



Holy Shibuta

A fishy tale for Rosh Hashana

• By ARI Z. ZIVOTOFSKY
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Imagine the great talmudic scholar Rava, his mouth watering, thinking about the next bite of his Shabbat meal and knowing that it will taste like ham. That image is what brought us to a most unusual meal, sitting in a forest overlooking the Euphrates River in Turkey. We dined with the provincial governor and a fish expert from the University of Harran with the apt name of Zafer Dogu, while we munched on a fish that in Arabic is called *shabut*.

Our main quest on this journey that had brought us to south central Turkey was for lesser-known Jewish customs and traditions, and while trawling for Jewish lore just 60 km. north of the Syrian border, we hit the mother lode. To understand this fish's tale, a bit of seining of the traditional sources is needed.

As we sit down to our Rosh Hashana meal, Jews all around the world begin their first course with foods that that symbolize hopefulness and dreams of happiness and peace for the coming

year. The most common custom is the dipping of an apple into honey, symbolizing that the impending year should be sweet. A less well known custom, but one with venerable and ancient roots, is dipping a ram's head in honey as a reminder of the binding of Isaac and the anticipation of a pleasant year.

Another common custom is to eat the head of a fish or ram, upon which we pronounce our desire that "we should be as a head and not as a tail." Many people also eat fish and recite "may it be Your will, our God who is the God of our fathers, that we increase and multiply like fish."

The fish in Judaism is seen as a particularly common and positive symbol. Fish bear many offspring and are a symbol of fertility. The protective shield used by *mohelim*, ritual circumcisers, is often made in the shape of a fish because it represents fertility. The body of water where we say *tashlich*, the symbolic "casting of our sins into the sea," during this High Holy Day season, ideally should contain fish

because fish are considered immune to the "evil eye." Because of this, fish is also the symbol of the month of Adar.

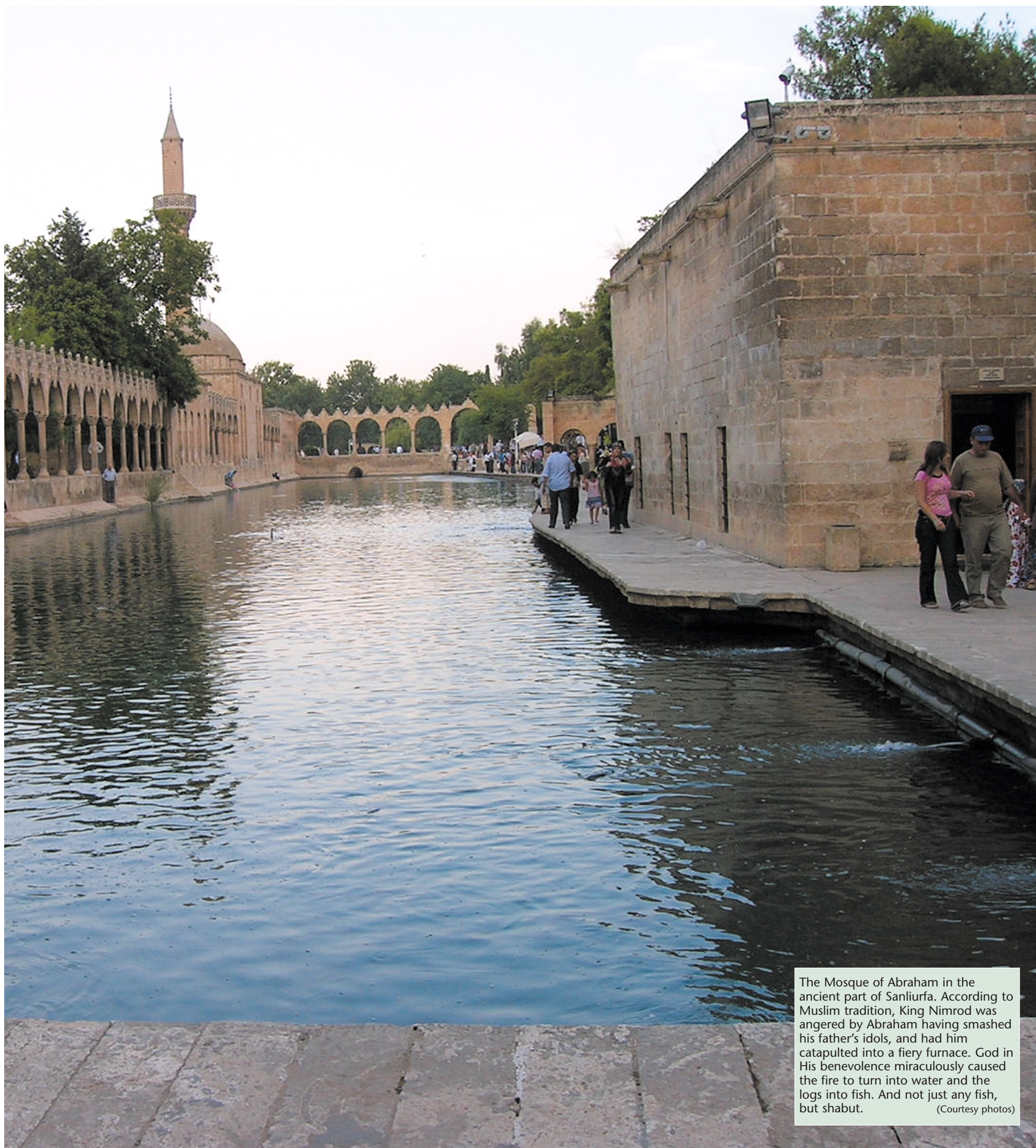
As opposed to animals, birds and grasshoppers, no fish are named in the entire Bible. Talmudic literature does mention several species by their common names, with the fish mentioned most often being the *shibuta*. Whatever this shibuta was, it was well known by the Diaspora community of Babylonia of old.

