

The Ashkenazi Custom Not to Slaughter Geese in Tevet and Shevat

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The notes of R. Moshe Isserles supplement the *Shulhan Arukh* by bringing the rulings and customs of Ashkenazi authorities. Scattered throughout his comments are references to various folkloric practices. These include the idea that placing the keys of the synagogue under a sick person's head will cause them to pass away (*Yoreh De'ab* 339:1),¹ that blessing two grooms at once can bring on the evil eye (*Even Haezer* 62:3),² and that a person can tell if they will survive the upcoming year by checking their shadow in the moonlight on Hoshana Rabbah (*Orakeh Hayyim* 664:1).³ In this article we will trace the origin of one such custom which is virtually forgotten today.

R. Judah ha-Hasid of Regensburg (1140–1217), a leading figure among the German Pietists (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*), is named as the source of an unusual Ashkenazi custom regarding the slaughter of geese. R. Moshe Isserles in his commentary to the *Tur* (*Darkei Moshe, Yoreh De'ab* 11:2) notes that he found in the name of R. Judah ha-Hasid that some slaughterers are careful not to slaughter geese during the month of Shevat. This is based on a tradition that whoever slaughters a goose during a particular hour in this month would die within the year. Since the precise hour is not known, slaughtering geese is avoided during the entire month. This is the reason people are careful not to eat geese during Shevat, lest they come to slaughter a goose during the dangerous hour. Some are careful not to eat geese during the month of Tevet as well. The way to counteract

¹ See the discussion in R. Yaakov Yisrael Stell, "Tefillat Neshamot ha-Niftarim b-Beit ha-Knesset," *Yerushateinu*, book 3, Elul, 5769, pp. 217–218.

² See the discussion in R. Gavriel Tzinger, "b-Din Birkat Eirusin v-Nisuin l-Kama Hattanim b-vat Echad" *Kovetz Beit Aharon v-Yisrael*, vol. 81:3, Shvat-Adar 5759, pp. 75–78.

³ See the discussion in R. Yisrael Weinstock, *Maagalei ha-Nigleh v-ha-Nistar* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1970), pp. 249–270.

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this is by having the slaughterer eat the heart of the goose he slaughters. R. Isserles mentions this custom not to slaughter geese during Tevet and Shevat in his glosses to the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Rema, Yoreh Deah* 11:4) as well, noting that this led to the custom of slaughterers eating the hearts of the geese they slaughter during Tevet and Shevat.

The only source we have for this custom in the writings of R. Judah ha-Hasid is *Tzava'at Rabbi Yehudah ha-Hasid*, the ethical will attributed to him, but of contested authorship.⁴ Item 41 in the document⁵ warns not to slaughter geese in the month of Shevat, and that one family is careful not to slaughter geese in Tevet. The will concludes by siding with the custom to avoid slaughtering geese in Shevat.

This custom is also mentioned in the glosses to R. Isaac Tyrnau's *Sefer ha-Minbagim*.⁶ There we find that geese are not slaughtered in Shevat, and if they are then the liver should be given to the slaughterer. While *Sefer ha-Minbagim* is a late-14th-century work, it is not clear when the glosses were written, or by whom. Opinion ranges from the time of *Sefer ha-Minbagim* to the mid-17th century.⁷ The gloss mentions that the book *Tashbetz* states in the name of R. Judah ha-Hasid that there is one hour in Shevat when whoever slaughters a goose dies. *Tashbetz*, referred to as *Tashbetz Katan* so as to avoid confusion with the compendium of responsa bearing the same name, is a collection of the customs of R. Meir of Rothenberg (c.1215–1293) recorded by a student whose identity is not clear. Some editions of *Tashbetz* include a statement that R. Judah ha-Hasid taught that it is dangerous to eat geese on the 8th of Shevat, and that there is one hour in Shevat where it is dangerous to slaughter geese, therefore some people are careful not to eat geese all of Shevat, lest they come to slaughter a goose.⁸ *Tashbetz* has undergone many editions, and the statements about

⁴ On the authorship of *Tzava'at Rabbi Yehudah ha-Hasid* see Reuven Margalio, *Sefer Hassidim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990), pp. 3–6, and Abrahams, Israel, “Jewish Ethical Wills,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Apr., 1891), p. 472, “There can be little doubt that the testament is spurious, but whoever be the author it contains a mass of superstitions.” It was first printed in Venice in the 16th century.

