

# NOAH'S BIRDS AND THE GIFTS OF THE JEWS

Parashat Noach, Genesis, Chapters 6-12 | October 7, 2021

One of the most famous birds in the history of literature is Edgar Allan Poe's raven, known for nattering "Nevermore." It is largely unknown, however, that this refers to an actual raven, the pet of another ingenious author: Charles Dickens. And that raven had a name: Grip.

The invaluable travel site *Atlas Obscura* reports that:

Grip the Raven was a beloved pet of Dickens, and he was so charmed by the mischievous, talkative bird that he made him a character in his serialized narrative *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty*, where at one point, in a sure inspiration to Poe, someone asks, at hearing a noise: "What was that—him tapping at the door?"

Grip can still be seen stuffed today in the Free Library of Philadelphia. You can go there to see a raven that appeared in two important works of literature, and which was the pet of one of the most famous authors in the history of English letters.

But rightly understood, Dickens was not the first figure in an influential text who kept birds, and as we shall see, a raven that may have been a pet will play a central role in the story of Noah. But unlike Grip, this raven would be joined with another bird, an exquisite creature that will teach us more than Noah's raven, or Dickens', or Poe's, ever could.

Last week, God had decided to destroy the world, with only Noah finding favor in the eyes of the Almighty. Noah is instructed to build an ark to preserve himself and his family from the destined deluge. But it is not only human beings that will

board the ark. The Almighty adds:

*And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort that thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee, male and female.*

*Of birds after their kind, cattle after their kind, every creeping thing of the earth after its kind, two of every sort shall come to thee, to keep them alive. (Genesis 6:19-20)*

As children learning this story, the image of the animals enchants us. As adults, we smile indulgently as our own sons and daughters bring home pictures of lions, bears, birds, aardvarks and antelopes boarding this floating zoo. But the Bible does emphasize an ornithological element as the deluge comes to its conclusion. The rain falls for 40 days and 40 nights, and the ark floats in a water-soaked world for many days more. Noah seeks signs that the water has abated, and we are suddenly introduced to two birds:

*And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made.*

*And he sent forth the raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from the Earth. (Genesis 8:6-7)*

This means that the raven discovered no signs of life. We are further informed:

*Also he sent forth the dove from him, to see if the waterways were abated from the face of the ground.*

*But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned to him...*

*And he waited yet another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark.*

*And the dove came in to him in the evening and lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off, so Noah knew that the waters were abated. (Genesis 8:8-11)*

Thus, the dove, and not the raven, finds evidence of life after the flood. We are further informed that,

*He waited yet another seven days; and sent forth the dove, which returned not again to him anymore. (Genesis 8:12)*

But here a difficulty presents itself. It is only many days later, after this entire escapade, that Noah is given explicit permission by the Almighty to exit the ark:

*And God spoke unto Noah saying:*

*Go forth from the ark thou and thy wife and thy sons and thy sons' wives with thee.*

*Bring forth with thee every living thing that is with thee of all flesh both fowl and cattle and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth... (Genesis 8:15-17)*

Only at this point are the animals brought aboard the ark allowed to leave. Why then would Noah, before the Divine command, let two of his birds fly away from the ark, instead of waiting for the Almighty's instructions? Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin offers an answer: the dove and the raven, he suggests, were not aboard the ark as part of the assembly of animals kept to preserve wildlife for posterity. These were Noah's pets; in ancient times, birds were often kept with a purpose. Ravens shielded from local pests, whereas doves and pigeons had the capacity to fly great distances, and to bear messages. Thus, the raven, sent first, almost immediately returns to the ark. Noah then sends his other beloved pet. But even the dove, with its extended flight capacity, could not at first find land. And then, at its second

outing, it brought back an olive branch, as it was trained to do. Finally, on the third week, the dove did not return. This, Rabbi Berlin notes, *proves* that the bird was not brought on for the continuity of its species, for doves, he argues, mate for life, and if it had a mate back on the ark, it would surely have returned.

Sending out these birds, Rabbi Berlin further argues, did not in any way violate God's command to stay on the ark, because these were not creatures that were brought aboard under the Almighty's original instructions. They were merely along for the ride because they were near and dear to Noah's heart.

This is an exquisite ornithological exegesis, but it is also poetically profound. Noah is the ancestor and the embodiment of postdiluvian humanity, and if we are to imagine our ancient ancestor boarding the ark with his two pets, perhaps a raven on one shoulder, and the dove on the other, then we can deduce from this that we too in a sense have a raven and a dove within us: two capacities in our character.

