

Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(24)

The Bird and Its Cage
Ecclesiastes Rabbah 11:9



Background to the Fable “The Bird and Its Cage”

The Dog and the Wolf, by Aesop

A gaunt Wolf was almost dead with hunger when he happened to meet a House-dog who was passing by. "Ah, Cousin," said the Dog. "I knew how it would be; your irregular life will soon be the ruin of you. Why do you not work steadily as I do, and get your food regularly given to you?"

"I would have no objection," said the Wolf, "if I could only get a place."

"I will easily arrange that for you," said the Dog; "come with me to my master and you shall share my work."

So the Wolf and the Dog went towards the town together. On the way there the Wolf noticed that the hair on a certain part of the Dog's neck was very much worn away, so he asked him how that had come about.

"Oh, it is nothing," said the Dog. "That is only the place where the collar is put on at night to keep me chained up; it chafes a bit, but one soon gets used to it."

"Is that all?" said the Wolf. "Then good-bye to you, Master Dog."

Better starve free than be a fat slave.

? Do you agree with the moral of Aesop's fable? Why? Why not?

? Can you think on another moral to apply to the same fable?

"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth; and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth, and walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know, that for all these things God will bring you into judgment"

? Can you explain King Solomon's advice in Ecclesiastes 11:9? Why do you think is he addressing a young man, in his youth?

The Bird and Its Cage Ecclesiastes Rabbah 11:9

מדרש רבה קהלת פרשה יא סימן ט

אמר ר' לוי לעוף שהיה תבוש בכלוב בא עוף אחד ועמד לו על גביו, אמר לו אשריך מה מזונותיך מצויין לך, אמר ליה ביש גדא וטמיע מזלא למזונותי את מסתכל ולהבושי לית את סקר, דלמחר מפקין ונכסין לי, כך ודע כי על כל אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט,

A bird was confined to its cage. Another bird came and said, "You must be so happy to have all your food given to you without having to look for it!"

The confined bird replied, "How pitiful you are! You see my food, but you cannot see the bars on my cage."

Ecclesiastes Rabbah 11:9

Note on "The Bird and Its Cage"

This well-known fable comes to us from Rabbi Levi as a commentary on the verse: "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth; and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth, and walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know, that for all these things God will bring you into judgment" (Ecclesiastes 11:9). The connection between this verse and the fable in question is not very clear, but the caged bird seems to be saying to the free bird that in spite of being assured of food without having to hunt for it, he is not saved from his punishment (either from the actual punishment of being caged or from the punishment of being killed and eaten).

More Fables to Ecclesiastes Rabbah 11:9

8. REJOICE, O YOUNG MAN, IN THY YOUTH (XI, 9). R. Samuel b. R. Isaac said: The Sages sought to suppress the Book of Koheleth because they discovered therein words which tend towards heresy. They declared, 'This is the wisdom of Solomon that he said, REJOICE, O YOUNG MAN, IN THY YOUTH! Now Moses said, That ye go not about after your own heart (Num. XV, 39), whereas Solomon said, WALK IN THE WAYS OF THY HEART! Is restraint to be abolished? Is there no judgment and no Judge?' But since he continued, BUT KNOW THOU, THAT FOR ALL THESE THINGS GOD WILL BRING THEE INTO JUDGMENT, they exclaimed, 'Well has Solomon spoken.'

R. Hiyya Rabbah and R. Simeon b. Halafta make statements.

R. Hiyya Rabbah said: It may be likened to a man who fled from the executioner; he ran away and the executioner ran after him. People said to him, 'Run less that you have not to make a longer return.' Similarly it is stated, BUT KNOW THOU, THAT FOR ALL THESE THINGS GOD WILL BRING THEE INTO JUDGMENT.

R. Simeon b. Halafta says: It may be likened to a man who swam in the river [to escape his pursuers]; he ran away and they ran after him. People said to him, 'Go not far into the water that you may not have far to come out and weary yourself.' Similarly it is stated, BUT KNOW THOU THAT FOR ALL THESE THINGS GOD WILL BRING THEE INTO JUDGMENT.

R. Hanina b. Papa said: It may be likened to a man who used to steal the taxes. They arrested him and said to him, 'Give up what is in your possession.' He answered them, 'Take whatever I have with me'; but they retorted, 'Do You think that we will only extract what is with you at the present time? We demand from you all that is with you and all that you stole during the years you were a thief!' Similarly it is stated, BUT KNOW THOU THAT FOR ALL THESE THINGS GOD WILL BRING THEE INTO JUDGMENT.

