

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT NOACH

Noach, the Dove, and the Raven

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After the forty-day flood, Noach assesses the situation outside the ark by sending out the raven and the dove. The ark did have a "skylight" (6:16) and a "window" (through which Noach sent out the birds - 8:6), but these apparently did not facilitate a proper inspection of the world and assessment of how much it had dried. This may have been a result of the structure of the window, but it is more reasonable to posit that Noach also wanted to evaluate the situation at a distance from the ark's resting place on Mt. Ararat. Even if his close surroundings were still submerged in water, it was possible that further away dry land was already visible. Either way, it was by means of the birds' panoramic perspective that he wanted to find out how the world was recovering.

I wish to focus on the structure of the story of Noach's dispatch of the birds, and its significance. Before looking at the verses, we must confront two fundamental questions:

Ultimately, Noach will receive a Divine command to leave the ark (8:15). Even after he understands (via the dove) that the earth has already dried, he does not leave on his own initiative, but rather waits for the Divine command. Thus, there seems to be no value to Noach's own efforts to ascertain the situation outside. Obviously, God knows how far the earth has progressed in drying up even without the dove being sent out of the ark, and it is He Who decides when Noach and the animals should leave.

Noach can leave the ark only when he sees dry land in his immediate vicinity. It is reasonable to assume that Noach could have seen this himself through the window of the ark; he did not need the birds for this. Why, then, does he send them?

In order to understand the relationship between Noach's efforts to understand to what extent the earth has dried up and God's command to him to leave the ark, we must focus on God's words to Noach. It seems that the term "command," which I used above to describe God's words to Noach, is misleading. God's words are perhaps better understood as agreement to or approval of Noach's actions, and as a blessing for leaving the ark. In other words, after Noach ascertained on his own that he was able to leave the ark, he was about to do so. Then God appeared to him, giving His approval and blessing him:

"Leave the ark, you and your wife and your sons... Bring out with you ... all the creeping creatures that creep upon the earth, that they may be fruitful and multiply upon the earth."
(8:15-17)

Thus, Noach initiated his departure from the ark and his return to the world, and God approved it. This is substantiated by the conclusion of the verse - "that they may be fruitful and multiply upon the earth," which is an expression of blessing.

Concerning the second question, we may say that its underlying basic assumption is not necessarily true. In other words, we need not accept the assumption that Noah's act in dispatching the birds must have immediate, practical ramifications. It is entirely possible that Noah did this out of curiosity and an expectation that the earth would dry up, and out of a desire to prepare for what was to come. Admittedly, when it would be possible for him to leave the ark, he would know this even without the aid of the birds, but sending them facilitated the appropriate preparation. Was the drying up of the earth close at hand? Would it still take a long time? We may compare this to a person who eagerly awaits some much-loved guests; he keeps looking out the window and even sends his child to stand at the gate of his house with instructions to inform him the moment that their car approaches. These actions will not bring the arrival of his guests any closer, but he cannot stop himself.

Beyond this, it seems that in the general context of the story there is another reason for sending the birds. Many commentators have noted the parallel between the revival of the world after the Flood and its creation in chapter 1. Following the wind that God causes to pass over the land (8:1), and following the re-establishment of the space between the upper and lower waters (8:2), "the tops of the mountains" were seen (8:5) and the world was thereby "recreated." The departure of Noah, his family and all the creatures from the ark is like a rebirth, like a baby emerging from his mother's womb into a reality that has just been created. These two representatives of the bird kingdom are the first to leave the ark, just as their creation - on the fifth day - preceded that of the terrestrial animals.

In light of the above, I would like to examine the verses describing the dispatch of the birds (8:6-13.)

This story may be divided into four sections, each addressing a new stage:

dispatch of the raven (an act that provides Noah with no information;(
first dispatch of the dove (revealing that "water was covering all the surface of the earth;("
second dispatch of the dove (informing him - with the help of the olive leaf in her mouth - that "the waters had abated from upon the earth;("
third dispatch of the dove (causing Noah to remove the covering of the ark and to see that "the surface of the earth was dried up.("

There is an unmistakable build-up here, with the dove conveying information to Noah, stage by stage, regarding the earth's recovery from the Flood.[1] The clear exception here is the raven (stage 1), who plays no part in the gradual build-up created here by the text. It is the first dispatch of the dove (stage 2) that introduces the process of clarification, after the raven fails to contribute anything.

