

Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(39)

Trees and Iron
Genesis Rabbah 5:10



Background to the Fable "Trees and Iron"

3 Fables by Aesop

Aesop's Fables: The Trees and the Axe.

A Man came into a forest, and made a petition to the Trees to provide him a handle for his axe. The Trees consented to his request, and gave him a young ash-tree. No sooner had the man fitted from it a new handle to his axe, than he began to use it, and quickly felled with his strokes the noblest giants of the forest. An old oak, lamenting when too late the destruction of his companions, said to a neighboring cedar: "The first step has lost us all. If we had not given up the rights of the ash, we might yet have retained our own privileges and have stood for ages."

In yielding the rights of others, we may endanger our own.



? Can you explain in your own words Aesop's moral?

? Can you think on another moral to Aesop's fable?

Aesop's Fables: The Eagle and the Arrow

An Eagle sat perched on a lofty rock, keeping a sharp look-out for prey. A huntsman, concealed in a cleft of the mountain and on the watch for game, spied him there and shot an Arrow at him. The shaft struck him full in the breast and pierced him through and through. As he lay in the agonies of death, he turned his eyes upon the Arrow. "Ah! cruel fate!" he cried, "that I should perish thus: but oh! fate more cruel still, that the Arrow which kills me should be winged with an Eagle's feathers!"

? Why do you think is worse for the eagle to be killed by an arrow made with an eagle's feather?

Aesop's Fables: The Owl and the Other Birds

Since the owl was a wise bird, she advised the other birds when the first oak tree sprouted that they should not allow it to grow. If they didn't uproot the tree at all costs, it would produce an inescapable substance, birdlime, that would bring about their death and destruction. Later on, when the people began to sow flax, the owl told the birds that they should pluck out the flax seed, since it was also going to wreak havoc on the birds. The third time the owl saw a man with a bow and she said that the man would overtake them with their own feathers: although the man walked on foot he would be able to launch arrows with wings. Each time the birds refused to heed the owl's advice. They acted as if she were crazy and said she was out of her mind. As things turned out, the birds discovered, much to their surprise, that the owl had been right all along. Therefore, whenever any other bird encounters the owl, they now treat her with reverence, as if she were an expert in everything. But the owl does not give them advice any more; she only complains.

? What is the common theme to the three fables by Aesop?

The Prophet Obadiah



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

The prophet named Obadiah is credited with authorship of the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible, consisting of a mere 21 verses in a single chapter. The date of his ministry is unclear due to certain historical ambiguities in the book bearing his name. The events recorded in his writings may refer to the invasion of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, a date near to 586 B.C. The main thrust of the prophet's ministry, reflected in the themes of his book, is the ultimate victory of the people of God if they maintain their faith. Edom is used as an example of failure to manifest love toward one's neighbor in times of need, (Obadiah 1:1-17) and the eventual victory of Israel is declared in a vision of the future. (Obadiah 1:18-21)

In Rabbinic tradition

According to the Talmud, Obadiah is said to have been a convert to Judaism from Edom, a descendant of Eliphaz, the friend of Job. He is identified with the Obadiah

who was the servant of Ahab, and it is said that he was chosen to prophesy against Edom because he was himself an Edomite. Moreover, having lived with two such godless persons as Ahab and Jezebel without learning to act as they did, he seemed the most suitable person to prophesy against Esau (Edom), who, having been brought up by two pious persons, Isaac and Rebekah, had not learned to imitate their good deeds.

Obadiah is supposed to have received the gift of prophecy for having hidden the hundred and twenty eight prophets from the persecution of Jezebel. He hid the prophets in two caves, so that if those in one cave should be discovered those in the other might yet escape (1 Kings 18: 3-4).

Obadiah was very rich, but all his wealth was expended in feeding the poor prophets, until, in order to be able to continue to support them, finally he had to borrow money at interest from Ahab's son Jehoram. Obadiah's fear of God was one degree higher than that of Abraham; and if the house of Ahab had been capable of being blessed, it would have been blessed for

? What do you think is the relationship between Aesop's fables and Obadiah's prophecy against Edom?

