

Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(37)

The Euphrates and the Fruit Trees
Genesis Rabbah 16:3



Background to the Fable “The Euphrates and the Fruit Trees”

The Euphrates



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

The Euphrates (Syriac: , Prāt) is the western of the two great rivers that define Mesopotamia (the other being the Tigris) which flows from Anatolia through Iraq.



Isaiah 7:1-2

And it came to pass in the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah that Rezin, king of Aram, and Pekah son of Remaliah, king of Israel, marched on Jerusalem to wage war against it, and he could not wage war against it. And it was told to the House of David, saying, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim," and his heart and the heart of his people trembled as the trees of the forest tremble because of the wind.

The Euphrates and the Fruit Trees Genesis Rabbah 16:3

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה טז סימן ג

רבי יהושע דסכנין בשם רבי לוי אמר אומרים לפרת למה אין קולך הולך, אמר להם איני צריך, מעשי מודיעים אותי, אדם נוטע בי נטיעה והיא עושה לשלשים יום, זורע בי ירק והיא עומדת לג' ימים, אומרים לחדקל, למה קולך הולך, אמר להם הלואי נשמע קולי ונראה, אומרים לאילני מאכל, למה אין קולכם הולך, אמרו להם אין אנו צריכין פירותינו מעידין עלינו, אומרים לאילני סרק למה קולכם הולך אמרו להם הלואי נשמע קולינו ונראה, א"ר הונא לא משום הטעם הזה אלא אילני מאכל על ידי שהן כבדים בפירותיהם לפיכך אין קולך הולך, אבל אילני סרק על ידי שהן קלים בפירותיהם קולך הולך, הה"ד (ישעיה ז) וינע לבבו ולבב עמו כנוע עצי יער מפני וגו'.

When they asked the Euphrates, "Why don't you let us hear your voice?" it answered, "I have no need to; my actions speak for themselves. A man plants a sapling at my edge and it will bear fruit in thirty days, and if he plants a vegetable, it will grow in three."

They asked the fruit trees, "Why aren't your voices heard?" They answered, "It is not necessary. Our fruits give testimony to our existence."

Genesis Rabbah 16:3

The Complete Text of Our Fable in Genesis Rabbah 16:3 (Soncino Edition)

Rabbi Joshua of Siknin said in Rabbi Levi's name: [the rivers] said to the Euphrates: "Why is thy sound not audible?"¹ "My deeds make me known," it replied²; "when a man plants a plant by me it matures in thirty days; when he sows a vegetable by me, it is full-grown in three days."

Said [the rivers] to the Tigris: "Why is thy sound audible?" "May my voice be heard that I may be seen," he replied.

The rivers said to the fruit-bearing trees: "Why is your sound not audible?" "We do not need it," they reply, "as our fruits testify for us."

Said [the rivers] to the non-fruit-bearing trees: "Why is your sound audible?" Would that we could make our voice heard so that we might be seen, "they answered."

Rav Huna said: This is not the true reason; but because the food trees are heavy with fruit, their voice is not audible; and because non-fruit-bearing trees are light in

¹ *The Euphrates is a quietly flowing river*

² *I need not shout my merits*

fruit, their voice is audible, as it is written (Isaiah 7:2), "And his heart was moved and the heart of his people, as the trees of the forest are moved with the wind" (These sayings allegorically teach that if a man has real solid virtue to his credit he need not advertise his greatness).

Comprehension Questions

? Why does the Tigris reply to the other rivers "May my voice be heard that I may be seen," when asked: "Why is thy sound audible?"

Marcelo Ferder's Drawing

? How do the trees by the Euphrates look in Marcelo Ferder's drawing?

Note on "The Euphrates and the Fruit Trees"

The message that underlies this fable is that those who are weak, useless, vain, and contemptible usually make a lot of noise to call attention to themselves, while those who are valuable do not need to make much noise to demonstrate their worth. In this case, the river that runs silently gives life to the earth, as does the tree that is heavy with fruit, which gives forth its harvest quietly. The midrash closes its message with a verse that shows us how a fearful and untrusting heart is shaken as are the trees of the forest (those that bear no fruit): "And his heart was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the forest are moved with the wind" (Isaiah 7:2).

Analysis Questions

? Do you know some people who are like the Euphrates (and the fruit-bearing trees) in our fable? Do you know some people who are like the Tigris (and the non-fruit-bearing trees) in our fable?

? Can you think on a situation in which might be necessary for a quiet productive person to make himself/herself heard (i.e. to boast his/her achievements)?

! Wrapping Up

Are you a "talker" or a "doer"?

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

1)

The Euphrates is a famous river in the Middle East (in Iraq, which was formerly Babylonia, where many Jewish people used to live). What kind of "voice" or noise could a river make?

2)

What happens to the fruit trees or the vegetables that grow next to the river? How does this "speak" for the river to show that it is powerful and helpful in the world?

3)

What kinds of things can you do to be helpful, without having to talk about it, and especially not brag about it?

4th-6th GRADES:

1)

What do you think the river (Euphrates is the name of a famous river in Iraq, where the majority of the Jewish people once lived) means when it answers that its actions speak for themselves?

2)

How do you think we generally form our opinions about people—more by what they say, how they look, or what they do? What do you think is the most important way, and why do you think this?

3)

What things have you done or helped others to do that you are proud of? Have you told anyone about this? Look at Maimonides' Levels of Tzedakah—what is the highest level, and why do you think this is thought to be the best?

7th-12th GRADES:

1)

How do our actions usually "speak" louder than our words? Give examples both of positive and of negative ones.

2)

In the third commandment of the 10 Commandments (see Ex.20:5-6) it talks about the consequences that await the children of both those who have done evil and those who have lived according to the laws of the Torah. How are we to understand this, especially if children are the "fruits" of each generation?

3)

What do you plan to do in your life that will plant seeds for a better future in some area or for some people in this world? How important is it to you that you be recognized for doing this?

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Post Reading Writing Strategy: Voice

(Kirby, D., D. Kirby, and T. Liner. Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2004.)

Since this fable is about voices that do not need to be heard, an exercise in different voices can emphasize the heard and the unheard. Kirby, Kirby, and Liner, in their chapter on Voice, ask students to try on different voices as a way to improve, enhance, and challenge writing. Students should try the following exercises:

- Mad Talking: Choose something or someone that makes you mad. Write about it using language that sounds angry.
- Soft Talking: Choose someone in need of comfort. Write to them in a way that would comfort them. Select soothing language.
- Fast Talking: Persuade someone to do something or to believe in something. Do not give them a chance to say anything.
- Trying On Other Voices: Write a monologue using the words and the tone of someone else—an author, a teacher, a relative, a famous person.
- Or from the Note, select a voice of one who is weak, useless, vain, and contemptible and make a lot of noise to call attention to yourself.