The Talmud discusses shibuta in several contexts. We are told that the great sages of the Talmud rolled up their sleeves and involved themselves directly in preparations for the Shabbat. The amora Rava would personally salt the shibuta fish for the Shabbat meal. We surmise from this that the fish was well known and considered enough of a delicacy to be served for the Sabbath repast.

It is described as both having medicinal value or posing a health risk, depending on the season of the year and the medical condition involved. A salted head of shibuta boiled in beer is

Fishing trip.
Shibut expert
Zafer Dogu
flanked by
Greenspan
(left) and
Zivotofsky.





The Mosque of Abraham in the ancient part of Sanliurfa. According to Muslim tradition, King Nimrod was angered by Abraham having smashed his father's idols, and had him catapulted into a fiery furnace. God in His benevolence miraculously caused the fire to turn into water and the logs into fish. And not just any fish, but shabut.

(Courtesy photos)



'State dinner.' Clockwise from lower left: Ari Zivotofsky, shibut expert Zafer Dogu, Asst. Prof. Erdinç Sahinöz, Governor Mehmet Özel, Ari Greenspan and two traveling companions.

a cure for a disease called *yarkona* (jaundice?). On the other hand, according to the Gemara, eating the shibuta during the spring month of Nisan could cause leprosy.

One of the more interesting references has to do with the unique taste of the creature. The Talmud relates that for everything that God prohibited in this world, He also created a counterpart that was permitted. For example, blood is prohibited, but the liver, which contains an abundance of the vital fluid, was permitted. Even though milk and meat may not be eaten together, the udder of a lactating cow is permissible.

Now here's the kicker. The pig, the most detestable of animals to the Jewish people, is of course forbidden as food. However, should one have a penchant to taste the forbidden swine, we are informed that the flavor of pork is identical to (part of) the shibuta.

FOR THE LAST few centuries the identity of the talmudic shibuta has puzzled European scholars and at least a half dozen possible species have been proposed. But it is no longer a mystery for us. Having an interest in Jewish culinary traditions, several years ago I

asked an Iraqi-born Tel Aviv cab driver which kosher birds they used to eat in his native land. When the nostalgia of his youth warmed his soul, he smiled and said that by far the tastiest item in their cuisine was neither fowl nor meat, but a fish called the shabut. His response electrified me. Could his shabut in Arabic be the shibuta of the Talmud?

As I later discovered, the great rabbinic leader of Baghdadi Jewry from the early 20th century, Rabbi Yosef Haim (known as the Ben Ish Hai) had no doubt. He listed the five most common kosher fish eaten in Baghdad and after mentioning the shabut he says "that is the shibuta of the Talmud." So here was the shibuta – it is a type of carp known in Arabic as shabut and by the scientific name *Barbus grypus*, from the family *Cyprinidae* (carps and minnows).