The raven, at least today, feasts not on olive branches but on carrion. Perhaps Noah let his raven fly around because amidst the receding water, it would have feasted on the animals that had drowned in the flood. Edgar Allan Poe thus fittingly chose the raven as his symbol of hopelessness when he describes in his poem how, "Once upon a midnight dreary as he pondered weak and weary the death of his love named Lenore," all of a sudden in flew a raven who when asked his name responds with the word, "Nevermore." Poe then writes that he asked the raven if he would one day be reunited with his beloved bride in the garden of Eden:

'Prophet!' said I, 'thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!

By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—

Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,

It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the  
angels named Lenore—  
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden, whom  
the angels named Lenore?’ Quoth the  
raven, ‘Nevermore.’

Like in the Bible, the raven here is the symbol of death, dreams denied, in a word— “Nevermore.” The raven inside us is our capacity for despair. But then there is the other bird within, the symbol of another aspect of our soul: the dove, which persevered and found land. It is often assumed that the dove, and the olive branch clutched in its beak, together and separately symbolize the biblical celebration of peace. Peace can, of course, be a wonderful thing, but war can at times also be important and, as Ecclesiastes informs us, there is a time for war and a time for peace.

Harry Truman once famously explained to Winston Churchill that in the symbol of the United States, the eagle clutches an olive branch in one talon, symbolizing peace, and arrows in the other, symbolizing war, and that the eagle’s head is always titled toward the olive branches, signifying the preference for peace. Churchill supposedly responded, “In my opinion, Mr. President, the eagle’s head should be placed on a swivel, so that it could face whichever way the times require.” I believe that for the Bible, the dove, and the olive branch clutched in its beak, symbolize not peace, or war, but something different altogether: hope.

Jews, akin to the individuals and animals aboard the ark, have spent many moments surrounded by the stormy sea of history, threatened by a deluge of death. Yet they never followed the example of Noah’s raven, who seemingly gives up. To paraphrase Poe, we lived in *centuries* dark and dreary as we pondered the enemies that awaited us outside our door. But like the dove, we were able to believe in, and seek, the signs of a better life that we could sense lay around the bend. The image of the dove that clutched an olive branch is truly emblematic of the Jewish people. We could so easily have become ravens, desperate creatures meandering aimlessly in the nighttime of history.

But instead, Jews made hope a central virtue, and now “*Hatikvah*,” “The Hope”, is the national anthem of the State of Israel, with the refrain, “*Od lo avda tikvateinu*,” “Our hope is not lost.”

The Biblical description of the dove betokens the dawn of hope and, seemingly, of a renewed hope by God for humanity. God Himself at this point commits never to destroy the world again. This, it would seem, is the aesthetic meaning of the covenantal symbol reflecting this Divine promise. God says:

*And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud:*

*And I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.*  
(Genesis 9:14-15)

The very resonance of the rainbow derives from the darkness of the storm that precedes it. Describing how the rainbow comes into being when light meets the resistance of the darkness of the cloud, the physicist Arthur Zajonc writes: “Where light meets darkness, colors flash into existence.” What this means is that a world without darkness is a world without color, and therefore if the rainbow is now a symbol of God’s forgiveness of the world and his refusal to destroy it, it is because the rainbow’s dazzling display actually reminds us that it is precisely in an imperfect world that color emerges. Yes, this is a world in which darkness exists, in which evil exists, but it is in precisely such a world where beauty—not just visual beauty but also moral and spiritual beauty—can emerge in a new and profound way. Perhaps God comes to terms with humanity because it is precisely our imperfections that, in the end, will allow for certain new instantiations of goodness. True, we sin, but in overcoming our failures, we show a new degree of heroism. While we frequently suffer due to others, it is often in how we respond to the disappointments of life that true moral victories emerge. Man has an

instinct for evil and man is not inherently good, but perhaps this allows for a world where certain human virtues can come into being.

The great philosopher and baseball player Yogi Berra once supposedly reflected that “If the world was perfect it wouldn’t be.” I take this to mean that without sin and failure, there would be no opportunity for virtues such as courage, repentance, and forgiveness. It is the imperfections of the world that allow for certain perfections to come to the fore. There is no realm on Earth devoid of darkness, but it is precisely in such an existence where human grandeur can make itself known. In the face of the brutality of nature, there is also made manifest the brilliance of human invention. In the face of man’s failures, there is the glory of repentance. In the fact of evil, there is the radiance of courage and goodness. In the face of indeterminacy, there is also found what is the central virtue of our story: hope. The Bible believes in our ability to reflect the color and radiance of sanctity in an imperfect world. The raven within us, our capacity for despair, makes the fortitude of the dove, when we bring that aspect of ourselves to the fore, all the more resplendent.

