

The Question of Quails

As well as eating Manna in the wilderness, the Children of Israel were fed a diet of quail (Shemot 16:13). One might imagine, then, that quail eggs (now readily available under the “posh birds” label at our supermarkets) should also be kosher. If only it was all so straightforward.

Far from straightforward, you may have enjoyed quail eggs at kosher supervised functions overseas, but a phone call to the London Beth Din or their published list does not yield a “quail is kosher” answer.

As we know, the Torah gives us ways to identify kosher species. For fish we need fins and scales (Devarim 14:9). Livestock must have a cloven hoof and chew the cud (Devarim 14:6). Regarding fowl, however, there is no simple rule. We are allowed to eat clean birds and fowl and given lists of unacceptable species (Devarim 14:12-20) “after their kind.” While the Gemara (Chullin 63a) is able to identify certain shared characteristics, so that we know that birds of prey or carrion eaters are not acceptable, there is still no ready rule.

Essentially birds are kosher where there is a tradition that they are eaten (Rashi), but absent such a tradition, they are not. In fact, while most of us take it for granted that turkey is kosher (and indeed, Israel is the largest per capita turkey consumer), there were those (eg Rav Shlomo Kluger) who held upon its introduction to Europe from the New World or India that there was no tradition that we may eat it and therefore we should not.

Doesn't the Tanakh count as “tradition” enough? If Hashem gave us quail in the wilderness, what better hechsher could we want? For those who sing zemirot at the Shabbat table, quail is in the refrain of “Ma Yedidut” מה ידידות, where we chant our enjoyment of וסלו ודגים ברבורים geese, quail and fish. Clearly the composer of the zemer had the tradition.

Unfortunately, we cannot be sure that the biblical “Slav” corresponds exactly to our Tesco quail. The Tanakh references many animal species in Hebrew. From the King James Authorised Bible through Artscroll (Iehavdil) there are attempts to translate them. The Tachash תחש (Shemot 25:5) whose skins adorned the Tabernacle is translated in some places as “rhinoceros” and others as “unicorn”. Some non-Jewish translations render it as “porpoise” and others as “badger”. We just don't know. For this reason, some publications such as *The Living Torah* have avoided translating animal names altogether.

Moreover, around the world in different countries, there are many animals (and plants) which has been named (often through superficial appearance) with the same common name, even though they are of completely different species. Travellers should be aware that there are fish locally known as “cod” or “tuna” which are Treif. In New Zealand, there was even a difference between the North and South Islands. “Whitebait” was kosher in one and not in the other.

Therefore, when we look at birds called “quail” it is important to identify the species rather than the common name and then to establish whether there is a tradition for that particular fowl.

The late Rav Yisrael Belsky (who passed away just last week) was Posek for the OU kashrut. In his correspondence with the Kashrut Authority of Australia and New Zealand in my time, he noted a local kosher tradition for both Common and Japanese quail (*coturnix coturnix* and *coturnix japonica*). In certain communities in America and in Australia, these quail eggs are sold and served under supervision.

R' Belsky distinguished these from the Bobwhite quail and Asian Painted quail (*colonus virgianus* and *coturnix chinensis*) which are not permitted.

Vis a vis the eggs, even where they are allowed, only a proficient ornithologist would be able to distinguish permitted species quail eggs from the similar eggs of other species. Without supervision, individuals may not take it for granted that smallish speckled eggs on sale come from a species that is approved.

The position of the London Beth Din is that there is no local tradition on which we can safely rely. Quail is not in our butchers nor an option for our simchas.

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare tells us it was the favourite food of Agamemnon. "Here's Agamemnon, an honest fellow enough, and one that loves quails, but he has not so much brain as ear-wax." Fortunately that's not on our menu either!