⁵ In some editions it is found as items 48 and 49.

⁶ *Sefer ha-Minbagim*, Shlomo Spitzer, ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1999), p. 143, Shevat, note 41.

⁷ See Spitzer, Introduction, pp. 17-18.

⁸ *Tashbetz*, *siman* 555 as quoted in *Shivim Temarim* by R. Chaim Shimon Dov Zivon, a commentary on *Tzava'at Rabbi Yehudah ha-Hasid*, (Warsaw: 1900), p. 106. This is also quoted by Hida in the name of R. Judah ha-Hasid in *Birkei Yosef, Yoreh Deah* 11:5, (Livorno: 1776) although other editions give the date of the 5th

slaughtering geese do not appear in the editions currently available.⁹ In the glosses of R. Moshe Isserles, *Tashbetz* quoting R. Judah ha-Hasid is given as the source for the custom not to eat goose in Tevet and Shevat.

All the early sources noting this custom are of unknown or contested authorship, and it is not clear when they were written. The time of the prohibition, Shevat or Tevet or both, is a matter of debate, as well as the remedy, the goose's liver or heart. What is clear is that by the 16th century this Ashkenazi custom was understood to have originated with R. Judah ha-Hasid and had been incorporated into the *Shulhan Arukh*.¹⁰

There are variants of this custom regarding what part of the goose to eat in order to avoid danger. *Shakh* states that he saw that the legs of the geese are eaten by the slaughterers;¹¹ R. Yonatan Eybeschuetz states that in Prague the custom is that the slaughterers take some fat from the goose.¹² Further leniencies are mentioned, that it suffices if one of the slaughterer's family members partakes of the goose, or even if the slaughterer is given money instead of a part of the goose.¹³ There are also various traditions regarding when it is dangerous to slaughter geese. *Taz* writes that he found in an old book in the name of R. Judah ha-Hasid that it is dangerous to engage in bloodletting, and to slaughter or eat a goose on the first day of the month of Iyar, Elul or Tevet when it falls on either a Monday or Wednesday, and in a different book that the dangerous time is the 15th of Tevet when it falls out on a Sunday.¹⁴

of Shevat (Jerusalem: Siach Yisrael, 2005). An interesting explanation for refraining from eating goose on the 8th of Shevat based on the idea that rabbis are sometimes referred to metaphorically as "white geese" is found in Natan Neta Olevski, *Neta Revai*, (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1995), *siman* 23, p. 414.

⁹ See Spitzer, p. 143, note 41. See also Menashe Lehmann, "Maḥzor ketav yad Lehmann v-ha-Tashbetz shebetokbo," pp. 188-189, in *Kovetz al Yad* (Jerusalem: Hevrat Mekitze Nirdamim, 1985), vol. 11 (21).

¹⁰ Over time, the custom spread to Sephardic Jews as well. See for example, Refael Aharon Ben Shimon (1848–1928), *Nabar Miṭzrayim* (Alexandria: 1908), volume 1, *Hilkebot Shebita*, *siman* 18, p. 57; R. Hayyim Palagi, *Sefer Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Chen Chayyim, 2004), p. 193.

¹¹ *Shakh*, *Yoreh Deah* 11:7.

¹² *Kreiti u-Pleiti*, *Kreiti* 11:14.

¹³ See responsa of Hatam Sofer, *Kovetz Teshuvot* 27 and responsa *Ketav Sofer*, *Yoreh Deah* 12, which state that the slaughterer should eat from the goose to avoid danger, but whoever is unconcerned about this may take money instead. See also *Darkei Teshuva*, *Yoreh Deah* 11:49.

¹⁴ *Taz*, *Yoreh Deah*, 116:6. Different editions of *Shulhan Arukh* contain textual variants in the exact dates mentioned by *Taz* based on the similarity of the letters *alef* (denoting the first day of the month) and *bet* (denoting the eighth day) in