We are meant to emerge from the tale of the deluge, after humanity was nearly entirely destroyed for its sins, with a deeper appreciation for the moral capacity and emotional resilience of mankind.

It is this element of ourselves to which Emily Dickinson once paid tribute in a poem. I had read her poem many times in the past, but only when I looked at it through the lens of our own story did I realize that I was not the first to identify the dove with hope, because Dickinson clearly links the bird that flew amidst the flood with the very same virtue. Read carefully to her words in this poem—which we can see as a mirror image of Poe’s “The Raven”—and the references to the drama of the deluge become clear:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—

That perches in the soul—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—  
And sore must be the storm—  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm—

I’ve heard it in the chillest land—  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet—never—in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb—of me.’

Noah’s tale of two pets is particularly poignant this year, as we emerge from the deluge of disease, from a global pandemic. It is at this moment that the image of the dove inspires all of us to cherish life’s possibilities, and to pray that our own hopes for the future be vindicated in the days to come.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

- Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5:

This is the meditation of Macbeth, the murderous monarch, following the death of his wicked wife. Our mortality, he says, makes individual life meaningless. Our lives can be compared to candles; their brilliance is but brief. Time is a series of insignificant events, endless yesterdays followed by a “tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.” This is the most eloquent expression in the English language of a feeling of futility, and it is everything that the Abrahamic faith was founded to reject.

After the Flood, we saw how the two birds launched from the ark—the raven that flew aimlessly, and the dove that discovered a sign of life—represent the triumph of hope over the darkness of despair. But it seems, at least initially, that this lesson is lost on Noah, for we sense that despair does indeed descend. As the flood waters recede and Noah emerges from the ark, he begins his post-diluvian life by planting a vineyard. The harvest leads to drink, and the drinking leads to stupor:

*And Noah began as a tiller of the earth, and he planted a vineyard.*

*And he drank of the wine and was drunk; he was uncovered within his tent.*  
(Genesis 9:20-21)

Why does he drink? Why, upon reemerging from the ark, does Noah plant grapes rather than grain, a source of sustenance? The Bible does not explicitly say, but it is not hard to guess. Think of what Noah has just been through. He has experienced the watery death of the entire world. How could he not turn to drink? How could he not see life, like Macbeth said, as a “walking shadow”? Thus wine enters human history as a means of escape from life’s woes, a relief from our troubles.

One son, Ham, excitedly reports on his father’s disgrace, but Noah’s two other children, Shem and Yefet, with the former seemingly leading the initiative, care for their father:

*And Shem and Yefet took the garment and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness.*  
(Genesis 9:23)

This is not only the first time that we truly see an interaction between father and child in the Biblical text; it is also the moment in which filial reverence is invented, when honor for parents is exhibited.

Upon coming to, Noah curses the son that has disrespected him, and prophetically blesses the other two in verse 27. In Hebrew,

*Yaft Elokim le-Yefet, veyishkon be-obalei Shem.*

“God will bring beauty to Yefet, but He will dwell in the tent of Shem.” From Yefet will descend a civilization that will bring beauty to the world. For the Rabbinic tradition this is a reference to Athens, to the contributions of Greece. But, Noah stresses, the dwelling place of God will be in the tent of Shem, Abraham’s ancestor. It is the communion and transmission first heralded by his ancestor Shem’s familial reverence, that offers the Hebraic answer to mortality.

With this in mind, we can understand how even as the first appearance of wine in scripture seems exceedingly negative, this is not a drink that the Jews have spurned. It is over wine that the Sabbath is sanctified, and over wine that the Passover seder is celebrated. And what Jews traditionally toast over wine is not escapism from death, but rather the cherishing of life. “*L’Chayim*,” usually rendered “To life,” is known to both Jew and Gentile alike through the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. But as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks noted, “*chayim*” in Hebrew actually exists only in the plural, so technically “*L’Chayim*” could be understood as toasting not “To life” but “To lives.” The meaning, he suggests, is that life becomes truly meaningful when it is shared, when it is about something larger than ourselves. This, for Jews, is most fully realized in the joining of generations. That is what Jews do when we toast “*L’Chayim*,” “to lives,” recalling not Noah’s drunken act of escapism, but rather his words that follow: God will dwell in the tent of Shem. The family of Shem comes into meaning by being part of something larger than ourselves.