Trees and Iron Genesis Rabbah 5: 10

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה ה סימן י

י ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום שלישי, יום שנבראו בו גבורים, היך מה דאת אמר (יחזקאל כג) שלישים וקרואים רוכבי סוסים כולם, כיון שנברא הברזל התחילו האילנות מרתתים, אמר להן מה לכם מרתתין, עץ מכם אל יכנס בי, ואין אחד מכם ניזוק.

When iron was created, the trees began to tremble. Iron said, "Why are you trembling? If none of you joins with me, you cannot be harmed." (The iron head of a hatchet can only be used with a wooden handle.)

Genesis Rabbah 5: 10

Analysis Questions

? In our fable, Iron advised the trees: "If none of you joins with me, you cannot be harmed." Why do you think this basic advice is necessary? Why would the trees even think in joining iron?

Note on "Trees and Iron"

The context of this fable seems to be the alliances of Samaria and Judea with the Assyrians.

The prophet Ezekiel, in chapter 23, blames Judea and Samaria for making alliances which resulted in their own destruction.

? Can you think of an alliance that can be detrimental to the participant parties? If so, why would they make such an alliance?

Another midrash cited in Sanhedrin 39b makes use of the same imagery: "The vision of Obadiah. Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom..." (Obadiah 1:1). Why did Obadiah prophesy precisely about Edom? Ephraim Mecasha, a disciple of Rabbi Meir, said in the name of Rabbi Meir, "Obadiah was a convert to Judaism from Edom. For this reason people say, 'The (handle of the) hatchet (that cuts down the forest) comes from the same forest.'" Obadiah, originally from Edom, was the one who prophesied his people's disappearance.

? "The (handle of the) hatchet (that cuts down the forest) comes from the same forest." What are your thoughts associated with this popular saying? What are your thoughts about Prophet Obadiah depicted as the hatchet that cuts down the forest?

! Wrapping Up

Loyalty and Betrayal

Why do people betray their friends, loved ones, countries? What causes humans to betray one another?



<http://www.answerbag.com/>



I think all betrayal is caused by greed. Not necessarily greed in the financial sense, but greed for more than what you already have. When the desire for wealth, power, control, or self-indulgence outweighs your integrity and honor, betrayal is pretty much inevitable.

? "What do you think about the above answer?"

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

1)

What do you think the trees were worried about when they saw the iron being created—especially in the form of the head of a hatchet?

2)

How did the iron try to reassure the trees that they did not need to worry? Why do you think this did not really calm them down?

3)

Why do some people join with the enemies of most everyone else? (We call those people "traitors.") Why is what they do wrong?

4th- 6th GRADES:

1)

How do you think the trees felt about the iron's answer? Pretend you are one of the trees and tell what it would say in response to the iron.

2)

When we know that someone is disloyal and goes to join forces with a group that threatens us, what can we do about it?

3)

Why is it important today that the countries of the world unite to solve major problems like pollution, fuel shortages, water shortages, hunger, and poverty?

7th-12th GRADES:

1)

"United we stand; divided we fall" is engraved on our coins and was a rallying cry for our country in its early history. How do you apply this verse to our life today? What are some of the things that threaten the unity of our community? Our country? Our global society?

2)

Do you think that people can harm or threaten others without some help from those who seem to be on the side of those threatened? Explain and give examples.

3)

How have we created our own "Frankensteins" (powers that ultimately become destructive against their creators) in the world today? What can we do about them now?

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Pre and Post Reading Strategy: Background Knowledge and New Information

Have a discussion of elements that when alone are not harmful but when mixed together are harmful. Clorox and ammonia is an obvious one. Each is a good and helpful home cleaner, but mixed together they are poisonous.

Read the Fable and discuss how the trees trembled when iron was invented, but it is only when they are combined that they become harmful.

Discuss other dangerous combinations:

- Bleach with acid toilet bowl cleaners: can result in toxic, potentially deadly fumes
- Bleach with vinegar: vinegar is a type of acid and when mixed with bleach, toxic chlorine vapor is produced
- Vinegar and baking soda: produces a volcanic like eruption
- Coca-Cola and Mentos (the candy): produces an immediate explosion
- Sometimes even people are fine when separate but harmful when together

An opposite situation where combined the elements are useful, but separate are dangerous:

- Sodium and chlorine: sodium can cause a violent reaction; chlorine is a toxic gas (a chemical weapon in WWI); but combined they make the common table salt.