We have seen that this custom has many variants, but the primary component is that there is a time when it is dangerous to slaughter geese unless a part of it is given to the slaughterer. To clarify matters, we must first understand the connection between geese and the months of Tevet and Shevat. Geese were a significant source of food for Jews in early medieval Rhineland. They were considered advantageous over chickens since they live longer, can be sustained on lower-quality feed, can be herded rather than carried, are less prone to diseases and provide more fat for schmaltz. Goose schmaltz was the predominant cooking fat at the time. Only centuries later, with the movement of Jews to Eastern Europe, did chickens replace geese as the principal fowl.¹⁵ Geese would gorge themselves in the months preceding the winter migration, eating as much as possible in anticipation of the long journey ahead. The liver and skin are the principal repositories of the fat of geese used to store energy reserves. In addition to this, geese were manually fattened by their owners through the autumn months. Typically, the geese were allowed to free-range for several months, during which time the keratin of their esophagus firmed, then in late autumn, in order to secure as much fat as possible from each goose, excess grains and bread were massaged down the throats of the animals on a regular basis. At the very end of autumn, through a combination of the instinctual pre-migration gorging and force-feeding by their owners, geese were at the peak of their fatness. Historically, most geese were slaughtered shortly before the onset of winter, in order to take maximum advantage of the fattened goose. Any domesticated geese not slaughtered by then would not be slaughtered during the ensuing winter months when their fat level fell. Those remaining geese were intended for future procreation.¹⁶ This led to the popularity of roast goose at Hanukkah among German Jews.¹⁷ Gentiles also feasted on goose at their autumn and winter holidays, at Michaelmas, the feast commemorating the autumnal equinox at the end of September, at Samhain (Halloween) at the end

Rashi script, thus making the 8th, not the first, of Iyar, Elul and Tevet dangerous days. See for example, *Shiv'im Temarim*, p. 107.

¹⁵ Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2010), p. 233.

¹⁶ Gil Marks, personal correspondence, Oct. 3, 2010. See also Nigel Pennick, *The Pagan Book of Days* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1992), p. 123, “The Anglo-Saxon name for November was Blotmonath, the month of sacrifice, the time for killing the livestock that could not be kept through the winter months.”

¹⁷ Marks, p. 74.

of October, at Martinmas in November,¹⁸ and at the Germanic Yule, originally the first day of the new year.¹⁹ The German Martinmas goose was later incorporated into Christmas celebrations.²⁰ Special “Roast Goose Fairs” were held in the fall.²¹ Tevet and Shevat coincided with the time of year that the slaughtering of geese had for the most part been completed.

Why would slaughtering a goose at that particular time be dangerous? Trachtenberg, in his classic work *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, suggests that while “the origin of this notion is obscure” it has something to do with the fact that the months of Tevet and Shevat cover the time of the winter solstice, a transitional period given great significance in the ancient world.²² Indeed, we find many goose-related customs centered on the Gentile festivals noted above that take place in the period of time from the autumnal equinox to the winter solstice. The goose served at these European holiday meals had a supernatural component as well. Geese had sacred associations among the ancient Greeks, Romans and Britons, ideas that survived into medieval Europe.²³ “A sacrifice of geese at the turn from one season to another was a universal custom in Europe.”²⁴ Rituals included sprinkling the blood of the goose across the threshold and in the four corners of the house.²⁵ The goose was considered an offering to ensure the regeneration of vegetation after the winter months. A harvest festival would be considered incomplete without the traditional goose.²⁶

¹⁸ Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, *A History of Food* (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 2009) p. 320. See also Leland Duncan, “Fairy Beliefs and Other Folklore: Notes from County Leitrim,” *Folklore*, vol. 7, (1896) p. 179, and Thomas J. Westropp, “A Folklore Survey of County Clare,” *Folklore*, vol. 22 (1911) p. 207.

¹⁹ Tamara Andrews, *Nectar and Ambrosia: An Encyclopedia of Food in World Mythology* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2000), pp. 105-106.

²⁰ William Sansom, *A Book of Christmas* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), pp. 144-145.

²¹ M.A. Courtney, “Cornish Feasts and Feasten Customs,” *Folklore*, vol. 4 (1886) p. 111.

²² Trachtenberg, Joshua, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Athenium, 1984), p. 258.

²³ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, James Hastings, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916), vol. 8, p. 623. See also N.W. Thomas, “Animal Superstitions and Totemism,” *Folklore*, vol. 11 (1900), pp. 242, 243, 253, 259.

²⁴ Toussaint-Samat, p. 320. An annual sacrifice of geese in connection to crops is found beyond Europe as well, for example in India; see Col. J. Shakespear, “The Religion of Manipur,” *Folklore*, vol. 7, (1896), p. 433.

²⁵ C.C. Bell, “Fifth of November Customs,” *Folklore*, vol. 14 (1903) p. 186, describing St. Martin’s Eve in November.

²⁶ Toussaint-Samat, p. 133.

