

Why Are Grasshoppers (Locusts) Kosher for Some Jews?

By Yehuda Shurpin

The [Torah](#) prohibits eating most insects, going so far as to call their consumption an “abomination.”¹ However, certain types of grasshoppers and locusts are permitted. Yet, with the exception of very few and specific communities, we don’t find that Jews eat them—and it doesn’t just have to do with taste. Let’s start at the beginning.



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Signs of a Kosher Grasshopper

The [Torah](#)² gives us a number of signs to discern which species are permitted. The [Mishnah](#) sums up the signs:

. . . Of locusts: all that have four legs, four wings, leaping legs, and wings covering the greater part of the body, are [kosher](#). Rabbi Yose says: [In addition to the signs] its name must be *chagav* [locust].³

In other words, even with the signs, there must be a tradition that the locust bears the name *chagav*. As the [Talmud](#) tells us, there are 800 non-kosher species of grasshoppers and locusts,⁴ and there are only eight that are kosher.⁵ Since, for the most part, we are no longer able to ascertain which species of locusts are kosher, we refrain from eating any locusts.⁶

This is, however, an oversimplification of the issues involved.

Communities That Eat Locust

To this day, certain Moroccan and Yemenite Jewish communities (and their descendants) have a tradition that specific species of locusts are kosher.

The most widely accepted species among them is the desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*).⁷ Interestingly enough, these locusts also pose the biggest threat to crops since they swarm and can quickly fly over great distances. Indeed, some explain that the Torah permitted this species of locusts precisely because they consume all the crops. Thus, even when all the crops were eaten by the locusts, there was still something left to eat.⁸ In fact, some explain that a distinguishing characteristic of kosher grasshoppers is that they sometimes swarm.⁹

However, although some have a tradition regarding the identity of kosher species of locusts, most abstain from eating them for a number of reasons.

The Locust Ban of Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (Ohr Hachaim)

Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (1696–1743, commonly known by the name of his commentary, *Ohr Hachaim*) was born in Morocco, where he lived most of his life before emigrating and eventually passing away in Jerusalem. Thus, he lived in a locale where some Jews ate locusts. Nevertheless, he issued a ban on eating it for a number of reasons. One of the main reasons had to do with the signs of the kosher locust.

One of the signs of the kosher locust is that it has “jumping legs,” called *kartzulayim*. In his commentary, the *Ohr Hachaim* follows the approach of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) that “high up on the creature’s body, near its neck, it has two leg-like extensions besides its [regular] four legs. When it wishes to fly or hop from the ground, it bolsters itself firmly with them and flies.”



A desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*) laying eggs during the 1994 locust outbreak in Mauritania (photographed by Christiaan Kooyman).

However, he points out, in the common grasshoppers and locusts, including those that many were accustomed to eat, the jumping legs were below the four walking legs, toward the rear of the insect. Based on this, as well as other reasons, he concludes that the local custom to eat these species of locusts was in error and people should refrain from eating any grasshoppers and locusts due to the difficulty in identifying the kosher species among the vast number of non-kosher species.

The *Ohr Hachaim* writes that the communities in his area had been plagued by locusts, which would come and devastate the crops every two or three years. But in the 20 years since they had heeded his ban, there had not been a single incident of locusts damaging their crops.¹⁰

Those who maintain the tradition of eating locusts explain that *kartzulayim* are actually small foot-like extensions at the end of the “jumping legs,” which are indeed found on the desert locust.

The Bottom Line

Although some communities have a tradition regarding the permissibility of certain species of locusts, most communities refrain from consuming any species due to the lack of a clear tradition, as well as the ban of Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar. According to most opinions, unless someone’s family belongs to a community that has a clear tradition to eat these locusts, one should refrain from eating them.¹¹

FOOTNOTES

1. [Leviticus 11:20](#).
2. [Leviticus 11:21-22](#).
3. Mishnah, Chulin 3:7. Two of these signs (four walking legs and two jumping legs) are explicit in the verse itself, and the other two are derived in the Talmud (Chulin 65-66) from the verses.
4. Talmud, Chulin 53b.
5. [Leviticus 11:22](#) lists four species. The sages of the Talmud (Chulin 65b) explain that the phrase “after its kinds” that follows each species listed serves to include an additional species similar to the one listed, thus bringing the total to eight.
6. See Rashi on [Leviticus 11:21](#).
7. Techumin, vol. 19, pp. 283-299; Zohar Amar, Ha’arbeh B’Msoret Yisroel, p. 106.
8. See, for example, Rabbi Moshe Toledano (1724-1773), Melechet Hakodesh, Shemini 11:21.
9. See Rabbi Amram Korach (last Chief Rabbi in Yemen), Saarot Teiman, p. 93; Arichat Hashulchan, vol. 3, p. 136; Rabbi Yosef Kapach, *Halikhoth Teiman: Jewish Life in Sanà*, p. 218.
10. See his work Pri Toar, Yoreh De’ah 85:1. See also his commentary Ohr Hachaim on [Leviticus 11:21](#). Interestingly, in his commentary he says it was twelve years, apparently since the commentary was finished earlier.

11. See Taz on Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 85:1. It should be noted that there is a debate in *halachah* whether someone from a locale that doesn't have a tradition about a species of animals (usually referring to species of birds) may rely on those that do (see Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 82:5 and commentaries *ad loc.*). However, regarding locusts specifically, there seems to be even more reason to be stringent due to the concerns discussed by Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar in his work on Yoreh Deah 85:1. (Of course, those rabbis who did have the custom to eat these species give explanations for his concerns. This, however, is beyond the scope of this general overview.)

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