And yet, in the face of this discovery of the importance of the collective, there is another danger: that the individual is ultimately effaced. Generations pass, and the tale of Mesopotamian mankind continues in the ancient social setting of Sumer, in the land that will be known as part of the empire of Babel. The famous tale of the Tower of Babel is told in Genesis, chapter 11: “*And the whole Earth was of one language*” and “*devarim achadim*,” “of few words.” (Genesis 11:1)

The Hebrew here is obscure, but the phrase “of few words” might mean that the culture was one that deemphasized individual expression because it was one that denied the very uniqueness of the individual. In his book *The Gifts of the Jews*, Thomas Cahill describes how Sumerians looked up at the sky and only saw cycles: the waxing and waning of the moon, the endless arc of the sun and stars, and concluded that life on Earth ought to mirror life in heaven. Human lives were an endless cycle of birth and death, with nothing new

to seek to accomplish. Thus, when we study the Mesopotamian tales of that era, writes Cahill,

There were no rounded individuals in Sumer, just temporary, earthly images of heavenly exemplars, patterns, and paradigms, which is why the two-dimensional characters of Sumerian stories display so little individuality.

All Sumerians sought, in other words, was to become part of the eternal cycle; to defeat death by denying individuality and assimilating into the collective, and to thereby become akin to the cosmos, and the endless cycle of “tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.”

This, perhaps, is the meaning of the Biblical tale that follows, the tale of the Tower of Babel, which seems to describe the ziggurats of Mesopotamia:

*And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and they dwelt there.*

*And they said to one another, come let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick instead of stone, and slime for mortar.*

*And they said, come, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach to the heavens and let us make a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the Earth.*  
(Genesis 11:2-4)

A tower whose head reaches the sky; this is central to Sumerian culture. Thomas Cahill further writes:

Why were all early temples and sacred places built at the highest point available to the builders? Because, this is the place nearest the sky. And why is the most sacred space nearest the sky? Because, the sky is the divine opposite of life on Earth, home of all that is eternal in contrast to the mortal life of Earth. When primitive man looked up at the

heavens, he saw a vast cavalcade of divine figures regularly passing before his eyes—the cosmic drama, breathtaking in its eternal order and predictability. Here, are the eternal prototypes and models for mortal life. But a great gulf yawns between the two spheres, for the life of the heavens, the life of the gods, is immortal and everlasting, while life in the earthly sphere is mortal, ending in death.

This, then, is the meaning of the tower's architects' aspirations: the tower whose top can reach the heavens. Only by joining the endless cycle that the stars reflected could they partake somehow in collective eternity. But in doing so, they must give up on individuality or difference, for it is the eternal order described by Cahill that is worshipped. The comedian Lily Tomlin once commented that, "I always wanted to be somebody; I realize now I should have been more specific." In Sumer, it is specificity that is rejected, for that is the price that needs to be paid if we are to overcome our own mortality, and become akin to the cosmos themselves.

If we look further, there is another hint to this effacing of individuality in the text. For the Bible here goes out of its way to stress the material used in the creation of this edifice. The Babylonians use *bricks*, we are told, instead of stones. As we see in Exodus, the supreme symbol of the Hebraic covenant is often an altar built not of bricks, but of natural stones from the ground. Why the difference? Constructing an edifice out of natural stones is a great skill, because each stone is unique. In contrast, as my father once suggested, when one builds out of brick, every single one is the same. Thus, a sacred structure of natural stone symbolizes what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once called, "integration without assimilation." It proclaims that each individual is unique, but finds further meaning in a distinct contribution to the larger whole. The brick-based Tower of Babel, in contrast, as my father explained, involves the denial of difference. Every human being was a brick: not unique, replaceable.

But if the embrace of difference is denied, then the Divine will force difference upon the tower's builders. Thus, God continues:

*Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.*

*So the Lord scattered them abroad from there upon the Earth; and they ceased to build the city. (Genesis 11:7-8)*

A society that seeks solely the assimilation of individuals is forced into fragmentation. A larger number of languages will hopefully produce a panoply of perspectives as the people spread further over the Earth. But as society spreads, it seems at first that the Almighty's efforts do not achieve their intended goal. The stars are still worshipped for their purported eternity and divinity; all believe that individuals' fates are fixed, and all true difference is denied. But suddenly, generations after Noah, we are introduced to a man named Terah, and to his son *Avram* or *Abram*, which in Hebrew is *Av Ram*, meaning "exalted father." The name seemingly indicates a dream, perhaps inherited from the parent who named him, of fathering a great family. And yet this dream itself seems deferred, if not dashed, for we are told that Abram's wife Sarai is barren.