The Europeans were stymied because they were looking in Europe, while the shibuta of the Babylonian Talmud is obviously found in Babylonia, modern-day Iraq.

That taxi ride ignited a passion to behold and maybe even taste this talmudic delicacy. We turned to the largest collection of preserved fish in the country, a true national treasure located at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but alas, it was lacking shibuta.

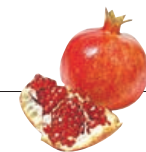
The next step would be more difficult and was our conundrum: The fish lives in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flow through Iraq, Iran and Syria and are not readily accessible to Israelis. But with the help of several parties outside of Israel, we managed to get our first few shibuta shipped from its natural territory via a third country. The trouble was that they were pre-

served in formaldehyde, so we could not get a taste. A side benefit was that we were able to donate a *Barbus grypus* to the Hebrew University collection.

Our desire for a frozen sample to eat on Rosh Hashana was not quelled. Travel to Iraq, Iran and Syria may be difficult for us, but there are many US military and civilian personal in Iraq and US army chaplain Lt.-Col. Jeremy Steinberg is among them. He had already served a tour of duty in Afghanistan and was serving his second tour in Iraq. Having known him for many years and knowing that he is good at detective work (he has a forthcoming book on Hebrew etymology), I e-mailed him about my search and finally convinced him that I was really serious about wanting him to find a shabut.

He agreed to look, though doubted that he would be successful. But succeed he did. He approached an Iraqi who was employed on the US Army base and asked him to find out about the possibility of getting a shabut for him. The base, being near the Euphrates and the shabut being popular, the Iraqi returned the next morning not with information but with a box containing two big and two small specimens. Chaplain Steinberg promptly

A lot of explaining and laughing went on in security offices that day, and we gave a new meaning to flying fish. They found it so amusing (and we were the only passengers in sight) that they even permitted us to photograph the X ray of the shibuta



purchased the fish, recorded the event with many pictures that quickly clogged my inbox, but alas the fish are still in Iraq because we have not found a legal means to ship them from there to Israel.

OUR SEARCH was not over and took a positive turn when we “discovered” that the Tigris and Euphrates have their sources in a friendly country, Turkey. Quite fortuitously, I found not just a fish expert but a *Barbus grypus* expert, Dr. Zafer Dogu, from the Department of Fisheries, Bozova Vocational School, Harran University. He was more than glad to cooperate and find a few fish for us. But things improved even more when we contacted the Turkish embassy, which graciously assisted us with arrangements for our trip to study the shibuta in the Euphrates, just a stone’s throw from Harran, the city of our forefather Abraham.

We flew to Istanbul and from there to Sanliurfa, landing on the longest runway in Turkey in a deserted, brand new airport that was opened only the previous week. One’s initial impression upon arriving in this area near the Euphrates is that of the lush green patches irrigated by the majestic river among the otherwise moon-like landscape of the harsh arid region of south-central Turkey. We stepped out of the airport into 44° heat and proceeded to the office of Governor Mehmet Özel, who warmly welcomed us and assisted us with all of our needs.

After an initial meeting with the governor, the fish expert and his boss, we were taken to a lake that was formed when the Atatürk Dam on the Euphrates was completed in 1993. The dam, one of the largest in the world, is part of the massive \$32 billion public project known as the Great Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) that has greatly improved the standard of living in the region. The lake covers 815 sq. km., and when it was filled for the first time it submerged 25 villages, displacing 55,000 inhabitants, and several important unexplored archeological sites.

Waiting for us on the lake were two boats that took us to the middle of this placid body of water, where we observed local fishermen pulling in nets full of fish. Unfortunately, none of the fish caught while we were there were shibuta. So as not to disappoint us, Dogu, took out and prepared (very cooperatively according to our instructions so that it remained kosher) one of the shibuta he had caught for us in advance, and a lovely lakeside “state dinner” with the governor was held. From there, we were taken to see the fish research facility where work is being done on raising, among other fish, the shibuta by, among others, Dogu who is a leading researcher on *Barbus grypus* sperm.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect

of the story came to light when we reached our hotel, an old stone structure built right near an early Arab holy site called the Mosque of Abraham in the ancient part of Sanliurfa. According to Muslim tradition, King Nimrod was angered by Abraham having smashed his father’s idols, and had him catapulted into a fiery furnace. God in His benevolence miraculously caused the fire to turn into water and the logs into fish. And not just any fish, but shabut. On the site of the furnace-turned-pond an ancient church existed and then a mosque was built.

