

Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(28)

The Bird and the Statue
Exodus Rabbah 27:3



Background to the Fable "The Bird and the Statue"

Jethro

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In the Hebrew Bible, Jethro (Hebrew: יִתְרוֹ, *Yitro*; "His Excellence/Posterity") was the priest of Midian and Moses' father-in-law, who sheltered Moses for 40 years after his flight from Egypt. The father of Moses' wife Zipporah, Jethro became the grandfather of their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer.

It was while tending Jethro's flocks that Moses famously encountered God in the burning bush and received his calling to deliver Israel from Egyptian oppression. Jethro later visited Moses in the wilderness during the Exodus. There, he offered sacrifice to the Hebrew God Yahweh and hosted a sacrificial feast with Aaron and the elders of Israel. Moses then accepted Jethro's advice concerning the need to teach the people God's laws and organize a system of justice.

Identified in the Book of Judges as a Kenite, Moses' father-in-law is also called "Reuel" and "Hobab." In Islam, Jethro is known as Shoab, one of the prophets in the Qur'an. He is also revered as a major prophet in the Druze religion.

Jethro is much discussed in rabbinical tradition, where he is sometimes seen as a repentant idolater but also honored as one of several authentic Gentile prophets. Modern scholars speculate that Moses may have inherited from Jethro not only sound advice about legal administration, but also important spiritual traditions.

Exodus 18:7-12

7. And Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and did obeisance, and kissed him; and they asked each other about their welfare; and they came into the tent.

8. *And Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, and all the hardship that had come upon them by the way, and how the Lord saved them.*

9. *And Jethro rejoiced because of all the goodness which the Lord had done to Israel, whom he had delivered from the hand of the Egyptians.*

10. *And Jethro said, Blessed be the Lord, who has saved you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of Pharaoh, who has saved the people from under the hand of the Egyptians.*

11. *Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods; for in the thing where they dealt proudly he was above them.*

12. *And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came, and all the elders of Israel, to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.*

Numbers 24:21

21. *And he looked on the Kenites, and took up his discourse, and said, Strong is your dwelling place, and you put your nest in a rock.*

? After reading the short biography of Jethro in the New World Encyclopedia and the verses Exodus 18:7-12, how do you understand the above verse in Numbers 24:21, "And he looked on the Kenites, and took up his discourse, and said, Strong is your dwelling place, and you put your nest in a rock"?

The Bird and the Statue

Exodus Rabbah 27:3

מדרש רבה שמות פרשה כז סימן ג

ד"א וישמע יתרו, ראה כמה טובות וברכות באו ליתרו משעה שנתחתן עם משה מה כתיב ויבא אהרן וכל זקני ישראל, וכן אתה מוצא בשעה שבא בלעם לקלל את ישראל לא דיין שלא קללן אלא ברכן, ולא עוד אלא כיון שראה עמלק התחיל לקללו שנאמר (במדבר כד) ראשית גוים עמלק ואחריתו עדי אובד, אבל ליתרו מהו אומר (שם במדבר כ"ד) איתן מושבך ושים בסלע קנך, אמר לו קיני עמנו היית בעצה מי הושיבך אצל איתני עולם, משל לצפור שברח מן הצייד ונפלה לתוך ידו של אנדרואנטיא כיון שראה אותו הצייד התחיל מקלסה ואמר לו כמה נאה בריחה שברחת, כך היה בלעם משבח את יתרו ואמר לו איתן מושבך.

A bird fleeing a hunter perched on the head of the statue of a king. When the hunter saw the bird, he began to praise it, saying, "What a good place you have chosen to flee to!"

Exodus Rabbah 27:3

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why was the Kings' statue such a good place for the bird to flee to?

Marcelo Ferder's Drawing

? How does the hunter look in Marcel Ferder's drawing?

Note on "The Bird and the Statue"

In this fable, the bird that flees from the hunter and takes refuge on the statue represents Jethro, Moses father-in-law, who leaves his idolatrous people and takes refuge under the protection of the God of Israel, where no curse can reach him and where blessings and honors rain down on him. "And Aaron came, and all the elders of Israel, to eat bread with Moses's father-in-law" (Exodus 18:12). When Balaam says (Numbers 24:21), "Strong is your dwelling place, and you put your nest in a rock," the midrash interprets this statement as being about Jethro. The rock, in which the bird nests, symbolizes the God of Israel and His people, with whom Jethro takes refuge.

More Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? How can we apply the moral of our fable to our lives?



Let's Review a Few More Texts

Pirkei Avot Chapter 2: Mishna 13

He (Rabban Yochanan) said to them (his students): go out and see which is a good way to which someone should cleave.

Rabbi Eliezer said a good eye;

Rabbi Yehoshua said a good friend;

Rabbi Yossi said a good neighbor;

Rabbi Shimon said one who considers consequences.

Rabbi Elazar said a good heart.

He (Rabban Yochanan) said to them, I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach over your words, for included in his words are your words."

? What is the essential difference between the approaches of Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Yossi on one side and Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar on the other side? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these two different approaches?

Pirkei Avot Chapter 1: Mishna 6

Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Perachya says, "Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend, and judge each person favorably."

? Why do we need both a teacher and a friend?

Wrapping Up

! When choosing the right statue can make all the difference in the world...

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

1)

Why couldn't the hunter throw either a stone or a stick at the bird he was hunting, after the bird sat on the statue?

2)

Do you think the hunter just gave up at the end of the story? What does he realize about the place where the bird is perched? When have you had to give up trying to do something? Why? How did you feel?

3)

What would it be like to say in a nice way how much greater something or someone was than you are—especially when you had to give up?

4th- 6th GRADES:

1)

As in the game of Tag, the bird found the Safe Spot. How do you think the hunter felt about this? How would you vocalize (give expression to) the feeling in the hunter's last words?

2)

What details do you notice in the illustration? What do you think this adds to our understanding of the story?

3)

What place(s) do you consider "safe"? What makes it/them "safe" for you?

4)

Look for words in our prayers which show how we consider God as giving us a sense of being safe in the world, as actually being a safe space or safety provider for us? What is God protecting us from?

7th- 12th GRADES:

1)

What is it really that stops the hunter from attacking the bird?

2)

If the statue represents God, what other people in the Torah sought God's protection besides Jethro (Moses' father-in-law), and from what or whom were they fleeing? What did the Rabbis hope to teach us about Jethro and those who left idolatry through this fable?

3)

What gives us a sense of security? Why is this so important for human life?

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Post Reading: Book Link

Often one reading leads to another. This is the case with "The Bird and the Statue" and Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince," which is another story of a statue and a bird. The bird becomes the messenger for the statue who was once a prince. The prince desires to help the poorest of the poor of his people. So he instructs the bird to remove several precious stones from the statue/prince to give to the poor. It is winter, and the bird should have gone to a warmer climate, but he remains because he falls in love with the prince and his goodness.

In the Jewish Fable the bird is saved by the statue, and in "The Happy Prince" the bird becomes the statue's messenger. However, both are good stories and would be a strong basis for discussion. Following a class discussion, students could develop a comparison/contrast paper on the facts of the stories and the ideas that come from them.