Terah leads Abram and his brothers from their childhood home of Ur Kasdim to Haran and there Terah passes away. Suddenly, at the age of seventy-five, Abraham hears immortal words, the first time since Noah that we find the Almighty explicitly addressing man:

*Now the Lord said to Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, to the land that I will show thee.*

*And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing. (Genesis 12:1-2)*

Abram is asked by the God that he has somehow come to know to embark on a journey into the unknown that will change the world. Thus, the Almighty further adds, “*in you, shall all the families of the Earth be blessed.*” Given all that we now know about the society of Abram’s age, if he chooses to obey the Almighty’s instruction, then the apparently eternal cycle of “tomorrow and tomorrow” will be broken, and something entirely new will appear on this Earth. Thomas Cahill tells us what might have happened had Abram surveyed the civilizations of his generation, describing all the Almighty asked of him:

On every continent, in every society, Avram would have been given the same advice that wise men as diverse as Heraclitus, Lao-Tsu, and Siddhartha would one day give their followers: do not journey but sit; compose yourself by the river of life, meditate on its ceaseless and meaningless flow—on all that is past or passing or to come—until you have absorbed the pattern and have come to peace with the Great Wheel and with your own death and the death of all things in the corruptible sphere.

Cahill’s point is that Abraham obeys not the popular wisdom of his time, but rather the words of the Almighty. And what appears, in verse 4 are two Hebrew words that, for Cahill, changed the world. “*Vayelekh Avram,*” “and Abram went.” He went for it! These words, for Cahill,

...signal a complete departure from everything that has gone before. Out of Sumer, civilized repository of the predictable, comes a man who does not know where he is going but goes forth into the unknown wilderness under the prompting of his god....Out of the human race, which knows in its bones that all its striving must end in death, comes a leader who says he has been given an impossible promise. Out of mortal imagination comes a dream of something new, something better, something yet to happen, something—

in the future.

Because of Abram’s journey, Cahill concludes,

We can hardly get up in the morning and cross the street without being Jewish. Most of our best words: new, adventure, surprise, future, freedom, progress, faith and hope: all these words are the gifts of the Jews.

In the 20th century, the primary danger to the West came from tyrannies that like the tower-building Babylonians of yore, denied the infinite preciousness of the individual. But today in the West, the danger, perhaps, is the opposite: that we forget the story of Noah’s son, that we emphasize only the individual and not the covenantal community. But a life unconnected is a life aptly described by Macbeth as, “a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more.”

In Abram—the story of an individual who makes a free choice to follow his God and thereby changes the world—we see the balance between the freedom of the individual and the meaning of community. Rabbi Sacks reports that:

I once had the opportunity to ask the Catholic writer Paul Johnson what had struck him most about Judaism during the long period he spent researching it for his masterly *A History of the Jews*. He replied in roughly these words: “There have been, in the course of history, societies that emphasised the individual—like the secular West today. And there have been others that placed weight on the collective—communist Russia or China, for example”

Judaism, he continued, was the most successful example he knew of that managed the delicate balance between both—giving equal weight to individual and collective responsibility. Judaism was a religion of strong individuals and strong communities. This, he said, was



very rare and difficult, and constituted one of our greatest achievements.

“*Vayelekh Avram*,” “and Abram went.” We end today with these words, but with these words an entirely new story begins. The tale of Abraham is that of the strongest individual that had ever lived and who defied the supposed Sumerian cycle, but who in so doing, created a family and a covenantal community more eternal than any other in existence. That is why he will continue to serve as a beacon of inspiration “tomorrow, and tomorrow and, tomorrow.”

---

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Noah's son Yefet—the ancestor of Classical civilization—is blessed with beauty, but it is Shem who is to be the ancestor of Abraham and the Chosen People. Why doesn't God choose to dwell in the civilization that embodies man's capacity for aesthetic grandeur? What should we make of this division between the beauty of Athens and the Godliness of Jerusalem?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik interprets the sin of the Tower of Babel as stemming from the belief of its builders in the static and cyclical nature of reality. What is so damaging to the Divine plan about this mindset? Is there not value and wisdom in accepting that history often repeats itself, that much about our world is unchanging? What makes the worldview of Abram superior to the worldview of Sumerian civilization?
3. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks cites Paul Johnson as suggesting that Jewish civilization strikes a healthy balance between radical individualism and oppressive communitarianism. Do you agree? What aspects of Jewish life and practice help reinforce both the preciousness of the individual and the indispensability of communities of shared meaning?