



Holy Shibuta

A fishy tale for Rosh Hashana

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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."

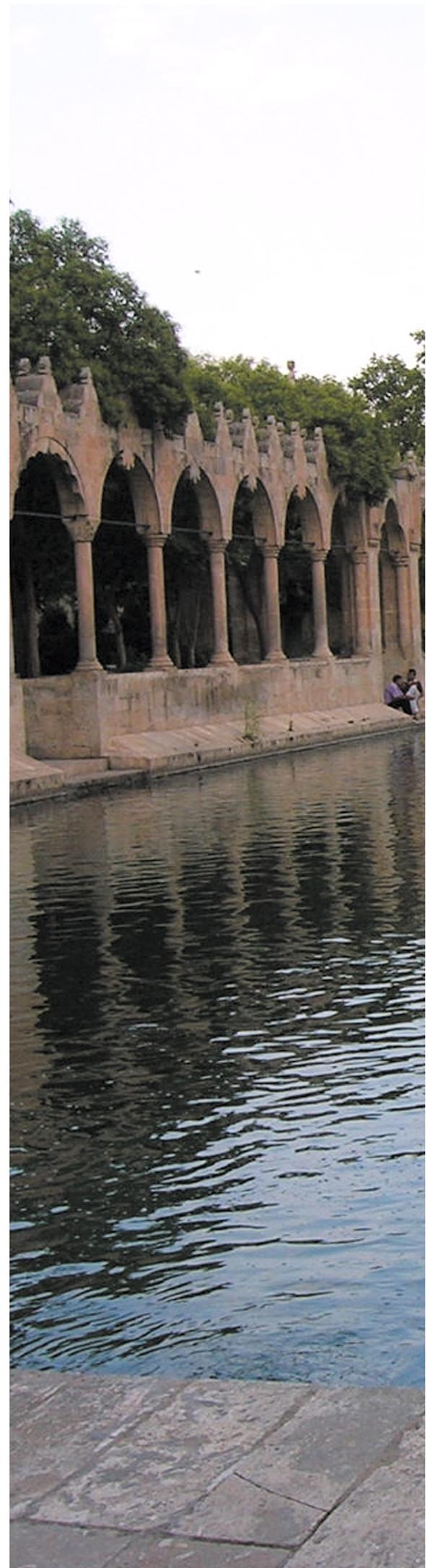
The fish in Judaism is seen as a particularly common and positive symbol. Fish bear many offspring and are a symbol of fertility. The protective shield used by *mohelim*, ritual circumcisers, is often made in the shape of a fish because it represents fertility. The body of water where we say *tashlich*, 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.

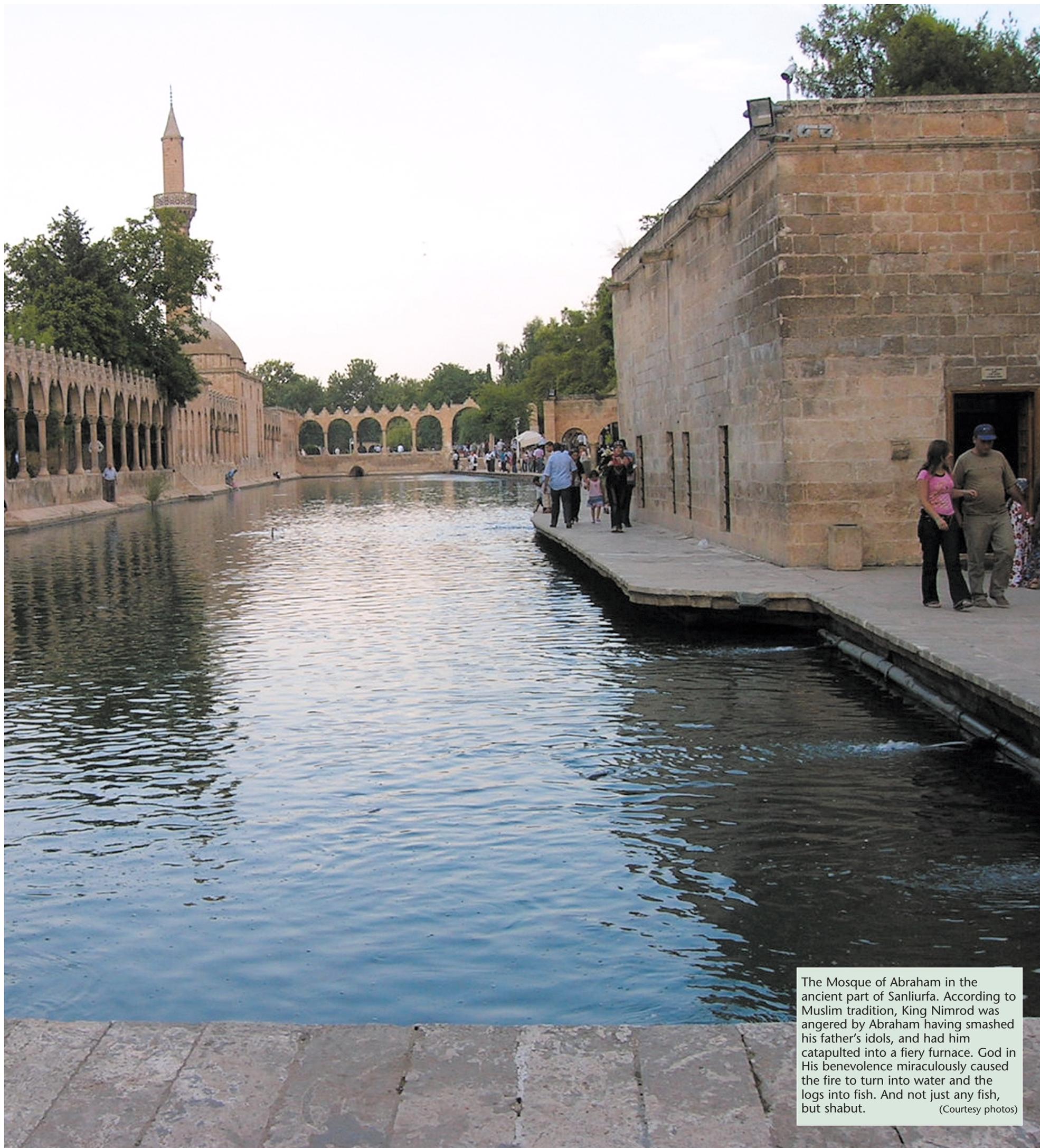
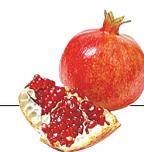
The Talmud discusses shibuta in several contexts. We are told that the great sages of the Talmud rolled up their sleeves and involved themselves directly in preparations for the Shabbat. The amora Rava would personally salt the shibuta fish for the Shabbat meal. We surmise from this that the fish was 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)