

# FISH: A STORY

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Once a year, early in March, Rabbi Joel Kentucky went to his tailor to be measured for a new suit. The garment was to be ready before the festival of Passover, when Rabbi Joel presided over the opening of the spring session of the rabbinic court. He didn't really need a new suit, but he had to be seen in one. It was a professional obligation, and after wearing it just once, he would give it away. When he had first arrived in our city, Rabbi Joel had tried a number of different tailors, but for several years now he had been going to the same one, Chaim Bergenzon. Many religious Jews went to Chaim for their suits, for he was a righteous man, and was known to be scrupulous concerning the biblical prohibition of fabrics that mix wool and linen. Rabbi Joel enjoyed his yearly visits to Chaim; he liked talking with him, for the tailor was an astute observer of people and he too was a student of both the revealed and the concealed, and he liked watching the man as he worked, throwing and folding and cutting and sewing the cloths.

But Chaim Bergenzon was also known for his sharp tongue, and on that particular morning Rabbi Joel felt a little apprehensive about his appointment later in the day. He knew that Chaim was likely to comment on his weight, and he was disinclined to discuss the matter with him. For the truth of the matter was that Rabbi Joel was enormously overweight. But serious as such matters might be, they should be discussed between a man and his physician, or perhaps

between a man and his Creator, but certainly not between a learned rabbi and his tailor. It was not that Rabbi Joel was a haughty cleric who did not speak with ordinary folk but rather that he was an exceedingly private person. He did not set himself apart from the people; rather, he had dedicated his life to a certain single-minded quest. If in our days the word holy can still be used to describe the living, probably no person in our city was more deserving of the appellation than he. He was devout in his prayers, courteous in his demeanor, pious in his outlook, and meticulous in the fulfillment of his duties. He studied the deepest books of our most secret tradition and strove to live in purity. Notwithstanding, he ate seven pounds of fish on each and every day, except, of course, on fast days.

In fact, the confrontation with the tailor was easier than he had feared. Looking at Rabbi Joel standing in his underwear in the measuring room, Chaim said: "Rabbi, you are not living your life properly. Overweight is overweight, fat is fat, obese is obese, but you are more than all of them. Something is wrong, and you should go to a doctor."

Rabbi Joel sighed, "I know, but will you make me my suit?"

I shall make you your suit, I shall make you a suit" said Chaim, "and it will be ready before the opening session of the rabbinic court. But tell me, will you go to a doctor?"

"Yes," said Rabbi Joel, "you are right. I shall go."

They fixed an appointment for the first measuring, and Rabbi Joel went home.

Rabbi Joel lived by himself in a large apartment that comprised the entire top floor of the rabbinic academy. There he slept and he studied and ate and occasionally tutored students; there too he prayed, at dawn and at dusk, alone in his private chapel. Only on the Sabbath did he go downstairs to worship with the faculty and students. Rabbi Joel had lived alone since he had arrived in our city, shortly after the death of his wife. His children and grandchildren visited him occasionally, but though they felt welcome, they also knew that their presence was not required; he was self-sufficient. At sixty-five years old, Rabbi Joel was following a path that permitted no distraction. Furthermore, during their previous visit, his youngest granddaughter had cried in the night and said that she could not sleep because of the stink of fish.

As he came home that day, Rabbi Joel thought to himself that it was true, and that not only his apartment, but the whole building was beginning to stink of fish. Perhaps his eating habits would bring him into open conflict with his colleagues, some of whom were already uncomfortable with his path, and could even bring the entire institution into disrepute. The tailor's words, "Rabbi, you are not living your life properly," echoed in his mind. Chaim was right, and he would go to the doctor. "But tonight," he thought, "I am going to eat my meal of the seven species from the great sea."

He placed the seven fishes on the grill tray, one-pound slabs of cod, haddock,

hake, halibut, mackerel, sea perch, and sole. He laid them from right to left, in English alphabetical order, and garnished them with a sauce of butter, garlic, and salt. He arranged them in the same order every night. In the past he had tried to use their Hebrew names, but he had abandoned that; it appeared that the holy tongue made no distinction between hake and haddock. And although the order he had adopted that evening was still tentative, he placed the fishes in the tray with precision and certainty.

