

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5781
The Beit Midrash of the Birds
Rabbi Betsy Forester

This feels like a strange time to celebrate the creation of the world and our place of honor as human beings in it. Our world, our country, and Madison in particular are mired in anxiety and despair. The pandemic, and the entrenched, structural and global problems it has exposed and exacerbated, seem intractable. And it's just plain weird to bring in yom tov from a tent in our parking lot, facing a live stream camera! On the other hand, we need spiritual uplift, joy, and hope. That's why we are here, and our need for spiritual connection and a renewed sense of purpose is palpable. I suspect you may feel pulled in those different directions, too. Over the course of the *Yamim Nora'im*, we will take some time to probe what is happening internally for us at the start of the year 5781.

I have a custom of telling a story on Erev Rosh HaShanah, and that's what I'm going to do tonight.

I am mindful right now of the story of Noah, who also sheltered in place, adrift, as the world suffered beneath his ark. That story feels so much less farfetched for me this year than it did before.

Did you know that Noah was in that floating zoo for over a full year? Imagine how it must have been to leave that quarantine and encounter a changed world, trying to comprehend what had been learned in the face of all that had been lost. We are not yet at that point, yet we are already beginning to see how the pandemic is changing us.

It is my custom to tell a story on Erev Rosh HaShanah. I learned a brilliant midrash by a modern Israeli author, Tamar Biala (translation adapted from Yehuda Mirsky). She looks at the aftermath of the Flood from the perspective of the community of birds, which are given roles that feel almost human. I would like to share that midrash with you tonight, with slight modifications.

A question was asked in the study house--the *beit midrash*--of the birds of the sky: The raven and the dove which Noah sent out from the window--whatever became of them? After all, what we know about the raven is that it went off, "going off and returning," until the waters were dried up from upon the earth, but we don't know what actually became of him. As for the dove, we know that "she returned no more to the ark," so what became of her?

The council of birds sent an eagle to fetch the raven and the dove. The eagle flew away, for a day, and another, and then returned with the dove, and her entire family--since from the moment she had found a home, up until that very day, she had been birthing, and caretaking, breeding a multitude of sons and daughters, but the eagle did not return with the raven.

So the other birds asked the eagle: That raven, couldn't you find him? He said: I found the raven flying here and there at the ends of the earth, and he refused to come with me. He told me, "Ever since the day that Noah sent me out, I haven't stood or rested, and if I didn't return to Noah, how can I possibly return with you? I answered: Noah died a long time ago, and neither his children nor their children are still on the earth. No one else is still waiting for you." He said, "Died and passed from the earth, and I didn't know?" His head drooped earthward. Once he raised it, he concluded: I won't join all of you, and I won't stop flying until the Divine Presence tells me to. For the earth is defiled from so much death and destruction.

They voted and decided to go and find the Divine Presence--otherwise known as the *Shekhinah*, so that they could bring the raven to her and she could help the raven cease his frenetic flight. They asked the luminaries, where is the place of the *Shekhinah*? And they didn't answer. They asked the beasts of the field and the fish of the sea, and they didn't answer. They asked the trees and the grasses, and even they did not know. They looked to one another and sought answers from one another, and that is when they heard the *Shekhinah* calling to them: "I am here among you, in the *beit midrash*. You are busy with Torah and I am listening and growing with you. She revealed herself to them in the image of a very large stork.

So the eagle went and brought the raven, and he arrived on wings dry and gray, limping in flight.

His fellow birds asked the raven, "Why do you fly back and forth and find no rest?" He said: 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. The waters left firm ground upon the earth and it is waiting for you. He answered them: The earth has lost its face from so much destruction, and when a place has no face, its tears cannot be wiped away, nor its disgrace.

At that moment, the sun began to set and the sky seemed to them as red as blood. The birds in their *beit midrash* looked at the dove, and saw that she was tired and weeping; they looked at the raven and saw that he was losing his mind.

They looked to the *Shekhinah* and saw that she was spreading her wings, and they were large, and a warming wind arose 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 that moment one could hear the murmuring of the *Shekhinah*, who was saying to those birds who dwelled in the *beit midrash*: What do we know about the dove and the raven? We are not doves, or ravens, and it wasn't we who were sent out from that window, to go and look."

Let's consider for a moment how we are like those birds, and like the *Shekhinah*.

Maybe, like the dove, you are productive and forward-thinking even as you carry pain and sorrow. Maybe, like the raven, you feel much less grounded than usual. Maybe, like me, you're like the dove and the raven, but especially like the community of birds that calls out for God's presence to help bring solace and hope. Each of us is going to get through this time however we get through it. I hope and pray that respect for the efforts we are all making will overcome our frustrations with ourselves and each other.

I yearn for the day when our flock will assemble within our sacred walls again. Tonight, I hope it helps to know how much you are missed in this place. I hope it helps to know that we can bring the *Shekhinah* closer to us because she is here all along. I pray that we gain strength from our tradition as we gather in the best way we can to drink from the well of our faith. May we use these days to strengthen our spirits and renew our vision for ourselves and our world. May God's canopy of peace unite us from one home to another in compassion, and commitment.

L'shanah tovah um'tukah tikateivu. May you be inscribed in the book of life for a good and sweet year.