

THE RAVEN AND THE DOVE

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

לע"נ אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורבקה הכ"מ

Dear Haverim,

This essay is a selection from my new, expanded volume on Sefer Beresheet, due out in 2015 from Urim and OU Press. Enjoy and Shabbat Shalom.

I

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the flood, as the waters receded, Noah lifted off the cover of the ark and sent out a raven, which flew in circles (or to and from the ark) until the earth was dry. He subsequently sent a dove to see if the waters had receded - which is odd, since the raven had already stayed that long... or had it? The dove, oddly, could not find a resting place and returned; 7 days later he sent the dove out and she came back at the end of the day with an olive branch in her mouth; 7 days later, he sent the dove out and it never returned.

THE TEXT 8:6-14

And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made. 7 And he sent forth a raven, and it went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth. 8 And he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground. 9 But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him to the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth; and he put forth his hand, and took her, and brought her in unto him into the ark. 10 And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. 11 And the dove came in to him at eventide; and lo in her mouth an olive-leaf freshly plucked; so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth. 12 And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; and she returned not again unto him anymore. 13 And it came to pass in the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dried. 14 And in the second month, on the seven and twentieth day of the month, was the earth dry.

II

THE MISSIONS: SEQUENCE AND PURPOSE

Scholars, medieval and modern, traditional and "otherwise" have puzzled over this sequence for centuries. The three "missions" of the dove seem to be unusual - after all, if the land was already visible well before Noah sent out the dove the first time, why did it not find any rest? And why did it return after its second voyage - but with an olive branch - and why specifically a branch of an olive tree? And if it was able to gain access to such trees, why did it come back at all - after all, when it was sent the third time and evidently found the water yet lower, it didn't return.

One parenthetical note about the sequencing problem as it relates to v. 7; it is possible that Noah sent out the raven and he kept circling; while the raven was circling, he began the dove-dispatches, such that the phrase 'ad y'voshet hamayim me'al ha'aretz (until the waters dried up from the land) may not have happened before the dove was sent. Thus the seeming contradiction between v. 7 and v. 11 is reconciled.

I'd like to put these questions aside for the meanwhile and look at the unfeted bird of Noah's ark - the raven. What was the purpose of Noah's sending it out and what could it accomplish that the dove couldn't do - and vice-versa? What did Noah learn from the raven's return and why did that cause him to send out the meeker dove?

The history of interpretation of this conundrum is not overly rich; there has always been such a focus on so many other "major" components of the immediate postdiluvian world (the offering, the covenant of the rainbow, the renewed moral code etc.) that the birds in general - and the raven in particular - have been generally overlooked.

Among the moderns, there are some who, predictably, argue for two traditions and see the two birds as two versions of the same; others, going as far back as Philo of Alexandria, have argued that the birds are purely symbolic; the raven representing vice (and, in his version, never returning as it is comfortable in the destroyed world) while the dove represents virtue (hence must return as it cannot bear to live among the remnants of such havoc). (Questions and Answers on Genesis II; 35-39)

A suggestion was recently made that Noah, by sending out the raven, hovering "to and fro" over the water, was reenacting God's "spirit hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:2. (Moberly, Why Did Noah Send Out A Raven? Vetus Testamentum 50, 3 2000 pp. 345-356)

III

REEXAMINING THE EVIDENCE - AND ASKING THE "RIGHT" QUESTION

The key to understanding this narrative twist lies in assessing, as best as we can, Noah's considerations and intentions at this point in the voyage.

First of all, the rain had stopped, which meant that, sooner or later, the earth would be able to begin absorbing the waters and allowing the water level to recede. The ark came to rest when the water receded to the level of the high mountains, thus giving some ground (perhaps still underwater) for the ark to rest. This is detailed in chapter 8:1-4; in v. 5, approximately 70 days pass and the mountain tops are now visible as the waters continue to recede. It is only at that point or sometime later (the reference point of "40 days" in v. 6 is unclear - is it 40 days after the rains ended? 40 days after the mountain tops were visible? 40 days after the ark came to rest?) that Noah opens the window/cover of the ark and sends out the raven, followed by the dove.

What was Noah trying to ascertain by sending out the raven?

Noah had to wonder what life remained - if any - underneath all of that water; on a more immediate level, he wanted to find out how low the water level was at this point.

Noah remembered the beginning of the flood - it wasn't that long ago. When the torrential rains came and springs opened up, people's natural instinct would have been to try to survive. Where do people go when there is a flood - regardless if the flood is the result of an over-swelled river or a torrential downpour? They seek higher ground. The upper ground, as high an area as could sustain animal and/or human life, would have been filled with all sorts of mammals for the raven to feast on. Noah was trying to find out if the water level had gone so low as to allow for a habitable place, at which point he could (at least) let the predatory mammals out of the ark, knowing that they would have access to plenty of sustenance. Keep in mind that Noah could not see how far the water had receded from his vantage point - all he saw was the very mountain tops as his ark was grounded at Ararat - so the raven's behavior would serve him well as an indicator of how low the water had gone down.

The raven continued to circle until "the waters were dried from the land" - meaning, the land that he was sent to explore. When the raven stopped circling and, presumably, disappeared from view, Noah could safely assume that habitable areas were now exposed and not water-logged. However, that would not help the great herbivore population on the ark - nor would it help the humans who were only permitted meat after leaving the ark.

His next step was to send out a dove, who would not be able to rest until it found a tree with branches appropriate for resting - in other words, the tree-line for nesting trees (which are typically low) would be visible. Since the dove could not find any rest, Noah understood that the broad world of vegetation, needed by so much of his mammalian cargo, was not yet accessible.

He then sent the dove a second time, and it returned that same day (at evening) with an olive branch in its mouth. This was quite informative, as Noah now knew several critical things that would help him in assessing how to restart life on earth. He knew that low trees (an olive tree, while it can grow in mountainous areas, is typically under 50 feet tall) were now visible and that they hadn't been destroyed by the flood - a most vital piece of data. Secondly, he now knew that that level was visible

- but he also understood something else. If the dove returned to him so quickly - or at all - it meant that the dove could not find a proper place to nest. Why couldn't the dove nest on that olive tree? Simply put - birds build nests from twigs on the ground. The final test of human and herbivorous mammal viability would be to see if the ground was exposed and dry - dry enough that twigs could be used to make a nest.

One week later, Noah got his answer - the dove went out for a third time and evidently was able to build a nest, as she never returned. At that point, Noah was ready to open up the ark, as all of the cargo - human and "animal" - now had access to habitable areas and vegetation.

IV

AFTERWORD

It is vital to view the narrative from a "real-world" perspective, remembering that the characters only know what they know and that the various questions posed, observations made and tests passed (or not) may be designed to further the actor's grasp of the situation. We find ourselves at the disadvantage of having read the story so many times that, in this instance (for example) we already know that the earth is completely dry (well, at least by the end of the narrative). We have to sensitize ourselves to the reality that Noah doesn't know that - to anticipate the questions in his mind and view his actions in that light - as intelligent and thoughtful attempts to give him the information necessary to move forward.

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