

Bug Fix: May Insects Ever Be Eaten?

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

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Reuters reports:

On a recent vacation in Tokyo, Takumi Yamamoto opted for a special lunch of cricket curry and silkworm sashimi, washed down with a water bug cider. The 26-year-old office worker, from the western prefecture of Hyogo, is one of scores of consumers across the world who have taken an interest in entomophagy, or eating insects, as bugs slowly become a more viable food source...

Entomophagy started to be taken seriously globally after the United Nations deemed bugs a sustainable source of protein to feed a global population estimated to swell to 9.7 billion by 2050...Japan has a rich culinary history of insects as food. Grasshoppers, silkworms, and wasps were traditionally eaten in land-locked regions where meat and fish are scarce, a practice that picked up amid food shortages during and after World War II, said Take-Noko manager Michiko Miura...[1]

We are generally forbidden to eat insects, with the exception of some grasshoppers. But certain categories of insects are permitted. For example, the Gemara states:

Larvae found in meat are forbidden, but those found in fish are permitted.[2]

This permissibility of (certain) worms found in fish was the subject of a great halachic controversy thirteen years ago about the anisakis worms frequently found in fish. An exploration of the considerable literature on the topic is beyond the scope of this article, but we have referenced some of the primary and secondary literature in the footnotes.[3]

Even insects that are permitted under the basic laws of insects entail a secondary concern, as set forth in the continuation of the above Gemara passage:

Revina said to his mother (when she found larvae in the fish she was preparing for him): "Mix them into the fish for me (so that I won't be repulsed by their sight), and I will eat."

Why did Revina want to avoid seeing the worms? Rashi explains that he did not wish to be disgusted by them.[4] It is possible that Revina was merely expressing his personal squeamishness, but elsewhere the Gemara asserts that eating disgusting things is actually prohibited:

Rav Kahana was standing before Rav and was passing a *shoshiva* (a type of kosher locust) upon his mouth. Rav said to him: "Take it off, so that onlookers should not say of you, 'He is eating it and violating *bal teshaktzu*.'"[5]^[6]

The Pri Chadash indeed assumes that in the case of Revina, had the insects not been hidden, he would have been disgusted by them (and they would have thus been prohibited under *bal teshaktzu*), and he accordingly infers from Revina's willingness to consume the insects as long as he did not see them that even if one is aware of the presence of disgusting insects in his

food, as long as he does not see them, and the awareness itself does not disgust him, he is permitted to consume them.

The Pri Chadash then proceeds to infer from this that *bal teshaktzu* must hinge on the eater's personal sensibilities, because

presumably most people would not consume worms in fish if they knew that they were there, out of disgust, but Revina was not concerned with this and would consume them because he was not disgusted by them.

He qualifies, however, that consuming items that some, or even most, people find disgusting—as long as one does not personally find them disgusting—is only permitted where at least *some* other people do not find them disgusting. But where *everyone* else does, one's personal lack of squeamishness is immaterial (*batlah dato*).[7]

The Knessess Hagdolah declares that in his opinion, the prohibition of *bal teshaktzu* extends to things that people commonly (*derech bnei adam*) find disgusting, even if the individual wishing to consume them does not find them disgusting.[8] While he may be referring to things that *everyone* finds disgusting, in which case his view would be consistent with that of the Pri Chadash, some *Acharonim* understand him to be referring even to things that only *most* people find disgusting, and thus in disagreement with the Pri Chadash.[9]

Returning to the Pri Chadash's distinction between something disgusting that one actually sees and something disgusting that one is only aware of, we find a similar point in the *poskim* regarding water that may contain insects that are otherwise permissible but are disgusting: The water may be drunk, despite the possible presence of disgusting insects, because they are not discrete and visible (*be'ain*).[10]

In summary, the permissibility of entomophagy (with regard to insects that are not prohibited by the basic laws of *shratzim* or crawling things) is governed by the following halachic rules:

- If one personally finds the insects in question disgusting, he may not eat them, regardless of whether others find them disgusting as well.
- If everyone finds the insects in question disgusting, they are likewise prohibited, even to someone who does not find them disgusting.
- If most people find them disgusting, but some, including the prospective eater, do not, then their permissibility is a matter of dispute among the *poskim*.
- Even insects that are disgusting when visible may be consumed if they are hidden in food so that they are not visible, even if one is aware of their presence. Similarly, the consensus of the *poskim* is that one may drink water likely infested with disgusting insects if he does not find such water disgusting.

