

Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(23)

The Bird That Made Its Nest on the Seacoast
Esther Rabbah 7:10



Background to the Fable "The Bird That Made Its Nest on the Seacoast"

Psalms 106:23

"They forgot God, their Savior, Who wrought great deeds in Egypt, wonders in the land of Ham, awesome deeds by the Sea of Reeds. He intended to destroy them [and would have] were it not that Moses, His chosen one, stood before Him in the breach to return His wrath from destroying"

Anger Management

"Be not quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools!" (Ecclesiastes 7:9)



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Our text comes from the Book of Ecclesiastes, known as *Kohelet* (preacher) in Hebrew. The authorship of this book of the Hebrew Bible has been traditionally ascribed to King Solomon. It gives us a very clear message about this week's *middah*, 'erech apayim'. Just as it is necessary to control one's words, it is also important to control one's emotions. A person who loses his or her temper quickly and becomes angry tends to hold onto that anger and is considered a fool! Notice that we are not told that it is wrong to feel angry or to express that anger - only that we must have control over our anger. The Talmud adds to this understanding by suggesting that "if a clever man is angry, his wisdom quits him. (Talmud, *Nedarim* 22b).

? Why do you think people get angry?

? What do you think about the Talmudic connection between anger and foolishness?

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מדרש רבה אסתר פרשה ז סימן י

י ויבז בעיניו לשלוח יד במרדכי לבדו, בזוי בן בזוי, להלך כתיב (בראשית כ"ה) ויבז עשו את הבכורה וכאן כתיב ויבז בעיניו, ויבקש המן להשמיד את כל היהודים. ר' שמעון בן יוסי בן לקוניא אמר בעלמא הדין נמשלו ישראל לצורים, שנאמר (במדבר כ"ג) כי מראש צורים אראנו, (ישעיה נ"א) הביטו אל צור חוצבתם, נמשלו כאבנים, שנא' (בראשית מ"ט) משם רועה אבן ישראל, (תהלים קי"ח) אבן מאסו הבונים, ואומות העולם נמשלו בחרשים ה"ד (ישעיה ל') ושברה כשבר נבל יוצרים נפלה כיפה על קידרא ווי לקידרא, נפלה קידרא על כיפה ווי לקידרא, בין כך ובין כך ווי לקידרא, כך כל מי שהוא בא ומזדווג להם הוא נוטל את שלו מתחת ידיהם, וכה"א בחלום נבוכדנצר (דניאל ב') די מטורא אתגזרת אבן די לא בידין והדקת פרזלא נחשא חספא, א"ר חייא בר ינאי פורפירא דמלכא מזדבנא בשוקא ווי ליה למיזבניה ווי ליה לזבניה כך ישראל הן פורפירא שהקב"ה מתפאר בהן ה"ד (ישעיה מ"ט) ישראל אשר בך אתפאר והן נמכרין אוי לו למוכר ואוי לו ללוקח, משל דהמן רשיעא למה הוא דומה לעוף שעשה קן על שפת הים ושטף הים את קנו ואמר איני זו משם עד שנעשה ים יבשה ויבשה ים, מה עשה נוטל מים מן הים בפיו ושופך ליבשה ונוטל עפר מן היבשה ומשליך לים, בא חבירו ועמד לו על גביו ואמר לו ביש גדא וטמיע מזלא סוף סוף במה את יכיל, כך אמר לו הקב"ה להמן הרשע אי שוטה שבעולם אני אמרתי להשמידם כביכול ולא יכלתי, שנאמר (תהלים ק"ו) ויאמר להשמידם לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו להשיב חמתו מהשחית, ואתה אמרת להשמיד להרוג ולאבד חייך רישך מתורם חלף רישיהון דאינון לשיזבא ואת לצליבא.

A bird made its nest on the seacoast, but the sea washed it away. The bird said, "I will not move from here until I turn the sea into land and the land into sea." So what did it do? It took water from the sea in its beak and sprinkled it onto the land, and took sand from the shore and sprinkled it into the sea.

A friend came, stopped him and said, "You poor devil, what a fool you are! How much do you think you can accomplish by yourself?"

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Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? How do we see the bird's foolishness in our story?

? Why can't the "working bird" see what is so obvious to his friend and to the reader?

? How do we know that the friend was truly a friend?

Marcelo Ferder's Drawing

? How does the "hard working bird" look in Marcelo Ferder's drawing?

Note on "The Bird That Made Its Nest on the Seacoast"

The context of this fable is Haman's attempt to annihilate all the Jews. The bird that makes its nest on the seacoast represents Haman, who is angry with Mordechai for not having knelt before him. The pointlessness of trying to transform the land into the sea and the sea into the land is compared to the pointlessness of Haman's plan. Thus God seems to be saying to the evil Haman: "I myself, who wanted to exterminate them, could not, as it is said: 'Therefore He said that He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach, to turn back His wrath, lest He should destroy them' (Psalms 106:23). And you speak of exterminating, killing and annihilating? You see that they will be exalted and that you will be hanged."

More Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why is so significant the commentary of Esther Rabbah about God's impossibility of destroying –God forbid- the Jewish people?

Wrapping Up

Esther 6:11-13

11 So Haman took the garment and dressed Mordechai, and he led him through the city square and proclaimed before him: "So is done for the man whom the King wishes to honor!"

12 Then Mordechai returned to the king's gate while Haman hurried to his house, miserable, his face covered.

13 Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends about all that had happened to him. And his wise men and his wife Zeresh told him, "If this Mordechai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail over him, for you will certainly fall before him."

! A friendly advice that came too late for Haman, but hopefully not for us!

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

1)

How do you think the bird felt after its nest was washed into the sea? What did the bird decide to do then? Would this have helped it get back its nest?

2)

The other bird thinks the first bird is foolish to try to turn the sea into land and the land into sea, one beakful at a time, and all by himself. Do you think this would still be an impossible task if he had been helped by many other birds? Would it still have been a foolish idea? Why or why not?

3)

What are some of the things you wish you could do if you had the power to do them?

4)

What are some of the things we know that only God can do because God is so much greater than we human beings are?

4th- 6th GRADES:

1)

Why do you think the bird was trying to change the geography of the area by switching the land to become a sea and vice versa? What do you think of this idea?

2)

What would you say the meaning of this fable is? (More than one answer is possible.)

3)

One of the prayers we say on Shabbat morning is "Nishmat Kol Chai," especially the section that begins "Ilu Finu..." ("Could our mouths..."). Read this prayer in English and describe what feelings and desires it expresses that we have. What are some of the things that God has power over that amaze you?

7th- 12th GRADES:

1)

What is it about the bird's reaction to losing its nest that seems foolish or absurd to us yet made perfect sense to the bird? Describe some people you know who react like the bird to problems they face. What do you think of them?

2)

In our days of space technology, we have seen amazing things that human beings can do and places they can go that were only dreamed of just a hundred years ago. What areas of life do you think will always be under God's control and why?

3)

Looking at the midrashic context of this fable as it relates to Haman's futile efforts to exterminate the Jews, what do we learn about how our Rabbis saw history and the uniqueness of the Jewish people? How did they also encourage the Jewish people to have hope for the future, even in difficult times?

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Pre-Reading Strategy: Setting the Stage

Provide students with a small spoon and a large bucket of water. Have them spoon water out of the bucket one spoonful at a time. Do this for several minutes so that they can see the futility in their effort.

Read the text, then ask students how they might have emptied the bucket of water in a smarter manner and with the cooperation of some friends.