R. Levi said: It may be likened to a bird shut up in a cage. Another bird came, stood by it and said to it, 'Happy are you, for see how your food is provided for you!' It replied, 'May you be unlucky and unfortunate! You consider my food but pay no attention to my being shut up; to-morrow they will take me out and slay me!' Similarly it is stated, BUT KNOW THOU THAT FOR ALL THESE THINGS GOD WILL BRING THEE INTO JUDGMENT.

R. Tanhum said: It may be likened to a worthless person who came to a shopkeeper and said, 'Give me fat meat, old wine, and various kinds of dainties.' He ate and drank and felt exhilarated; but as he was about to depart, the shopkeeper said to him, 'Pay the cost of what you have eaten!' He replied, 'My stomach is in front of you, Cut it open [and remove your goods]!' The shopkeeper was a clever man; so what did he do? He took some matting, wrapped the man in it, and set him by the entrance of the shop. When anybody passed, he said to him, 'Give charity for this dead man that we may buy shrouds for him.' A contemptible and ill-natured person passed and said to him, 'How long is this ill-fated wretch to rot here?' He replied, 'By your life, until the money is provided.' When the money had been provided, he said to the man, 'Go to destruction!' Similarly it is stated, BUT KNOW THOU, THAT FOR ALL THESE THINGS GOD WILL BRING THEE INTO JUDGMENT.

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What theological question is the author trying to address here?

? How is this fable similar to the one in Esther Rabbah 7:1: "The Mule, the Mare, and the Sow"? How is it different?

A man had a mule, a mare and a sow. He gave the sow all it wanted to eat, but to the mule and the mare he gave just what they needed.

The mare said to the mule, "What is this fool doing? To us who work for him he gives just what we need to eat, but to the sow—who does nothing—he gives as much as she wants."

The mule said to the mare, "The time will come when you will see the sow's downfall, for he is not feeding her for her benefit, but for his."

When the festival of the gentiles came (the first day of the month of the Roman calendar, usually celebrated as a feast day), they killed the sow and ate it.

Marcelo Ferder's Drawing

? How do the two birds look in Marcelo Ferder's drawing?

Wrapping Up

! **Understanding the World as a Matter of Faith: Let's Explore Other Sources**

- Bavli Shabbat 30b
- Avot 2:21
- Avot 4:19
- Avot 3: 19 (or 20 in other editions) (See Rambam's commentary)
- Ani Ma'Amin (Thirteen Principles of Faith)

Bibliography

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Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

1)

Why does the bird outside the cage think that the bird in the cage has a happier life?

2)

Why do you think the bird inside the cage was not really happy with his life?

3)

How do you feel about something you have made or something you have done for yourself? How does that compare to your feelings about having that same thing done for you or made for you by your parents or some other adult?

4th-6th GRADES:

1)

What did each bird admire about the other bird's life?

2)

What would you say is the main point or moral of this story?

3)

When in your life has it seemed that what someone else had or the way they lived was so much better than yours? What might be some of the disadvantages or that life or having that object? What might be some of the advantages of your life (that the other person might not have)?

7th-12th GRADES:

1)

In one way, this fable seems to teach us about the saying "The grass is always greener on the other side." Give an example from your life of this. Why do you think this is so much a part of human nature? In its extreme form, what can it lead to that the Torah condemns?

2)

What other moral(s) could you derive from this fable? Explain. What examples would you find of this in the Torah narratives?

3)

Ecclesiastes 11:9 is the context for this fable. Read a little more of Ecclesiastes and describe its overall tone and outlook. What view of freedom and redemption can be derived, then, from this fable? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Post Reading Strategy: Book (Essay) Link

For older students, an interesting match would be "The Bird and Its Cage" and Samuel Scudder's essay on observation "Learning to See." Scudder was a Harvard graduate and a leading scientist in ichthyology in the late 1800s. The essay is about Scudder's desire to study with the famous zoologist and geologist Louis Agassiz who gave Scudder the task of taking a dead fish, a haemulon, and observing it. Agassiz would ask Scudder from time to time what he had observed. At first he saw little. He stared until he saw nothing new. He decided to draw it, which pleased Agassiz who said a pencil is a good eye. For three days Scudder observed and added to his knowledge. On the fourth day, he was given the task of describing many different haemulon and the resemblances and differences. At last Agassiz taught him that "Facts are stupid things until brought into connection with some general law."