We reiterate that all the above is only relevant to insects that are not prohibited by the basic laws of *shratzim*, a comprehensive discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article.

[1] Tom Bateman and Rocky Swift. Silkworm sashimi, cricket curry on menu as bugs make a comeback in Japan. Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/silkworm-sashimi-cricket-curry-menu-bug-s-make-comeback-japan-2023-07-26/>.

[2]Chulin 67b.

[3]See R' Moshe Yehuda Landau, *Tola'ai Anisakis Hanimtza'im Bedagim*, Kosharot; R' Shneur Zalman Revach, *Bedin Tola'as Anisakis*, Kosharot; R' Moshe Mordechai Karp, *Be'inyan Hachashash Letola'ai Anisakis Bifrusos Dag* Herring; R' Moshe Katz, *Tola'as Ha'anisakis—Asurah mide'Oreisa O Muteret Lechat'chilah*, Iyar 5775, Mechon HaTorah Veba'aretz; Kuntres Milsa Dish'chicha; R' Moishe Dovid Lebovits, Worms in Fish—the Recent Tumult, Halachically Speaking Vol. 6 Issue 9; R' Tzvi Rosen, Opening Up A Can of Worms: The Anisakis Controversy.

Cf. Shu"t Mishneh Halachos *cheilek* 16 *siman* 4.

[4]But see Orach Chaim *Ma'achalos Asuros* 2:14 who suggests that according to the Rambam, if the insects were not hidden, they would be prohibited under the standard prohibitions against consuming insects.

[5]Vayikra 11:43.

[6]Shabbos 90b. Cf. R' Yerucham Fishel Perlow, *Biur al Sefer Hamitzvos LeRav Sa'adia Gaon, Lo Sa'aseh* 76; Minchas Asher, *Issur Achilles Shratzim, os* 3: *Be'inyan Bal Teshaktzu*.

[7]Pri Chadash Y.D. *siman* 84 *os* 3 and *siman* 116 *os* 11 (cited in Pri Megadim *ibid. siman* 84 M.Z. *s.k.* 2).

[8]Knesses Hagdolah *ibid. siman* 84 *Hagahos* Tur end of *os* 4.

[9]Pri Megadim *ibid. S.D. s.k.* 3.

Mishnas R' Eliezer (De Toledo, *cheilek* 2 *Kuntres Hazichronos os* mem: *Mius os* 98 p. 22b) simply declares that the Knesses Hagdolah disagrees with the Pri Chadash regarding things that most people find disgusting, but he does not cite a source in the Knesses Hagdolah. The Sdei Chemed (*cheilek* 1, *klalim ma'areches* *habais os* 79 p. 340) writes that he does not know where the Knesses Hagdolah expresses such a view, but it seems clear that the Mishnas R' Eliezer interpreted the passage of the Knesses Hagdolah we cited as the Pri Megadim does.

Cf. *Ochel Lo Ta'im, Olamot*.

[10]Bach *ibid. Kuntres Acharon*; Shach *ibid. s.k.* 3 (the Shach mentions this dispensation in addition to the fact that "his intent is merely to drink the water").

The Issur Veheter (*klal* 41 *os* 7) and the Taz *ibid. s.k.* 2 rule that water that may contain insects that are disgusting may not be drunk. The Pri Megadim *ibid. S.D.* 3 explains that this is not inconsistent with the view of the Bach and Shach, because the latter are referring to the case where the insects are not disgusting in their water-mixed state, whereas the Taz is referring to the case where they are disgusting even in that state. The Knesses Hagdolah *ibid.* proposes this same distinction but is uncertain of it.