In fact, the text creates a clear contrast between the raven and the dove from the moment that they are sent out, and also afterwards, upon their return (or failure to return). The Torah describes the dispatch of the raven quite simply: "He sent forth the raven." In contrast, the first dispatch of the dove is described in these words: "He sent forth the dove from him, to see if the water had abated from upon the surface of the earth".

There are two obvious differences in the descriptions of these two acts. Firstly, in sending off the dove, the Torah adds "from him," creating a sense of closeness between Noah and the dove. This expression is missing when Noah sends the raven. More importantly, the reason for the raven being sent out of the ark is absent at the time of the dispatch. Reading the story

for the first time, the reader finds himself wondering whether Noah actually wanted to send the raven permanently away from the ark, or whether he needed the raven's help. It is only when Noah sends the dove that the Torah adds the reason for the act: "to see if the water had abated from the surface of the earth." It is logical that the same reason underlay the dispatch of the raven, but for that very reason it is surprising that the Torah notes the reason only the second time, when the dove is sent out, leaving us with our question as to the purpose of sending the raven.

It would seem that this difference joins together with the first one ("from him") to give us a feeling that there is some closeness between Noah and the dove, in contrast with his relationship with the raven. Noah seems to be in some doubt as to whether he can rely on the raven. So doubtful is he that the Torah refrains from even mentioning the reason for its dispatch. In contrast, Noah feels quite comfortable relying on the dove, and therefore his desire to know the situation outside is mentioned specifically when the dove is sent.

The difference is even more stark in the description of their return. The raven does not return - or at least its return is not specifically noted in the text. The opaque expression, "It went forth to and fro" is subject to debate among the Rishonim. Rashi understands that the raven did not even fly off to examine the situation of the world: "It did not go off on its mission," but rather "went and flew around about the ark." Radak (and others) understand that the raven did indeed fly off to seek food, but did not "tell" Noah anything: it may have found meat or it may not have. Either way, it is quite clear that there is a "communication gap" between Noah and the raven.

In sharp contrast to this, the Torah describes the dove's return to the ark:

"The dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned to him, to the ark... and he put out his hand and took her and brought her to him, into the ark".

This description carries enormous emotional weight. Firstly, the sense of closeness between Noah and the dove is emphasized by the repeated mention of the place: "And she returned to him, to the ark." The dove returns not only to the ark, but also "to him" - to Noah, the man who sent her out.

The description of Noah's actions is also most unusual: "And he put out his hand and took her, and brought her to him." The verse as a whole demands some explanation. It seems to add nothing at all to the previous verse, which already informed us that the dove returned to the ark. It appears that the entire purpose of this verse is to arouse associations of love and closeness. The dove could have flown back into the ark on her own, but Noah stretches out his hand to take her in.

It seems that no elaboration is necessary concerning the connotation of the expression, "And he took her, and brought her to him." Were it not for the fact that the Torah is talking about a bird, we would be quite certain that the context concerned the marriage of a man and woman. It is difficult to avoid the comparison with other verses, such as:

"Yitzchak BROUGHT HER to the tent of Sarah, his mother, AND HE TOOK Rivka and she became his wife, and he loved her" (Bereishit 24:67;{

"Yehuda saw there the daughter of a Canaanite man whose name was Shua, AND HE TOOK HER AND HE CAME TO HER" (Bereishit 38:2;)

"It happened in the evening that he took Leah, his daughter, AND HE BROUGHT HER TO HIM, and he came to her" (Bereishit 29:23.)