Rabbi Joel set the table and then he recited his afternoon prayers.

His timing was always right, and as he read the final verses the familiar smell of roasted fish reached his nostrils. He scrubbed his arms thoroughly from the elbows down with soap and a hard brush; only then did he take a laver to perform the ritual ablution of his hands. He sat down at his table and spent a full five minutes contemplating the slightly charred and smoking offering before him. He often wondered why fishes had never been prescribed as sacrifices at the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. Among all the creatures of the animal world, none seemed to know their place better than fishes. They swam, they spawned, they ate, they grew, and they died, all in the still of the abyss; they lived in harmony and abundance while being cut off by the waters from the blessing of light

Rabbi Joel made the appropriate benedictions and slowly ate his meal. He noted the taste, the texture, and the smell of each fish, both singly and in combination. His meal was made up of seven courses, each of which had seven

parts. The first course was of cod: first he ate a portion of cod; then a portion of cod with a small piece of haddock; then a portion of cod with a small piece of hake; then a portion of cod with a small piece of halibut, and so on, until he had eaten a portion of cod with a small piece of each of the other six species. The second course was of haddock: first he ate a portion of haddock; then a portion of haddock with a small piece of cod; then a portion of haddock with a small piece of hake, and so on, until he had eaten a portion of haddock with a small piece of each of the other six species. By the time he had completed the seventh course, that of sole, and had eaten the final portion of sole, that with a small piece of sea perch, two hours and forty-five minutes had elapsed. Throughout the meal he strove to remember the source and the destination of each morsel, what he was raising, and what he was separating. Rabbi Joel ate as befits a holy man -- but he ate too much.

He did not eat so much out of gluttony. Indeed, he was hardly aware of his body during these meals. True, he enjoyed the pleasures of tasting and chewing and swallowing, but not the sensation of gorging himself. Rather than heavier, he felt lighter when he was done. For Rabbi Joel, eating was a rite, not relief for his physical appetites.

The following day Rabbi Joel kept his promise to the tailor and made an appointment to see a physician that very afternoon. He was referred to the metabolic disorders clinic, where he was weighed, measured, and questioned about his diet. A medical student measured the circumference of his ankles, calves, thighs, hips, waist, chest, wrists, forearms, biceps, neck, and head,

marking his findings on a multicolored chart; the young man looked puzzled, sent Rabbi Joel to be weighed again, and made his calculations several times over. A male orderly asked him for a urine specimen, and a nurse took his pulse, his blood pressure, and his temperature. He sensed that he was the center of a flurry of interest, that people were looking at him furtively, and then hurrying on to their tasks. And then, and this is scandalously common in the medical clinics of our city, he was abandoned, just left to sit alone in a corridor for a whole hour while important people in white coats rushed past.

Eventually he was summoned to the doctor's office and was surprised to see not one physician but a medical tribunal of three. Were they dressed in black instead of white, he thought, they could pass as a rabbinic court. So this is what the other side looks like.

The elderly doctor who sat between the other two opened the proceedings without introducing himself. His voice was smooth and gentle. "Rabbi Kentucky," he said, "it is our policy in this clinic to be open and candid with our patients. And that is the way we would like to be with you." He paused, and Rabbi Joel, knowing that the doctor was waiting for him to acknowledge the authority of medical science that was invested in his person and in this tribunal, nodded seriously. The doctor continued: "Rabbi Kentucky, not only are you seriously overweight, but you are also much too heavy."

Now Rabbi Joel was known for his sharp talmudic mind; he could discriminate between the finest points of law, between the subtlest nuances of language, but

the doctor's distinction was beyond him.

"What's the difference?" he asked.

