

Alter Rebbe
Likkutei Torah
Parshas Behalosecha
אם את כל דגי הים כו

Introduction

This discourse by the **Alter Rebbe**, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad Chassidus, centers around the mysterious response of Moshe Rabbeinu when the Jewish people demanded meat in the desert. Drawing from **Parshas Beha'aloscha**, the Alter Rebbe probes Moshe's words—"From where shall I have meat?"—not as a logistical concern, but as a profound spiritual dilemma rooted in the gulf between Moshe's sublime spiritual standing and the coarse nature of physical meat.

The discourse introduces a striking mystical contrast between **meat and fish, hidden and revealed worlds** (*alma d'itkasyah* vs. *alma d'itgalya*), and the various types of spiritual nourishment the soul encounters. More deeply, it unpacks why Moshe could not descend into even refined forms of engagement like eating fish, and why Hashem ultimately gave the people *slav* (quail)—a form of food with higher spiritual properties.

Threaded throughout is the question of how, and whether, a soul can descend into the material world without spiritual damage, and under what conditions such descent is not only permissible—but transformative. The discourse explores the limits of spiritual elevation, the nature of food as a vessel of Divine light, and the distinction between tzaddikim like Moshe and the rest of the nation.

This ma'amar is both a theological meditation and a practical guide to how our material lives—especially something as physical as eating—are governed by deep metaphysical hierarchies and possibilities of holiness or fall.

"If all the fish of the sea..." etc. To understand this—[for] they did not ask for fish at all, but for meat.	אם את כל דגי הים כו'. להבין – הלא לא שאלו דגים כלל – אלא בשר.
The matter is, that Moshe said: "From where shall I have meat?" The meaning is: he was on a very lofty level, to the extent that it was impossible for him to descend downward to receive vitality from meat—	הענין – כי משה אמר: "מאין לי בשר" – פירוש: שהוא במעלה מאד נעלה – עד שאי אפשר לו לרד למטה לקבל חיות מן הבשר
for meat is coarse, and therefore an ignoramus is forbidden to eat meat—only a Torah scholar is able to elevate [it], etc. But relative to Moshe's level, which is exceedingly lofty, even this type of elevation is considered a descent.	כי הבשר מגושם. ולכן עם הארץ אסור לו לאכול בשר – רק תלמיד חכם יוכל להעלות כו'. אבל לגבי מעלת משה – שהיא גבוה מאד – אפילו עליה זו נחשבת ירידה.
And this is [the meaning of]: "Six hundred thousand on foot is the people in whose midst I am—and You say, I shall give them meat..."	וזהו: "שש מאות אלף רגלי העם אשר אנכי בקרבם – ואתה אומר: בשר אתן להם"

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Meaning: Since “I”—that is, the level of Moshe—is among the people, how can You say, “I will give them meat,” etc.?	פירוש: כי מאחר ש"אנכי", הינו – בחינת משה – "בקרוב העם – איך תאמר: "בשר אתן להם" כו
And this is: “Shall sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them and suffice for them?” The word “ומצא להם” means “will be found and obtained by them,” meaning that the sheep and cattle will be drawn and pursued downwards, pulling them down and causing them to fall from Moshe’s level, etc.	וזהו: "הצאן ובקר ישחט להם ומצא להם?" – פירוש "ומצא להם": שיהצאן ובקר ימצאו וישגו – בדרך 'אחריהם להמשיכם למטה – ויפלו ממעלת משה כו
And therefore he said: “If all the fish of the sea [will be gathered for them]...” For behold, everything that exists on land exists in the sea.	ולכן אמר: "אם את כל דגי הים [יאסוף להם] כו". כי הנה כל מה שיש ביבשה – יש בים
And the meat of the sea is fish, only that the sea is from the hidden world (<i>alma d'itkasyah</i>), while the dry land is from the revealed (<i>alma d'itgalya</i>).	והבשר שבים – הם דגים, רק שהים הוא מעלמא דאתקסא, ויבשה – מעלמא דאתגליא
And the great descent is to the level of the revealed world—to eat meat of the land and elevate it—and not fall downward into coarse physicality.	והירידה הגדולה – לבחינת עלמא דאתגליא – לאכול בשר שביבשה ולהעלותו – ושלל יפל למטה בגשמיות
There is a strategy for this: to first descend into <i>alma d'itkasyah</i> —fish from the sea—through which he can afterward descend further, etc.	יש עצה לזה – עלי ידי ירידה תחלה לעלמא דאתקסא – דגים שבים – שבהם, ועל ידם – יוכל אחר כך לרד 'יותר כו
And therefore it is the custom of Israel to eat fish before meat.	ולכן מנהג ישראל לאכול דגים קודם לבשר
But with regard to Moshe’s level—even if all the fish of the sea were gathered for them and reached them—this too would draw and lower from Moshe’s level.	אבל לגבי מעלת משה – אפילו אם את כל דגי הים יאסוף להם ומצא להם – גם כן – שגם בחינה זו של דגים – ימשך ויוריד למטה ממעלת משה
(And the idea can be explained as written elsewhere: that Moshe is from the level of <i>adam</i> in the path of Atzilus, about whom it is said, “And have dominion over the fish of the sea...” (Bereishis 1:28)—	והענין יש לומר כמו שכתוב במקום אחר – דמשה) הוא מבחינת אדם בארץ אצילות – דעליה איתמר: – ("ורדו בדגת הים...") (בראשית א' כ"ח)
meaning he is even above the level of supernal souls, which are called <i>nunin d'yamma</i> (“fish of the sea”) and “birds of the sky,” etc.—	הינו – שהוא למעלה גם מבחינת נשמות עליונות – – הנקראות "נוני ימא" ו"עוף השמים" וגו'
therefore, even in the matter of sustenance, it is a descent for him to eat physical fish and meat, since he is even above the level of “fish of the sea” in the supernal worlds.)	ולכן גם בענין המזון – ירידה היא לו – אכילת דגים ובשר גשמיים – כיון שהוא למעלה גם מבחינת "נוני (ימא" שבעולמות העליונים וגו')