The last verse and the verse under discussion are the only two places in the Torah where this exact expression occurs![2]

Needless to say, it would be a great exaggeration were we to apply the association of marital love to the relationship between Noach and the dove. Clearly, this is not the intention of the text. However, we cannot ignore the association which, in its surprising way, creates a strong sense of closeness between Noach and the dove - a feeling that was altogether absent in the dispatch of the raven.

This idea is further substantiated by a subtle word play in the text. Noach's name is explained in two places in the text. The first is at his birth, where his father, Lemekh, says: "This one will COMFORT US (yenachamenu) for our labor and the toil of our hands" (5:29) - implying that his name is related to the concept of "nechama," comfort or consolation. But just prior to the Flood, the Torah hints at a different significance to the name: "And NOACH found FAVOR ('chen' - the same two letters as Noach's name, reversed) in the eyes of God" (6:8). This word play creates a connection between Noach and the favor that he finds in God's eyes.

Yet, the simplest meaning of the name - rest, deriving from the Hebrew "manoach" or "menucha" - is not mentioned. The sending off of the dove seems to hint at this third and most obvious interpretation of his name: "And the dove found no REST (manoach)." This is the meaning that our minds connect most closely with the name "Noach," and it is difficult to imagine that it is purely coincidental that the Torah adopts this expression in its description here.

Why does the Torah hint at Noach in the dove's search for a resting place (or, more precisely, in her failure to find such rest)? The Torah seems to be seeking to contrast Noach, who is in the ark, with the "manoach" that is absent outside of it. The dove is unable to find a good substitute for Noach - she cannot find "menucha" - and so she returns to Noach, in whose hands she will once again find "menucha." The anthropomorphism does not surprise us at all: while the dove finds no rest for the "SOLE OF HER FOOT," Noach makes up for the lack: "And he put out HIS HAND and took her"....

Ramban contributes further to these associations by adding the following words: "The dove found no rest FOR HER GOOD" (38:9). The expression, "for her good" is borrowed from Naomi's words to Ruth: "My daughter, shall I not seek rest for you, for your good?" (Ruth 3:1). The context there revolves around seeking a husband for the single Ruth.

The description of this relationship between Noach and the dove reaches its climax in the image of the dove returning to the ark. In the next stage (stage 3 - second dispatch of the dove), there is a regression in the text's emphasis on the closeness between them. Now, it appears, the text seeks to create some distance between them. While in the first dispatch we are told, "He sent the dove FROM HIM," the second time we read only: "Again he sent forth the dove FROM THE ARK." Clearly, "from him" indicates a greater degree of closeness than does the expression "from the ark".

Moreover, when the dove again returns, the discrepancy grows even larger. The first dispatch concludes with the words, "She returned to him, to the ark." In contrast, at the end of the second dispatch we read only: "The dove came to him." This expression admittedly still indicates closeness ("to him"), but the absence of the second expression ("to the ark") allows some of the affection to abate. Here there is no description of any act on Noach's part to bring the dove back into the ark; the Torah suffices with a description of the dove's own action.[3]

The third and final dispatch of the dove (stage 4) is characterized by a further distancing of Noach from it. The Torah states simply, "He sent the dove" - not "from him," not even "from the ark." Needless to say, the fact that the dove does not return ("but she did not return again to him again any more") turns the literary distance between the two characters into a real, tangible one.

What is the significance of all of the above? What is the meaning of the hidden conflict between the raven and the dove, and why does the Torah describe the initial closeness between Noach and the dove, and the gradually increasing distance between them?

An examination of the contexts in Tanakh in which a dove appears reveals that one of its principal characteristics is the return to its nest, to its family. Thus, for example, when the prophet Yishayahu describes the return of Am Yisrael to their land, he says: "Who are these who fly like a cloud, like doves to their windows?" (60:8). This characteristic obviously also finds expression in our parasha, with the dove returning to Noach and to the ark, in contrast to the raven. This characteristic is also the source of the ancient custom of sending off letters specifically with a dove, as the Radak comments on our parasha (8:7:)

"When Noach saw that he had learned nothing from the (dispatch of the) raven, he sent the dove, for the dove has the power of imaging, allowing it to return something to its sender... It also has a natural desire to return to its nest. Therefore it was a custom among kings to raise a dove and to send it to distant places, attaching a note to its wings. It would then return to its sender, with a note attached to its wings by the person who received the first letter".