"It's quite simple," explained the doctor. "There are two separate problems. The first is that for a man with your body structure and height, your weight should be between 150 and 165 pounds, and it is 265. Now this is quite serious, and we will tell you later about the strain that this places on your cardiovascular system. The second problem is that when we look at your bulk, that is, at how big your body actually is, we find that your weight should be only 230 pounds. So not only is there too much of you, but what there is too heavy. Let me explain the second problem differently. Human beings normally have the specific gravity of sea water; that is, they can float on the water. You would sink. Even with a life belt, you would sink. Like a lead weight"

The two younger doctors nodded in concurrence.

"I should go on a diet?" asked Rabbi Joel.

"We would like to admit you to our advanced metabolic studies research department. Today. Immediately. If you have to make arrangements at home or at work, you can go and come back this evening. But you must eat nothing and drink only water."

Rabbi Joel thought of the forty-two pounds of fish in his freezer, sighed and

said, "I can do what has to be done with a couple of telephone calls. Let's start."

And so he became a hospital patient. He was stripped of his clothes, given nicely ironed hospital robes, and settled in a room in the top floor of the building. The whole east side of the city was visible from his window, and in the distance he could see the high flat roof of the academy. A student from the college brought over his prayer books, his phylacteries, and prayer shawl. Visitors were not encouraged.

Day after day they starved him and they tested him. His intake was limited to water and pills. He rode stationary bicycles; was connected to a variety of electronic devices; gave blood, sputum, and urine every few hours; was x-rayed from every conceivable angle; and was weighed every twelve hours.

On the fifth day, Anna, the nurse who weighed him, told him that he had already lost twenty-four pounds.

On the sixth day he made a telephone call to Chaim Bergenzon, the tailor, saying that he was already so much thinner that Chaim should stop working on the suit. No, he preferred no visitors. He would call about a new measuring when he got out of the hospital.

On the seventh day he was once again summoned to the medical tribunal. "We are doing very well with the overweight problem, Rabbi Kentucky," said the elderly doctor whose name he did not know. "You have lost thirty-three pounds.

At this rate, within a week we will have conquered the medical problem of your excessive weight. We can start giving you some solid foods. However, Rabbi Kentucky, I must admit that with your second problem, the fact that what is left of you is too heavy, too dense, we have drawn a blank. It's a medical mystery. To tell the truth, your condition has worsened. You are now even denser than you were before."

"So what do we do?" asked the rabbi.

The younger doctor at the left answered. "We have one clue. We don't know what it means, but we have to follow it up on it. The x-rays that we took showed strange shadows over various parts of your body; they were especially dark in the thoracic region. We suspected some metallic deposits, like lead, but none of the tests revealed any traces of unusual ions in your body fluids. So we are left with no explanation. What we would like to do is to move in a radically new direction."

Rabbi Joel sighed. "Tell me what is necessary," he said.

The young doctor continued. "We want to take a biopsy of your pericardial tissue, where there are particularly heavy x-ray shadows, and to submit the material to micro-chemical analysis. We need your consent to do this."

"You want to stick a needle into my heart, and you want me to agree?" asked Rabbi Joel. "Fine. I consent."

The biopsy was taken within an hour, and despite the local anesthesia, it was quite painful. After he was returned to his room, he slept for a couple of hours. He was awakened by Anna, the nurse, who gave him his first solid food in a week: grapefruit and low-fat cottage cheese.

The tests continued over the next few days, and though nobody told him about the progress of the investigation, he sensed a growing excitement.

The medical student who took the blood samples said nothing, but seemed to look at him in wonderment. More x-rays were taken with sophisticated equipment that, he was told, gave three-dimensional pictures. The young doctor who had sat to the left of the elderly doctor came twice, once to ask him about the exact quantities of the fish that he had eaten every evening, and once to inquire where he had purchased them.

On the seventh day after the biopsy he was summoned once again to the medical tribunal. There were nine doctors. A hanging court, he thought. They were very courteous to him, treating him like an honored guest, not like an overweight rabbi in the metabolic disorders clinic. They asked him to be seated. The hard-backed chair he had previously been offered had been replaced by a leather conference chair.