In 1896 this pool was visited by a Christian traveler who described the experience (See <http://armenianhouse.org/harris/armenia/letter11.html>).

“I was visiting, under guard of a Turkish soldier, the most beautiful part of Edessa, the fish-pond on the borders of which stands the Mosque of Abraham the friend of God, and a Moslem college. This college is the successor of the famous Christian school of Edessa, and the mosque, no doubt, marks the site of an ancient Christian church. The pool is full of fish, which it is prohibited under severe penalty to kill, and which every one feeds with bread and pennyworths of parched corn. Such a rush when you throw it in! They tumble over one another, and jump half out of the water. Obviously the protection and support which the fish enjoy comes from a time when they were considered sacred. So I asked my soldier what was the name of the fish, and his answer was, ‘In Arabic they are called shabut.’”

THIS WAS NOT the end of the story. It was time to take a fish to Los Angeles for an OU “halachic dinner” to share with the rest of the Jewish world (see <http://www.greenspandental.com/JewishJournal.com.html>). But how could we get the fish into the US legally and with it staying fresh? This turned out to not be a concern. We were informed in an e-mail by the deputy chief of Trade Operations, Customs and Border Protection of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey that “non living fish [from Turkey] that are for personal consumption and free from live pests/insects are not regulated and permitted entry.”

Dogu’s boss, Asst. Prof. Erdinç Sahinöz, confirmed the health status of our fish. Going through security is



US army chaplain Lt.-Col. Jeremy Steinberg goes fishing during his tour of duty in Iraq.

often a tense experience. In the isolated, new empty Sanliurfa airport, the security people sat up straight in their chairs and their eyes popped when they saw a large fish on the X-ray scanner. A lot of explaining and laughing went on in security offices that day, and we gave a new meaning to flying fish. They found it so amusing (and we were the only passengers in sight) that they even permitted us to photograph the X ray of the shibuta.

Had our Turkish been better, we might have found dry ice in Istanbul, but given its current state our precious cargo was wrapped in regular ice, hand carried and stored in the overhead bins, and off we went. The dripping water we explained to fellow passengers must be faulty air-conditioning units on the planes, and we headed to LA hoping for the best. It arrived still frozen, was masterfully prepared by the chef at the Prime Grill with applesauce, instead of an apple in its mouth, and was willingly consumed at the Baron Herzog winery in Oxnard by a group of OU rabbis.

The question we are often asked is “does it taste like pig?” Having never tasted pork, we cannot personally answer that question. But the final verdict of the chef at the Prime Grill, after finding commonality between their textures and consistency, was a definite “no.”

What is interesting is that three different texts exist regarding the exact

description of the shibuta’s taste. One source says the fish tastes like pig. Another says its brain does, and a third states the tongue is the tasty morsel. Could the rabbis have been talking tongue in cheek? As any angler will tell you, the tongue or brain of a small freshwater fish is so tiny as to be almost nonexistent.

Might the lesson be more along the lines of being satisfied with what we have and transmitting to us that we should not feel as if we are missing anything in this world? Basically, the lesson might be that if you feel like you are lacking, search far and hard enough and you might even find what you thought you never could.

As of now, the shibuta does not live in Israel. However, it has the potential to, and indeed some of its close relatives do. Two such species are *Barbus longiceps*, a species that exists nowhere else except the Kinneret and its tributaries, and *Barbus canis*, a fish found in the Jordan River. This brings us to a beautiful midrash.

As we start a new year and dream of peace and prosperity and of the days to come, let us contemplate the eschatological message that the rabbis tell us the shibuta has the potential to share with us. The midrash allegorically tells us that when the Jews went into exile at the hands of the Babylonians, “700 types of kosher fish, 800 types of kosher locusts and an unlimited number of kosher birds were exiled with them to Babylonia, and when they returned all of them returned with them except for the fish called the shibuta... and in the days to come, all are destined to return.”

Shana Tova to all, and a year of great fishing, wherever your pond may be.

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