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And even though bread is lower than meat, its root is higher, as explained elsewhere regarding the matter of the two loaves over the two lambs.	ואף-על-גב דלחם הוא למטה מן הבשר – הרי שרשו גבוה יותר – כמו שכתוב במקום אחר – בענין "שתי הלחם על גבי שני הקבשים".
And know that Birkat HaMazon is only on bread, etc.	ותדע – שברפת המזון אינה אלא על הלחם כו'.
Also, the manna descended in Moshe's merit—it was food of Chochmah. (See what is written in the discourse “And I was with Him as a nursling,” etc.)	ועוד – דהמן ירד בזכות משה – מזונא דחכמתא. (וראה מה שכתוב בדברי המאמר: "ואהיה אצלו אמן" כו').
But Hashem decreed [they receive] <i>slav</i> (quail), which are birds, and they are on a higher level than the meat of animals—	אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא גזר "שלו", שהם עופות – והם – למעלה מבחינת בשר בהמה
for [meat] is from the level of the ox-face among the animals of the chariot, while birds are from the level of <i>Keruvim</i> , etc.	כי הוא מבחינת "פני שור" כו' בחיות שבמרכבה – ועופות הם מבחינת כרובים וגו'.
And they were also very fat, as mentioned in the Gemara: “thirteen racks,” etc.—for red meat represents <i>gevurah</i> , and fat represents <i>chesed</i> , etc.	וגם היו שמנים מאד – כדאיתא בגמרא: "תליסר רפתי" כו' – כי "בשרא סומקא" – בחינת גבורה, ושמנות – בחינת חסד כו'.

[NOTE Summary:

In this profound teaching, the Alter Rebbe explains Moshe Rabbeinu's objection to providing meat to the Jewish people in the desert. Moshe's statement, "From where shall I have meat?" is not logistical—it expresses his spiritual inability to descend into coarse material engagement. Moshe's level is rooted in the world of *Atzilus*, far beyond even exalted souls, likened to "fish of the sea" or "birds of the sky." For someone of Moshe's stature, engaging with physical meat—even for elevation—is itself a *yeridah* (descent), because he stands above the entire process of refining coarse matter through spiritual work.

The Rebbe explains the distinction between different types of sustenance. Meat from dry land symbolizes revealed, coarse reality (*alma d'itgalya*), while fish from the sea represents hidden, more refined spiritual realities (*alma d'itkasyah*). Because meat is more prone to dragging a person downward, there's a spiritual custom to eat fish before meat—to ease the soul into the task of elevation through gentler refinement first. Yet, even this progression is considered a descent for Moshe, whose soul transcends even the *nunei yamma*—supernal "fish-souls" in higher worlds.

The Rebbe also explores why Hashem ultimately gives the people *slav*—fatty birds. Birds are spiritually superior to animals; they stem from the level of *Keruvim*, while animals correspond to the "face of the ox" in the Divine chariot. Furthermore, the meat of the *slav* was not only abundant but rich—symbolizing a fusion of *gevurah* (red meat) and *chesed* (fat). This teaches

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that even when Hashem grants material requests, He does so in a manner that preserves spiritual elevation and inner refinement.

Practical Takeaway:

1. **Spiritual Awareness of Food:** Not all consumption is equal. The Alter Rebbe teaches that eating can either elevate the soul or drag it down—depending on consciousness, refinement, and inner preparedness. Even kosher food requires spiritual readiness.
2. **Sequence Matters:** The custom of eating fish before meat is not trivial—it reflects the soul’s descent from the concealed world into the revealed one. Begin your spiritual descent wisely.
3. **Self-Knowledge and Limits:** What is elevating for one person might be degrading for another. Moshe could not engage with even subtle forms of descent. Know where your soul thrives, and where it may be at risk.
4. **Hashem’s Kindness:** Even when the people ask for something that could lower them, Hashem sends a more refined version (*slav* instead of red meat), showing that Divine response always carries hidden compassion and guidance.

Chassidic Story (about the Alter Rebbe):

Once, a wealthy follower came to the Alter Rebbe to ask for guidance on spiritual refinement. The man prided himself on observing all the mitzvos and eating only the finest glatt kosher meats and wines. “Rebbe,” he asked, “why do I feel distant from G-d, even though I serve Him with abundance?”

The Alter Rebbe looked at him with penetrating eyes and said softly, “You feed your body with sanctified delicacies, but you haven’t yet fed your soul with hunger.”

The man was confused. “But I make blessings, I eat on Shabbos, I support Torah,” he protested.

The Rebbe explained: “When a tzaddik eats, he elevates the food. When an *am haaretz* eats meat, it may sink him further unless he labors inwardly. Meat is thick. It demands deep inner fire to refine it. Sometimes, even fish is too heavy if you’re not conscious.”

The man took this to heart and began eating less—only when hungry—and always with meditation. Years later, he returned, tearfully thanking the Rebbe. “Now I feel G-d at the table.”

END NOTE]