The idea that food and drink may be adversely affected by the changing of the *tekufot*, the solstices and equinoxes, and be rendered dangerous for consumption is also found in many medieval sources, both Jewish and Gentile.²⁷ However, if the slaughter of a goose was considered dangerous due to the winter solstice and this was indeed the “particular hour” warned about by R. Moshe Isserles, why would the custom extend to the entire month of Tevet? All other sources that mention the dangers of the *tekufot* limit the hazard to the exact hour of the *tekufah*, or at most from sunset to midnight,²⁸ and don't extend the danger to the entire month, and certainly not a month after the solstice to Shevat. Furthermore, the time of the *tekufah* was well known, and the “particular hour” when it is dangerous to slaughter geese was understood by R. Isserles to be unknown. An additional problem with this theory is that we have seen that rather than avoiding slaughtering geese at the autumnal equinox and winter solstice, geese were considered an integral component of the festivities held at those times of year.

R. Reuven Margalioth, in his notes to *Tzava'at Rabbi Yehudah ha-Hasid*, explains that the custom has to do with the idea, found multiple times in the Zohar, that Tevet is one of the months where negative spiritual forces and stern judgment are found in the world.²⁹ According to R. Margalioth, this causes the slaughter of geese to be dangerous at this time. However, the Zohar includes the months of Tammuz and Av along with Tevet as difficult times and we find no such custom in those two months. Furthermore, why would the danger affect the slaughter of geese more than of any other animal?³⁰

The mystical work *Sefer ha-Kaneh* explains³¹ that during the month of Shevat the “angel of geese” has dominion and whoever slaughters a goose will be slaughtered in turn.³² This is stated right after mentioning that it is prohibited to kill a black cat. It is not clear who is the author of *Sefer ha-Kaneh* and where or when it was written. It is generally understood to be

²⁷ See Trachtenberg, pp. 257-258. Also see for example *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* 33:8.

²⁸ See for example Rabbenu Bahya on Genesis 4:22, *v-achot*.

²⁹ Reuven Margalioth, *Sefer Hassidim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990), p. 23, note 57.

³⁰ See *Hodesh be-Hodsho* (Brooklyn, New York: Ichud Chassidei Munkacz, 2000) Shevat, 5760, vol. 6, no. 71, p.7, for these and other criticisms of the idea that the custom is based on the Zohar.

³¹ *Sefer ha-Kaneh* (Cracow: Yosef Fischer Publishing, 1894), *Sod Hilkehot Tereifot*, p. 278.

³² וכן ארז"ל שלא לשחוט אווזים בזמן שיש לשר שלהם הממשלה והכה והוא חודש שבט כי הממית ימות.

a Spanish or Greek work from the late 14th or early 15th century.³³ The idea of a vengeful “angel of geese” is not found in other sources;³⁴ however, this idea was popularized by being quoted in *Beer Heitev* (*Yoreh De’ah* 11:7).

R. Yonatan Eybeschuetz explains that this is a superstitious practice, not based on any logic or natural law, and falls under the category of “the ways of the Amorite” that Jewish people should not follow. He states that in the time of R. Judah ha-Hasid witchcraft involving geese was common, and perhaps this custom came to negate their power, but this is no longer a concern.³⁵ This approach is quoted by the Hida,³⁶ R. Jehiel Michal Epstein in his *Arukh ha-Shulhan*,³⁷ and others³⁸ as the reason this practice is no longer observed.³⁹ The idea of permitting sorcery to combat sorcery is well represented in Jewish legal writings, for example, the Maharshah writes in a responsum, “the Torah did not prohibit sorcery in this manner, which comes only to expel and nullify sorcery,”⁴⁰ and the ruling of the *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* (166:5) that “it is forbidden to consult sorcerers except...if a sickness was the result of witchcraft.”⁴¹ Seemingly illogical and theurgic practices can be justified only when warding off malevolent supernatural forces, such as witchcraft. In the absence of these malevolent forces, the techniques once used to combat them are downgraded from

³³ See Ta-Shema, Israel, “Where were *Sefer ha-Kaneh* and the *Peliab* composed?” (Hebrew) in *The Jacob Katz Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1980), pp. 56–60.

³⁴ There is some controversy surrounding the authenticity and reliability of *Sefer ha-Kaneh*. See for example, *Birkei Yosef*, David Avitan, ed. (Jerusalem: Siach Yisrael, 2005), *Yoreh Deah* 11:5, p. 11, note 7.

