran, *Responsa of the Rashbash* (Jerusalem, 1968), 629.
 24. R. Mosheh Toledano, *Melekheth ha-Kodesh* (Livorno, 1803) on *Parashat Shemini*.
 25. R. Shimon and R. Zemakh, sons of R. Shlomo ben Shimon Duran, *Sefer Yakhin u-Boaz* (Livorno, 1781), A, par. 64.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. R. Ḥayyim Atar, *Peri To'ar*, in *Sefer Perot Ginossar* (Jerusalem, 1991), *Yoreh De'ah* 85: 1.
 28. R. Ḥayyim Atar, *Or Ha-Ḥayyim*, Lev.11: 21.
 29. *Responsa Yakhin u-Boaz*, A, par. 64.
 30. See his book *Mizmor Le-David*.
 31. R. David Pardo, *Hasdei David le-Seder Kodashim* (Jerusalem, 1890) ad loc., *Tosefta Hullin* 73:9. See also his commentary on Lev. 11.
 32. Shalom Shimoni, *Ginzei Shalom* (Tunisia, 1916), *Yoreh De'ah*, 5.
 33. Calfon, Mosheh ha-Kohen, *Berit Kehunah ha-Shalem* (Bnei Brak, 1990), *Yoreh De'ah*, 4; *Hukkat Mosheh* (Djerba, 1959), par.8. A similar ruling was brought by Rabbi Shushan ha-Kohen (1907—1976) who was born in Djerba, see *Peraḥ Shushan* (Jerusalem, 1976), 57.
 34. His answer is cited in a short but excellent essay, which is in manuscript form only. The essay was written in 1759 after the death of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar. R. Kalifa ben Malka was apparently preparing to send his response to the yeshivah of R. Ḥayyim ben Atar in Jerusalem (which continued to exist until 1866). Part of the response of R. Kalifa ben Malka is quoted by David Pinto (the grandson of R. David Pardo), in the introduction to his book, *Mizmor le-David* (Brooklyn,1992).
 35. *Melekheth ha-Kodesh* on *Parashat Shemini*.

36. R. Petahya Mordekhai Birdogo, *Nofet Zufim* (Casablanca, 1938) on *Yoreh De'ah* 13.
37. R. Avraham ben Mordechai Ankawe, *Sefer Zevaḥim Shelemim* (Livorno, 1858), Laws of Ritual Slaughter, 81:2.
38. R. Yedidya Monsoniego, *Sefer Kuppah ha-Rokhelim* (Lod, 1994), under the letter 'het', 59- 60.
39. P. L. Simmonds, *The Animal Resources of Different Nations*, (London, 1885), 359-360; Frederich (Fritz) Simon Bodenheimer, *Insects as Human Food*, (The Hague, 1951), 204- 205.
40. J. Kafih, *Halikhot Teiman* (Jerusalem, 1987), 218.
41. R. Yehia Salah, *Responsa Pe'ulot Zaddik*, (Tel Aviv 1965), 2, par. 36; 3, par. 202.
42. R. David Masharki, *Rosh Besamim* (Jerusalem, 1987), *Yoreh De'ah* 85.
43. Rabbi Amram Korah, *Sa'arat Teiman* (Jerusalem, 1993), 94.
44. Yinon Avisar, "Locusts—Some of the Kosher Edible Foodstuffs of Yemenite Jewry" (Hebrew), *Te'udat Kashrut* 1 (1994): 52–53.
45. Mordekhai Margaliot, *The Differences Between the People of the East and the People of the Land of Israel* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem, 1938), 176-177.
46. Yafet ben Ali, Mss. St. Petersburg, Pirkovitz Collection, I, 57, p. 150a and I, 11, p 920b; Yeshua ben Yehudah, Mss. St. Petersburg, Pirkovitz Collection, I 1989, pp. 91a–91b.
47. Yeshua ben Yehudah, p. 93b.
48. Aharon Nikomodio, *Keter Torah* (Ghazale, 1866), on Shemini.
49. Eliyahu Bshaizi, *Aderet Eliyahu* (Israel, 1966), 230.
50. Samaritan commentators usually followed Jewish tradition. The identification of the species of locusts permitted for eating by the Torah was translated into Aramaic as in *Targum Onkelos*, and in the Arabic translation they used the system of R. Sa'adyah Gaon. It is reasonable to assume that in an earlier era the Samaritans had a tradition of eating locusts. At the same time, there are no historical accounts which can support this hypothesis. At any rate, in our times the Samaritans do not have this tradition, as I was informed by Binyamin Sadka, in an interview on May 8, 1998.
51. Meir Benayahu, "Collected Tales of the Relations between the Sages of the Land of Israel and the Sages of Italy" (Hebrew), *Sinai* 35 (1954): 64-65.
52. Mina Rozen, "The Position of the Musta'rabs in the Inter-community Relationships in Eretz-Israel from the End of the 15th Century to the End of the 17th Century," *Cathedra* 17 (1980): 73-101.
53. Yehosef Schwartz, *Grains of the Land*, (Jerusalem, 1900) (Hebrew), 379.
54. Quoted by Pinhas Grayevsky, *The Locust in the Land of Israel, 1838–1916* (Jerusalem, 1927), 4-5.
55. In his comments on *Grains of the Land of Israel*, p. 379; see n. 46.
56. For example: Ezra Gamili, *Memories of My Life in Israel and in the Exile* (Tel Aviv, 1983), 27, 37; Shlomo Tivoni, *Love of Hadassah* (Tel Aviv, 1982), 104; Aryeh Shushan, *My City, Jerusalem; The Lives of the People of Jerusalem* (Hebrew) (Rehovot, 1981), 338; "Jerusalem's Locust Plague", *National Geographic* 28,6 (December, 1815): 511-550.
57. Aharoni, 41.