The elderly doctor opened the proceedings.

"Rabbi Kentucky," he said, "last week we told you that your loss of weight was encouraging, but that we were concerned about what appeared to be metallic deposits throughout your body, especially in the thoracic region. Well, I am pleased to tell you that by now the first, that of your overall bulk and weight, is effectively under control. And about the second, we have a diagnosis. That is what we would like to talk to you about."

Second-from-the-right, one of the new physicians, continued:

"Pleased to meet you Rabbi Kentucky. My name is Eugene Newman, from the National Micro-Isotope Laboratory in Washington, D.C. I was called in when all the standard chemical tests of your biopsy failed to reveal anything. Your physicians here concluded that the deposits in your body must be of an inert metal. They were right. I tested the material and found that it was gold."

"Gold?" asked Rabbi Joel.

"Yes," continued the young doctor who had sat on the left at the first tribunal, who had come to ask him about the fish that he ate, and now was sitting on the far right. "Gold. A lot of it. The first question we had to ask ourselves was where so much gold had come from. I had a look at the fish. According to what you told us, you have been eating about 22 kilograms of fish a week for a period of seven years. That means that you have eaten just over 56 metric tons. Now I have consulted with my colleague here," and he nodded to the man to the left, who nodded in return, "Dr. Flannigan, a noted ichthyologist, and he has informed me

that such fishes may contain up to one hundredth of one percent of pure unassociated gold. One hundredth of one percent of 56 metric tons is 5.6 kilograms. And in your body we have found 5.45 kilograms of pure unassociated gold."

The elderly doctor in the middle continued: "Rabbi Kentucky, 5.45 kilograms is about 12 pounds. At yesterday's spot price in Geneva, \$419 per ounce, you are worth \$80,448. About four-fifths of the gold is in the area of your heart, so your heart alone is worth about \$65,000."

"Please stop for a moment," Rabbi Joel interrupted him. He closed his eyes for a few moments, trying to understand. He opened his eyes. "Please continue," he said.

The elderly doctor continued. "The physiological process by which gold has been deposited in your body is a mystery. It is within the cells, in an atomic state, in a colloidal suspension ..."

"Excuse me, doctor," Rabbi Joel interrupted him, "but I have a question for Dr. Newman. Did you find only gold? Or were there other metals too? I mean, was there silver? Is the gold alloyed with silver?"

Dr. Newman looked surprised. "Yes, there is silver too, but it's present in much smaller quantities. About five percent by weight."

The elderly doctor continued: "The silver is not worth more than \$500. But Rabbi Kentucky, what I want to tell you is that your medical condition is apparently not threatening to your health. The gold is inert, and there is no danger of poisoning. It is not affecting any of your essential functions. Your heart, liver, kidneys, are all fine. But the gold should not be there, and it is important that we discover how and why you have absorbed it."

Rabbi Joel interrupted the doctor once again, this time with considerable agitation. "Stop, please stop," he almost shouted. "Gentlemen, learned doctors, please stop. I must leave you now. I can hear no more. I truly appreciate everything you have done, all your work and all your care, but now I must leave. I am truly grateful, but I can stay here no longer. As you have just said, my condition is not serious, and with your permission, or without, I shall go home now."

For a few minutes the learned doctors lost their professional reserve. There was uproar, as all spoke and shouted at the same time. Then each in turn urged him to remain in the hospital and to let them continue their research. "Our findings will advance all of medical science." "We have called a news conference tomorrow to announce a major discovery. We'll have to cancel it." "You may possess the alchemists' secret of making gold." "Your name will go down in history. We were going to call the condition EdemioCardius Midasius. We'll change the name to EdemioCardius Kentuckyius." "Please, Rabbi Kentucky, please."