³⁵ *Kreiti u-Pleiti*, *Kreiti* 11:14 and *Pleiti* 11:5.

³⁶ *Birkei Yosef*, *Yoreh Deah* 11:5.

³⁷ *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, *Yoreh Deah* 11:15.

³⁸ R. Pinchas Simcha Kornfeld, *Ma’arekhet ha-Shulhan* (Bnei Brak: 1995), vol. 1, p. 126, n. 19. See also Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel – Hilkhot Purim* (Jerusalem: Cong. Nitei Gavriel, 2000), p. 51, note 7. See also *Shivim Temarim*, pp. 108-109 who disagrees with R. Yonatan Eybeschuetz explaining that there is a טעם נורא for this custom.

³⁹ This is also the explanation offered by contemporary kashrut organizations as to why the custom is no longer observed (personal communication from Rabbi Mordechai Frankel, Institute of Halacha at the Star-K, January 8, 2014).

⁴⁰ R. Shlomo Luria, *She’elot u-Teshuvot Maharshah*, 3.

⁴¹ See J.H. Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 93, 94.

legitimate means of protection to simple superstition, and should thus be abandoned.⁴²

In fact, the idea that certain days are dangerous for eating geese is found in European folklore. Many records of so-called Egyptian days, bad luck days, include three days on which it is ill-omened to engage in certain activities, such as bloodletting, beginning a new business venture and eating goose. These lists are found as early as 354 CE and were very popular through medieval times.⁴³ They were known as *Dies mali*, the origin of the English adjective ‘dismal.’⁴⁴ Lists of unlucky days are common in medieval works; they were understood to be based on the ancient Egyptian calendar and were determined on astrological grounds.⁴⁵ We find that the last day of April, the first day of August, and the last day of December were considered especially dangerous, “and if they eat any goose in these 3 days, within 40 days they shall die.”⁴⁶ Another list mentions the last Monday of April, the first of August and the first Monday in the second half of the month of December as days when “he that tastes of goose-flesh, within forty days space his life he will end.”⁴⁷ This is reminiscent of the list of dangerous days that *Taz* found in an old book in the name of R. Judah ha-Hasid, with its dangerous Mondays.⁴⁸ We can now understand that what *Taz* found was simply a list of Egyptian days translated into the Jewish calendar, Iyar, Elul and Tevet substituting for April, August and December. The same goes for the 8th of Shevat as reported in the name of *Tashbetz*. The multiple versions of perilous days recorded by *Tashbetz* and *Taz* are reflective of the different traditions of Egyptian days. The main

⁴² R. Hayyim Palagi writes that this custom is based on scientists [הכמ"י המהק"ר] stating that these are difficult days, *Sefer Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Chen Chayyim, 2004), p. 193. Based on this, if it is now demonstrated that the science behind the custom is in error, the custom need not be observed.

⁴³ Laszlo Sandor Chardonens, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, 900–1100* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 331.

⁴⁴ Chardonens, p. 330.

⁴⁵ Trachtenberg, p. 254. See also Pennick, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Robert Chambers, *Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection With the Calendar* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger, 2004, reprint of the original 1869 edition) Part 1, p. 42, quoting a Saxon MS (Cott. MS. Vitell, C. viii. fo. 20).

⁴⁷ Chambers, p. 41, quoting *The Book of Knowledge*. See also Laurence Gomme, “Rules Concerning Perilous Days,” *Folklore*, vol. 24 (1913), p. 122.

⁴⁸ As this article was going to press, I found that this same conclusion has been reached by Justine Isserles, “Some Hygiene and Dietary Calendars in Hebrew Manuscripts From Medieval Ashkenaz” in the recently published Sacha Stern and Charles Burnett, eds., *Time, Astronomy, and Calendars in the Jewish Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 273–285.

difference is that the Jewish versions of this custom focus on the danger involved in slaughtering geese, whereas the Gentile versions talk only about the danger of consuming geese.⁴⁹ *Tashbetz* and *Taz* mention the danger in eating geese as well as slaughtering geese; other Jewish sources discuss only slaughtering geese. This follows the approach of R. Isserles, who notes that we refrain from eating geese in order to avoid the danger in slaughtering geese (*Darkei Moshe, Yoreh De'ab* 11:2).