In complete contrast to the characteristic of the dove to return to its orderly home, the raven is characterized in Tanakh as the exact opposite: it is a bird that does not live in inhabited areas. It is perceived as a desert animal that is to be found in empty, abandoned places. Thus, when Yishayahu describes the total destruction that is destined to come upon "all the nations," he says (34:11): "It will be the inheritance of wild animals of the night; the owl and the raven will dwell in it." Likewise, the fact that it is specifically ravens that bring Eliyahu bread and meat (Melakhim I 17:6) is not an innate trait of kindness in the raven, but rather the fact that God has commanded Eliyahu to dwell in an isolated place, a place that is uninhabited: "Go from here and turn eastwards, and hide yourself in the Wadi Kerit" (verse 3). It is therefore the ravens, who live in this wild and deserted place, that bring him food.

The different natures of these birds also find expression in their voices. There are several references in Tanakh to the quiet, gentle cooing of doves. For example, in the description of Chizkiyahu's prayer during his illness, there is a gradual weakening of his voice: "I wait for the morning LIKE A LION... LIKE A SWIFT OR A CRANE, so do I chirp, I moan like a DOVE" (Yishayahu 38:13-14). This is obviously quite different from the sharp cawing of the raven: "He gives food to the beasts, to the young ravens that cry out" (Tehillim 147:9.)

In summary, we may say that with the dove there is human communication, in contrast to the raven, which lives specifically in uninhabited places and whose voice is strange and threatening. The dove is perceived as man's best friend, to the extent that one of the names for the beloved woman in Shir Ha-Shirim is "my dove" (yonati.)

The story of the dispatch of the raven and the dove from the ark fits nicely into these contexts. Immediately after his departure from the ark, Noach offers sacrifices, in light of which God promises that there will never be another Flood. In describing the sacrifices offered, the text emphasizes that they were "from all the pure animals and from all the pure birds." In other words, Noach offered doves as sacrifices, but rejected the raven as a suitable vehicle for his Divine service. The dove's connection with man makes it relevant also to man's relationship with his Creator; the opposite applies to the raven.

But this is not sufficient. The closeness between Noach and the dove highlighted by the Torah has another aspect. We stated at the outset that the emergence from the ark is like rebirth. Philo of Alexandria wrote that the ark is in effect a "mother," or a great womb, from which the creatures of the world were "reborn." From this perspective, the Torah hints subtly at the difficulty of the unavoidable separation and severing that every parent experiences in relation to his growing child, who gradually becomes an independent personality.

The gradual separation between the dove and the ark (and Noach) is the gradual distancing of every person who builds his own internal world and slowly turns into an autonomous entity. At first, the dove finds no "rest for the sole of her foot" in the reality outside of the ark, and so she returns to its warm familiarity, where Noach's hand holds her. Later, the dove comes into real and tangible contact with the reality outside of the ark (the olive branch). Eventually, she separates herself permanently from the womb that protected her for the forty days of the Flood; she is born anew, emerging into the world outside, accompanied by God's blessing: "Be fruitful and multiply upon the earth".

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(

FOOTNOTES

[1]In this sense, our story fits into what Prof. Yair Zakovitch calls the "literary pattern of three and four," whereby after three attempts we find a turning point in the fourth attempt. Here, of course, the fourth attempt is no surprise to us. On the contrary, the Torah prepares the reader for the drying up of the earth, for Noach's knowledge (and ours, as readers) of the situation has been built up in stages.

[2]Compare, for example, "And Boaz TOOK Ruth, and she became his wife, AND HE CAME to her" (Ruth 4:13.)

[3]We may also add that the Torah notes the time of the dove's return - "in the evening," "le-et erev," reminding us of the raven - orev, which the Torah depicts as lacking any emotional weight as far as Noach is concerned; this coldness is therefore projected here onto the dove.