



Are There Bugs in Your Fish?

You may have heard that currently there is serious discussion in the Torah world about the existence of bugs – or more accurately, parasites – in a variety of fish. You may have heard snippets of the back-and-forth, or seen a list of which rabbis permit and which rabbis forbid a particular variety of fish. I hope this article gives you a better understanding of the problem.

Q: What are parasites, and how do they differ from bugs?

A: Almost all species of fish, to a greater or lesser extent, suffer from attack by parasites. Parasites are small organisms that live at the expense of the host, off of whom they feed directly. While “bugs” eat various plants or decaying matter, parasites eat their host (talk about *hakaras hatov*). There are two main types of parasites. Ectoparasites are those

found on the external surfaces of a fish (the skin, fins and gills), while endoparasites are found in the flesh and organs. The issue under discussion is the infestation of several species of freshwater and saltwater fish with endoparasites.

Q: Is there a difference between parasites and bugs in halachah?

A: From a halachic perspective there is little or no appreciable difference between the two, and both are referred to collectively as *tola'im*. One who consumes a visible parasite that has been separated from its fish host would likely be committing the same violation as if he consumed a non-parasitic bug found in the same place.

Q: How big are these parasites?

A: At times, parasites can be as large as several millimeters, which is generally considered by *Poskim* to be

nireh l'eynayim – visible to the naked eye. Many fish have parasites that are not visible to the naked eye, and these parasites are halachically permitted, as are most things in *halachah* that cannot be detected with normal human senses.

Q: How often does parasite infestation occur in the affected species?

A: Many parasites are found frequently enough to be considered at least a *miut hamatzui* – occurring often enough to be considered halachically significant, and thus require our attention. In the case of insects in vegetables, for example, a vegetable that is found to be infested to this extent needs to be washed in a way that removes the concern.

Should the parasites be considered forbidden, one would be required to look for them (even if they were not

immediately visible) and remove them (washing would not remove them from fish). Kashrus agencies would either have to stop certifying products made with these species of fish or advise consumers that they would need to check for and remove these parasites themselves.

Q: So far this doesn't sound easy. If a vegetable were similarly affected, all authorities would agree that one would be prohibited from eating it without removing the insects (though to what degree might be a matter of discussion). Why shouldn't it be clear that a similarly infested fish would be forbidden until any parasites are removed?

A: Actually, the *tola'im* affecting fish may be *mutar*. The *Shulchan Aruch*¹ states that worms found in the viscera (internal organs) of fish are forbidden, but those found in the flesh or between the skin and flesh are permissible.

Q: If so, what is the disagreement about?

A: Some have suggested that there are reasons some of the parasites affecting our fish supply might not be the same as those permitted in the *Gemara*² and in *Shulchan Aruch*. Here are some of the potential concerns:

The *Gemara* may be discussing *tola'im* that spontaneously appear in the flesh, while modern-day parasites migrate from the viscera.

The *Gemara* may be discussing *tola'im* that enter the fish at a time when the *tola'im* are not visible to the naked eye (i.e., the fish ate a smaller creature that was infected by a parasite), while the parasites we are questioning may enter the fish at a time when they are visible.

The *Gemara* may be discussing *tola'im* that migrated from the viscera to the flesh at a point when they were not visible, while these parasites may be visible at the time they migrate from the viscera to the flesh.

The *Gemara* may be discussing

tola'im that migrated from the viscera to the flesh while the fish was alive, while these parasites may migrate after the death of the fish.

Q: With regard to the one parasite everyone seems to be focused on, is it true that this is a new parasite that did not exist in the time of Chazal?

A: There is no indication that any parasite exists today that has not existed from the time of *Mattan Torah*, and there is even less possibility that something has "evolved" since the time of the Beis Yosef, requiring new *halachos* that would apply to it.

For example, some have suggested that the nematode *Anisakis* is a new creature that *Poskim* could not have discussed before, and of which the Rabbanim of the last generation were unaware. This does not seem likely since various incidents of *Anisakis* infestation have been documented by scientists since the early 1800s. It is true that the diagnosis of anisakiasis, a condition in which a person is infected with a live *Anisakis* parasite, was only made in the 1950s, but that has to do with changes in medical diagnostic technology, not in the origin of the species.

Q: So in the end, is it mutar or assur?

A: Some Rabbanim are recommending that their *mispallelim* refrain from eating any species of fish that might be infected with any of the visible species of parasites. For the most part, this recommendation is a precaution while the Rabbanim wait for more thorough research to be done on the size of the parasite both at the stage when it enters the fish and again when it leaves the viscera for the flesh. Some Rabbanim feel that if it were visible at either of these two stages, it might be considered a forbidden species of *tolaas*.

It is worth noting that all Rabbanim agree that *tola'im* found in the stomach are forbidden (as stated in the aforementioned citing of *Shulchan*

Aruch). Some argue that if this parasite is in fact found in the stomach and the reason we find it in the flesh is that the primary processor did not eviscerate the fish quickly enough, one should ignore the fact that the parasite was found in the flesh and focus on the fact that it came from the stomach.

Other Rabbanim (including Harav Yisroel Belsky, who granted me ample time to explore the issues, as well as his opinion in more complete detail) feel strongly that the parasites currently affecting various species of freshwater and saltwater fish are not appreciably different from those that existed in the time of *Chazal*, and that the parasites found in the flesh of fish are still permitted. Rav Belsky understands that *Chazal* told us that the *tola'im* found in the flesh are *mutar* because of the *sevarah* of *mina gavli*,³ where the term is explained to mean that the parasite grows in the fish and becomes permitted as part of the fish regardless of its original size when entering the fish or migrating from the viscera, and that we are not commanded to become experts in the field of parasitology in order to know which types are permitted.

The Rabbanim permitting the parasites also point out that *Chazal* did not differentiate between the permitted types of parasite in the flesh and the forbidden types, which might also lead one to believe there is no halachic distinction in how one found the parasite in the flesh.

Q: Practically speaking, do I have to be machmir on this issue or not?

A: As with all issues of *halachah*, one is advised to seek the counsel of a qualified halachic authority for advice on practical *mitzvah* observance. **M**

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1. *Yoreh Deah* 84:16.
2. *Chullin* 67b.
3. Rashi, *ibid*.