We now have the source for the custom reported in *Taz* of particular days when a goose should not be slaughtered, but what of the more popular custom mentioned by R. Isserles that the entire months of Tevet and Shevat are considered dangerous? The source of this custom is the conflicting lists of Egyptian days regarding the dangerous day to slaughter geese,⁵⁰ along with the additional difficulty of translating this day into a particular Hebrew calendar date, especially since the first Monday of the second half of December was not tied to a particular date at all. Since the day of peril was disputed in various lists, some mentioning for example the first Monday of the second half of December and some the last day of December, the whole month was considered off-limits. If this is the case, why don't we find any warnings relating to slaughtering geese in the months of April and August, as found in the lists of Egyptian days? We do find such days recorded by *Taz*, but not by R. Isserles. The reason could be a practical one. The season for slaughtering geese was the end of the fall and beginning of winter, as we have seen that this is when the majority of geese were killed. It was important to know what days to avoid during this season. As a practical matter, the dangerous days for slaughtering geese in the spring and summer were largely irrelevant, as not much slaughtering took place then. This prohibition may have also had the added benefit of encouraging people to have their geese slaughtered at the peak of their fatness, at the end of autumn, right before the winter begins.

⁴⁹ The exception to this is R. Hayyim Palagi who states that the danger is in eating goose-flesh because the meat is difficult to digest, and therefore should be avoided on days of ill omen, *Sefer Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Chen Chayyim, 2004), p. 193. He lists a number of activities that should be avoided on these days, such as making *shiddukhim*, and beginning any endeavor in general.

⁵⁰ This is the reason given in *Shivim Temarim*, p. 107, that because of the different versions of the dangerous day found in *Tashbetz* and *Taz* we are cautious during the entire months of Tevet and Shevat. Modern scholarship has failed to find a formula underlying the Egyptian days or a resolution to the conflicting lists. See Chardonnens, pp. 356–358.

The Egyptian days regarding eating goose included days in late December, making it understandable that the month of Tevet should be considered dangerous for slaughtering geese. How did the month of Shevat come to be included in the prohibition? In fact there are multiple lists of Egyptian days, some listing just three unlucky days, some twelve and some as many as twenty-four.⁵¹ These expanded lists include even more days when it is perilous to eat goose, such as the first and 25th days of January,⁵² and the eighth day of February.⁵³ Based on these expanded lists of Egyptian days, the month of Shevat also contains days where it is dangerous to eat goose. We can now understand why *Tzava'at Rabbi Yebudah ha-Hasid* mentions that some people were cautious regarding Tevet and others Shevat: it all depended on which list of Egyptian days was being consulted.⁵⁴ What of the “particular hour” of danger mentioned by R. Isserles? This too is mentioned in certain lists of Egyptian days, where the 11th hour of the first of January and the sixth hour of the twenty-fifth of January are mentioned as the dangerous times to eat geese on those particular days.⁵⁵ Texts including the exact hour of danger are rare,⁵⁶ and as noted before, the dangerous dates themselves were a matter of dispute, leading R. Isserles to write that the particular hour of peril is not known.

We now see that the Ashkenazi custom not to slaughter geese during Tevet and Shevat is based on the popular tradition of Egyptian days of bad luck and danger. We even find in certain Latin texts of Egyptian days that the months of Tevet and Shevat are actually mentioned by name as corresponding to the months of January and February.⁵⁷ As R. Yonatan Eybeschuetz explained, it is a superstitious practice, “the ways of the Amorite.”

Why was the goose singled out for special consideration on the Egyptian days? Although their true origin is unknown, the Egyptian days were believed to be based on Egyptian beliefs and astrology, or on the seasonal

⁵¹ Chardonens, pp. 330, 349.

⁵² Chardonens, pp. 356.

⁵³ Chardonens, pp. 365.

⁵⁴ This is the simple reason that there are so many divergent and conflicting customs regarding the perilous days in Jewish sources. See also Aron Maged, *Beth Abaron vol. 3* (Brooklyn: E. Grossman's Publishing House, 1965) pp. 152-153.

⁵⁵ Noted on p. 135 of Chardonens' doctoral dissertation at Leiden University, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics: A Study of the Genre with a Text Edition* (2006) upon which his book *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, 900–1100* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) is based.

⁵⁶ Chardonens, pp. 246.

