

Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash

TAMAR BIALA

A Raven and a Dove

When the rains of the Flood ceased, Noah sent a raven and a dove from the ark to check whether the waters had subsided. The raven and dove survived the destruction of their world, and they bore witness to the catastrophe. Written as an allegory, the midrash describes the attitude toward these survivors in a *beit midrash* of birds and considers society's, as well as God's, responsibility for them.

A question was asked in the *beit midrash* of the birds of the sky: That raven and that dove that Noah sent out from the window—whatever became of them? After all, of the raven it is written *it went off, going off and returning, until the waters were dried up from upon the earth* (Gen 8:7), but it does not say what became of him. As for the dove, it is written *so she returned to him into the Ark, for there was water upon the face of all the earth* (Gen 8:9), and later it is said *but she returned to him again no more* (Gen 8:12), and it does not say where she went or what became of her.

They sent the high-flying eagle, which can bear another bird on its wings, to fetch them. The eagle flew away for a day, and another, and then returned with the dove, and all her retinue, since from the day she had found a home and until that day she did not stop being fruitful and multiplying, and kept giving birth, and busying herself with pregnancies, and utterly exhausting herself. But he did not return with the raven.

They asked him: That raven, you didn't find him? He said: I found him, flying here and there at the ends of the earth and he refused to come with me. He said, Ever since the day that Noah sent me forth from the ark, I haven't stood still or rested, for the earth is defiled, so how could I come and dwell among you? I won't join all of you, and won't stop my flight until I'm told to by the Shekhinah, of whom it is written that She dwells among the defiled in their defilement.

On hearing this, they decided to go and find the Shekhinah and bring Her the raven, so that he might cease from his flight.

The birds of the sky asked the celestial lights, where is the place of the Shekhinah? And they did not answer.

They asked the beasts of the field and the fish of the sea, and they did not answer.

They asked the trees and the grasses, and even they did not know.

At the time that they were looking at one another and seeking an answer from one another, they heard the Shekhinah calling to them, Here I am among you, for you are preoccupied with learning Torah and I am listening and growing with you.

She revealed Herself to them in the image of a very large stork.

The eagle went and brought the raven, who was advanced in years, his wings dry and gray, limping in flight.

The inhabitants of the *beit midrash* said to him: Why do you fly back and forth and find no rest?

He said, Where should I stand, and where should I rest my wings? Anywhere I try to stand, the dead eyes of my brothers and sisters stare at me. And anywhere I try to sit, the earth stirs, and groans, and the weeping voice of my brother's blood rises upward from it.

They answered, But the dove found land on which grass grows, and took an olive branch in its mouth, and then went, and blossomed, and sought out a new life, and she is still giving birth even now. And it is written *the waters left firm ground upon the earth* (Gen 8:13) and the earth is waiting for you and those like you, for thousands of years now, to come back.

He answered them, Even if the waters have left firm ground upon the earth, I cannot dwell on it, for it says *the face of the soil was destroyed* (Gen 8:13), and a place that has no face, neither its tears nor its disgrace can be wiped away.

At that moment, the sun began to set, and the sky seemed to them as red as blood.

The inhabitants of the *beit midrash* cast their eyes upon the dove, and saw that she was tired and weeping. They looked at that raven and saw that he was losing his mind.

They looked upon the Shekhinah and saw that She was spreading Her wings, and they were large, and a warm wind emanated from them.

The Shekhinah arose from Her place and went over to the dove and the raven and sheltered them with Her wings.

The raven ceased his flight. The dove's soul was rested.

And some say that at this moment one could hear the murmuring of the Shekhinah saying to those birds who dwelled in the beit midrash, What do you know about the dove and the raven, you are not doves, or ravens, and it wasn't you who were sent forth from that window, to go and look.

Commentary

In this midrash Tamar Biala imagines a study house of birds in which there is a discussion about the fate of the raven and the dove from the story of the flood. What became of them? The birds decide to send the eagle to search for them. The eagle, which is capable of carrying another bird on its wings (in Deuteronomy 32:11, God's deliverance of Israel is analogized to an eagle bearing its young) will be able to transport the birds back to the study house, assuming it can find them.

The eagle returns with the dove, who seems to have integrated back into society. The dove seems to be functioning normally, though ever since the flood, she has not desisted from procreation and is exhausting herself with pregnancy after pregnancy. The dove is keeping herself busy as a defense mechanism so that she never has the time and space to remember the catastrophe and feel the pain.

The eagle then finds the raven consumed by suffering. The raven refuses to return with the eagle to join the other birds. It views the post-diluvian world as "defiled," and it hears the voice of the dead crying out from the earth—much as God heard Abel's blood crying out from the earth (Gen 4:10). The restless, tortured raven, which can find no rest, insists that it will return only if the Divine Presence, the Shekhinah, instructs it to do so—since according to the midrashic tradition (Bamidbar Rabbah 7:8), the Shekhinah dwells among Israel in their defilement.

The birds in the beit midrash are unable to locate the Shekhinah. Ultimately the Shekhinah reveals Herself to them in the figure of a large stork. It turns out that She was among them all along, in keeping with the Mishnah in Avot 3:6, which teaches that the Shekhinah dwells among any ten individuals engaged in the study of Torah.

The raven arrives in the study house on the eagle's wings. It tries to explain itself to the other birds in the study house, but they are unable to comprehend its plight. They point out that the dove has already put her life back together and started anew. After all, they tell the raven, the land has already dried up and the waters have left firm ground upon the earth. But the raven responds with a close midrashic reading of the biblical verse that describes what Noah saw when he removed the cover from the ark: *The face of the soil was destroyed* (Gen 8:13). The soil had been rendered faceless, and when a place has no face, its tears and disgrace can never be wiped away and its shame will endure forever.

The members of the avian beit midrash feel compassion for the raven and the dove, but they do not know how to ease their suffering. Thus, they are catapulted into a torment of their own. The midrash concludes with the Shekhinah spreading Her wings and sheltering the two survivors. This great embrace calms the dove and enables it to desist from its exhausting struggle for survival and to allow herself her final rest. At the same time, the sheltering wings of the Shekhinah put an end to the raven's loneliness and distress and allow it to rest at last. This image recalls the prayer for the souls of the dead, "El Malei Rachamim," in which we ask for the dead to find shelter under the wings of the Shekhinah. The midrash closes with the Shekhinah rebuking the birds of the study house for judging these survivors without having any real sense of what they had endured.

The use of an allegorical midrash that anthropomorphizes birds so as to give voice to the human plight recalls the kabbalistic literary tradition, in which both the Shekhinah and the human soul are depicted as birds (see, for instance, Tikunei Zohar 21).