But Rabbi Joel would listen to none of their pleas. He thanked them courteously and firmly for all their help and insisted that he be permitted to leave the hospital immediately. "Gentlemen, I must go," he said. "I have just ten days to get a new garment made and to prepare for the opening of a new session of the rabbinic court. I have been away from my duties for too long. Thank you, learned doctors." And with this, he got up, went to his room, got dressed (and discovered that his clothes were much too large) and went to the office to sign himself out.

He did not go straight home, for he needed time to think, to understand. "We have found gold in your heart," the physicians had said. "You are not living your life properly," the tailor had told him. He walked through the city, from park to park, occasionally resting for a while on a bench, and then moving on. He knew that he was being beckoned in a specific direction, but he could not go straight there. Nevertheless, after a couple of hours, he reached the basement workshop of Chaim Bergenzon.

"Rabbi Chaim," asked Rabbi Joel, "you knew about all this, didn't you?" "Yes," answered the tailor softly, "but please don't call me rabbi." "You knew about it all. About the fish, about my meals, about the gold."

Chaim shrugged and offered his guest a chair.

"Chaim," said the rabbi, "for seven years I've been working on my eating. For seven years I've tried to make each meal into a perfect act of worship. It was the

most important thing in my life, to do just that one thing perfectly. And what happens? I got almost a hundred pounds overweight, and a crazy doctor tells me I've got \$65,000 worth of gold in my heart."

The two men sat together in silence.

After a few minutes Rabbi Joel said, "What should I do? Chaim, can you tell me what I should do?"

"What do people do when they make mistakes? They start over again."

"Can you help me, Chaim?" asked the rabbi.

"Rabbi Joel, you've chosen a lonely path. It took you to great heights, but it was too lonely. It was too lonely. You know that. And you know that I can't tell you what to do. I can wish you well-being. But that's all." The tailor paused for a moment, and then continued: "But you know, there is one thing I can do for you. I can make you some new clothes. Real garments, good cloth, not a suit to hide in at a ceremony once a year. Good clothes that you can wear every day of the week."

There was nothing more to be said. They made an appointment for a new measuring, and Rabbi Joel left. He took a bus home. To enter his apartment he took the service elevator at the back of the building. He did not want to be seen, and he told no one downstairs of his return. For many years Rabbi Joel had not

been as agitated as he was that afternoon. He moved restlessly around the apartment, never staying in one place for more than a few minutes. He went to the freezer and looked at the fish piled up on the shelves, and was unmoved, or rather, he was moved in a direction he did not understand and could scarcely feel. He went to the closet and was baffled to see that indeed he possessed no clothes. From his library he took down some sacred books, reread the well-marked passages on fish, and looked up what he could on gold and silver, but he knew that he would not find the answers there.

"You made some mistakes, Rabbi Joel," the tailor had said. "You made some mistakes."

Just before sunset he went into his private chapel and began to recite the afternoon and evening prayers, but he could barely concentrate. The familiar benedictions and exaltations and petitions moved through his throat and his mouth and his lips, but they did not flow from his soul. Strange thoughts danced in and out of his mind; they appeared so rapidly and were so bizarre that he could not follow them, could not see where they came from or where they were going. At such times, he knew, prayers were unacceptable, and though they should not be abandoned or abridged, they should be concluded as quickly as possible.

That night Rabbi Joel prepared a final festive meal. He laid the seven fishes on the grill tray, one-pound slabs of cod, haddock, hake, halibut, mackerel, sea perch, and sole. He laid them from right to left, in English alphabetical order, and

he garnished them with a sauce of butter, garlic, and salt. As the fish cooked, he just sat and watched. He did not get up to set the table, nor did he prepare for dinner. He did not get up to scrub his arms, nor did he perform the ritual ablution of his hands. This night he would not partake of the meal. When the familiar odor reached his nostrils, he did not move, nor did he remove the fishes from the grill, left them until they were charred, until they were totally consumed. The acrid, bitter smell brought a welling up of tears to his eyes, and still he sat motionless. Only when a pillar of black smoke billowed from the oven and began to fill the room did he get up. He opened all the windows of his house to let it blow away, over the city, high into the clouds, and beyond.

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