⁵⁷ Chardonens, pp. 231.

changes in Egypt.⁵⁸ Some scholars have attempted to trace the goose prohibition to Egyptian traditions.⁵⁹ The goose figures prominently in Egyptian creation myths as laying the primeval egg from which the Earth was hatched.⁶⁰ Additionally, “the goose was commonly killed as a victim to the gods, for no animal is more frequently seen in the sculptured representations of sacrifices.”⁶¹ These beliefs may have figured in an Egyptian goose taboo. Others relate the goose prohibition to a taboo among some Celtic tribes against eating geese in general, or to an Irish belief that eating goose after bloodletting is dangerous,⁶² or that gooseflesh is difficult to digest and therefore should be avoided during inauspicious times.⁶³ All of these explanations are considered inconclusive, modern scholarship having failed to provide a convincing rationale for the custom to avoid eating goose on certain days.⁶⁴

One part of the Ashkenazi custom not mentioned in the lists of Egyptian days is that eating the heart, liver or some other part of the goose serves to cancel the danger involved in slaughtering the goose. What is the origin of this protective measure? There are precedents in the world of ancient and medieval medicine for the idea that “only by harnessing the powers that inflicted the wound can the wound itself be mollified.”⁶⁵ This concept is found in Jewish sources as well, for example, the consuming of part of a dog's liver to cure a person who was bitten by a rabid dog is discussed in the Mishnah (*Yoma* 8:6).⁶⁶ The therapeutic use of parts of a rabid animal, particularly the liver, to cure a person bitten by such an animal is found in the writings of Galen and many other ancient physicians.⁶⁷ The idea behind this is that part of the animal that caused harm

⁵⁸ See Chardonens, pp. 333, 348, 349.

⁵⁹ Chardonens, pp. 333, 339.

⁶⁰ Remler, Pat, *Egyptian Mythology A-Z* (New York: Chelsea House, 2000), p. 72.

⁶¹ J.C. Prichard, *An Analysis of the Egyptian Mythology* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1819), p. 319.

⁶² J.H.G. Grattan, and C.W. Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine, Illustrated Specially from the Semi-Pagan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 43.

⁶³ R. Hayyim Palagi, *Sefer Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Chen Chayyim, 2004), p. 193.

⁶⁴ Chardonens, p. 339.

⁶⁵ J.H. Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 78.

⁶⁶ See also Jerusalem Talmud, *Yoma* 8:5, where such a cure was administered unsuccessfully.

⁶⁷ Fred Rosner, *Medicine in the Bible and Talmud* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 1977) p. 50.

has the power to undo that harm, a belief echoed today in homeopathics.⁶⁸ R. Mordechai Jaffe (*Levush*) explains that eating the heart of a goose saves the slaughterer from death since “the essence of life is in it.”⁶⁹ The heart and liver are the general curatives given to protect slaughterers since they are the main blood organs and were understood to have the power to negate any harm originating from geese.⁷⁰ Other suggested parts of the goose also hearken back to ancient beliefs. Goose fat was believed to have special curative powers,⁷¹ and goose feet figured in homeopathic magic, having the power to ward off supernatural danger.⁷²

The Ashkenazi custom to refrain from slaughtering geese during Tevet and Shevat is based on the days when it was considered dangerous to eat geese according to the superstition of unlucky Egyptian days. The protective measures suggested to ward off the alleged danger are rooted in ancient beliefs regarding effecting a cure using a part of the thing that caused the harm. In the words of R. Yonatan Eybeschuetz, “Heaven forefend that we should be strict about this, *you should be perfectly faithful to the Lord your God*” (Deut. 18:13.)⁷³ ❧

⁶⁸ Rosner, p. 50.

⁶⁹ *Levush, Yoreh De'ah*, 11:4. וְנוהֲגִין לֵאכֹל מִן הַלֵּב שֶׁעִיקֵר הַחַיּוֹת תְּלוּי בּוֹ.

⁷⁰ However, many Jewish sources indicate that it is customary not to eat the heart, or liver, of any animal since it causes forgetfulness. See the discussions in *Yabia Omer*, vol. 2, *Yoreh Deah*, 8, and *Meshaneh Halakhot* 3:61, *Shivim Temarim*, pp. 107-108.

⁷¹ See *Yoma* 84a and Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, Fred Rosner, ed. (Northvale, New Jersey: Aronson, 1993) p. 172, note 289.

⁷² A. Ela, “Working Evil by a Duck’s Foot,” *Folklore*, vol. 28 (1917), p. 322.

⁷³ *Kreiti u-Pleiti, Pleiti* 11:5 חס ושלום להקפיד על זה, תמים תהיה וכו'.