

Does Judaism Root for the Ravens? An Ornithological Response to Parashah Noah Judaism for the Birds (or the birds for Judaism)

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- Preparing this drash, I made a survey of associations of Judaism with birds, mainly, flitting from one topic to another: Judaism making use of birds, inspired by birds, having stories or symbols with birds (and by extension, animals, in general.)
- Noah's menagerie: Which animals can fly, **besides** birds?

Answers: bats, flying fish, insects.

Yet Judaism, in symbolism, features only of birds, not any other winged animal.

- The second commandment prohibits making images of creatures, so in the [Birds' Head Haggadah](#), humans are depicted with birds' heads (see illustrations below). This absence of or prohibition against human imagery is called "aniconism." Many other cultures depict people with animal features – people with the heads of elephants, monkeys, dogs, bulls – but in Judaism, only birds.
- Traditionally we have written Torah scrolls with quill pens. For many years the feathers have been from geese, though more recently, turkey feathers have been permitted. So for centuries, we could **not** have had the sefer Torah without birds.
- Angels have feathered wings and are depicted thus in the decorations on arc of the covenant – the cherubs for ha-aaron.
- This parashah contains the raven and the dove. There are many interpretations about them.

Why does the raven fly around the ark?

The interpretation I like best is from the Talmud, Sanhedrin, which points out that for some animal types in the ark, there were more than two allowed. The pure animals got to stay in multiple couples, so there were many doves rescued. But for the raven, there were only the two. So, the raven was reluctant to leave the ark and abandon his wife. If anything were to happen to him, there would be no way to perpetuate the species, and the ravens would go extinct. In a midrash, the raven explains to Noah that the raven wants to stay near his own wife, his only one.

- There's another Midrash about a particular bird:

King Solomon, who was building the first Temple and was also good with animals, requests an eagle fly to the Garden of Eden to get a tiny creature, a Shamir, to cut the Temple stones or breastplates; so an eagle was necessary for Solomon's temple.

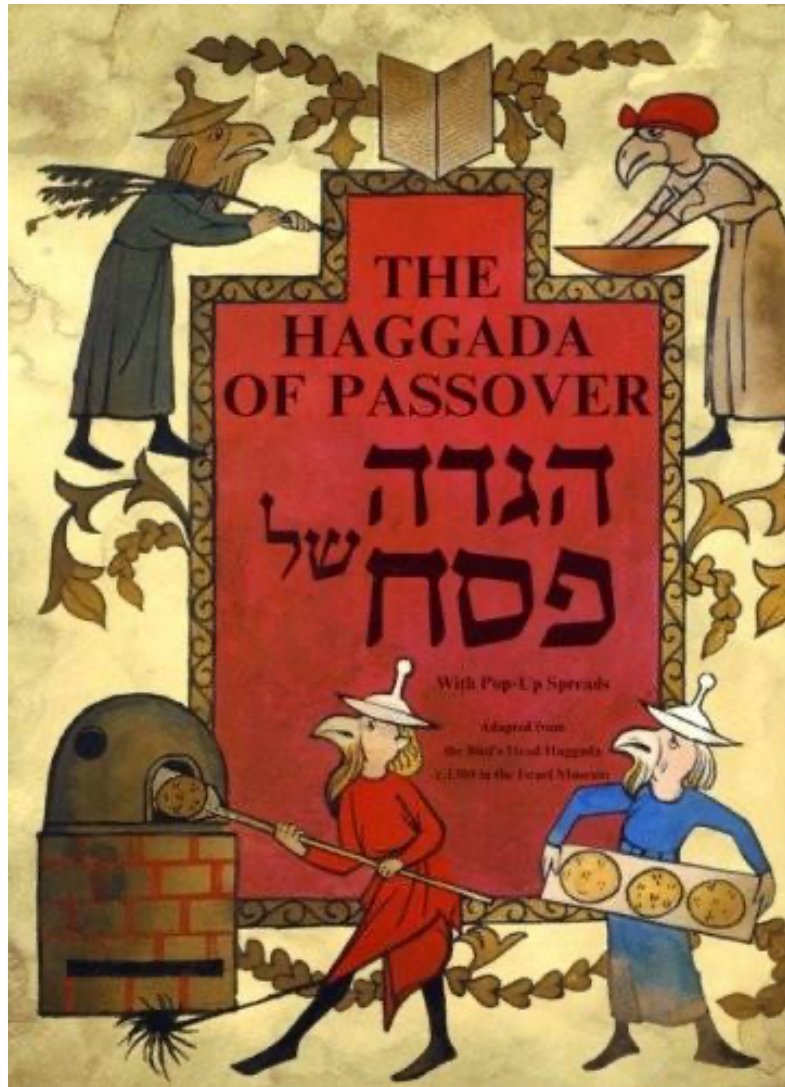
- Some of the Temple sacrifices permitted were of birds (Parashah Vayikra / Leviticus).

- Of course, the Torah lists the Kosher and non-Kosher birds (Parashah Shimeni/Leviticus; Parashah Devarim / Deuteronomy; Parashah Re-ei/ Deuteronomy).
- And there's the famous ruling in the Torah – don't separate the mother from the baby birds (Parashah Ki Tetzi/ Deuteronomy).
- Here's another Midrash favoring birds:
Even without mitzvot, we can learn from doves about love and from chickens about tidiness. (I don't know how we can learn tidiness from chickens, but it's an interesting concept.)
- Recently, in Israel, some banded birds, part of a study by Israeli ornithologists, were found in Arab countries, and were suspected of spying (like the raven or dove?). The Arabs protested at first (they gave Israel the bird?), then returned the birds – a tower of Babel misunderstanding.
- Modern note:
Towers with windows, today, are hurting migrating birds.
- Halacha:
On one Sabbath, Beshalach feeds the birds, because birds ate the manna on one occasion to prevent the children of Israel from gathering it on Shabbos.
- In the daily morning, Shacharit prayer, we thank the rooster for telling us of the dawn (Zechvi). There's the traditional idea that birds singing might be interpreted as prayer.
- And Psalm 148 (in many siddurim) – the animals are praying, praising Hashem.
- Finally, I have a personal story of The Tanya – animal soul vs Godly soul: my experience davening with a goose.

I was saying kaddish for my father, during the 11 months of mourning, the first time I had experienced this for a parent. I apparently didn't know I needed a minyan to say kaddish, I was trying to say it three times a day. I was at my workplace where I was a teacher, and there was a pond on the campus. A lot of wild Canada Geese were there. They're pretty skittish animals, when they're not defending territory, and don't want people to get close to them. So there I was, immersed in the siddur one morning, when I looked up, and there was a goose looking up at me! It had approached me while I was praying. It had such a silly goose expression on its face. Maybe it knew I shouldn't say kaddish without a minyan, and it was astonished. Maybe it was trying to contribute to a minyan. It seemed in solidarity or sympathy with me, sensed I was mourning or prayerful. When I was praying, the bird trusted me enough to approach. And then I wondered, Is this how animals naturally go through life, continuously praying? Could they be closer to Hashem than most people, attuned to Hashem?

Questions for discussion:

- Have you ever had a spiritual experience with animals?
- If you are vegan or vegetarian, how did you arrive at that choice?
- Is there an animal you particularly like, related to Judaism?



- For information in this drash, I wish to thank or credit: the late Hal Brodsky, Ben Elton, Elisha Fialkof, Rabbi Shmuel Hertzfeld, and Norman Shore. Any errors are my own (we learn from each other).