

# WHAT DID THE DOVE BRING TO NOAH?

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The Book of Genesis tells how the dove returned to Noah, *and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf* (Gen. 8:11). Early interpreters wondered how to resolve the mixing of male and female genders in this verse. The dove is referred to in the feminine gender, *va-tavo* (and she came), *be-fiha* (in her mouth), like every other dove in the Bible. However the word *taraf* (plucked) is in the masculine instead of the feminine (*tarefah*), as one would have expected.

Explaining this unusual usage, Rashi writes: "I am of the opinion that it [the dove] was a male and that therefore it [the text] speaks of it sometimes as masculine and sometimes as feminine, because really wherever *yonah* [dove] occurs in the Scriptures it is spoken of as feminine . . .". In contrast, *Targum Onkelos*, Pseudo-Jonathan, Ibn Ezra, and Radak suggest that the word *taraf* is an adjective describing the leaf as torn off, not a verb referring to the action of the dove. Both *Onkelos* and Pseudo-Jonathan translate the Hebrew words *aleh zayit* (olive leaf) as *teraf zeita* in Aramaic and the Hebrew word *taraf* as *tevir*, "broken". *Taraf* is similarly translated as "cut off" by Saadiah Gaon. This approach led to the JPS translation, *a plucked-off olive leaf*.

Ibn Ezra brings multiple options to explain the word *taraf*. According to the first, *taraf* is a synonym of "olive leaf." Sometimes the Bible uses two adjacent terms to describe the same thing. He quotes Daniel 12:2 as an example of this usage, where the words *admat afar* (dust of the earth) both signify "dirt." He attributes this approach to R. Judah Ibn Bal'am.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Mishnah uses the word *taraf* to mean "leaf" in *Uktzin* 2:1, when discussing olives pickled with their leaves (*be-tarpeihen*). The commentators (e.g., Bertinoro, *Tosefot Yom-Tov*, Albeck, Kehati) all interpret *tarpeihen* to mean "leaves." Ibn Ezra's second explanation is that the word refers to the broken state of the leaf, as in *Targum Onkelos*.

There is another possible meaning for *taraf*. Even-Shoshan notes that this word appears as *tarfa* in Aramaic and as *taraf* in Arabic. In both languages it denotes the flat part of the leaf.<sup>2</sup> As an example, he cites *kol tarpei tzimḥah*

*tirash* (its entire foliage withers) in Ezekiel 17:9. This, in my opinion, is the sense of *taraf* here (Gen. 8:11), a noun meaning the flat (widest) part of the leaf, as opposed to the word *aleh* in the same verse, which includes both the flat part and the stem. Accordingly, the meaning of the text is that the dove returned with the flat part of an olive leaf held in her beak.

The famous image of the dove holding an olive branch in its beak derives from the Septuagint (LXX), which translated the word *taraf* as "twig." Skinner<sup>3</sup> notes the classical use of the olive branch as a symbol of peace, quoting a line from Virgil: *Paciferaeque manu ramum praetendit olivae*, "holding out an olive branch."<sup>4</sup> The LXX rendered *taraf* in Greek as *karphos*, a term that has various meanings, such as dry branches, pieces of wood, scraps of wool, and other materials with which a bird builds its nest.<sup>5</sup> It forms part of a familiar expression in Matthew 7:3, *Why beholdest thou the mote [karphos] that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam in thine own eye?* This may be compared to a statement by R. Tarfon in TB *Arakhin* 16b and *Bava Batra* 15b: "I wonder whether anyone in this generation accepts reproof, for if one says to him, Remove the mote from your eye, he will answer, Remove the beam from yours!" Thus, according to the LXX, the dove brought a small twig in her beak for the purpose of building her nest. This is based on the Greek symbolism of an olive branch denoting peace. Irene, the Greek goddess of peace, is often represented on coins holding an olive branch.<sup>6</sup> Athenian heralds used an olive branch to symbolize peace and plenty,<sup>7</sup> while statues of Athene, who assumed the role of goddess of peace and wisdom, was also represented with an olive branch.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of the dove plucking a twig to help build its nest accords with the idea of building the world anew after the destruction caused by the Flood. However, since leaves are also used to build nests, *taraf* (in the sense of "leaf") carries this association as well. Doves do not eat olive leaves, which are bitter and have no nutritional value.<sup>9</sup> They mainly eat seeds, and the only reason why the dove collected an olive leaf was to build its nest – a new home in a world renewed after the Flood. Thus, in the Bible, an olive leaf (or branch) plucked by the dove has no connection with the idea of peace; it actually represents a new beginning, the world coming to life once again.

The Latin translation (Vulgate) generally follows the LXX. It reads: ". . . and the dove came to him in the evening carrying in her mouth an olive twig

with green leaves" (*at illa venit ad eum ad vesperam portans ramum olivae* [an olive branch] *virentibus foliis* [green leaves] *in ore suo intellexit ergo Noe quod cessassent aquae super terram*). The added element of green leaves suggests that the dove broke off a fresh branch. It is through the Vulgate that the symbol of an olive branch was popularized in the Christian world.<sup>10</sup>

According to the standard Jewish view, what the dove carried in its beak to Noah was either an olive leaf or, possibly, the flat part of the leaf without the stem. The twig interpretation, based on the Septuagint, is not maintained by the Jewish commentators. Reference to a branch can indeed be found in *Genesis Rabbah* 33:9, where R. Abba bar Kahana declares that the dove brought the leaf "*mi-shavshushin* [from the branches] of the Land of Israel",<sup>11</sup> but even there it is a leaf plucked from an olive branch.

The olive leaf brought to Noah by the dove was a powerful symbol of new life after the Flood.<sup>12</sup> The olive branch in the dove's beak, conceived by the LXX and the Vulgate, was based on a symbolism not found in Jewish sources.<sup>13</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Ibn Ezra *Shittah Aheret* to Gen. 8:12. R. Judah ben Samuel Ibn Bal'am (1000-1070) was a Bible commentator, grammarian and halakhist in Spain. He appears to have written a commentary in Arabic on the entire Bible. Some volumes were published recently by Bar Ilan University, but it is not clear if the explanation quoted above was preserved.
2. A. Even-Shoshan, *Ha-Millon he-Hadash*, vol. 2 (19680 p. 923.
3. J. Skinner, *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh, 1956) p. 156.
4. Virgil, *Aeneid*, VIII, 116.
5. Liddell-Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (1996), Supplement, 881; Supplement, p. 168.
6. Kathleen N. Daly and Marian Rengel, *Greek and Roman Mythology, A to Z* (New York: Chelsea House, 2009) p. 50.
7. See Thomas Hardwood, *Grecian Antiquities* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1801) p. 305; Simon Hornblower, *The Greek World 479-323 BC* (New York: Routledge, 2011) p. 130.
8. Liana Chesney, "Medician Emblems of War and Peace," in Pia F. Cuneo, *Artful Armies, Beautiful Battles: Art and Warfare in the Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) p. 119.
9. In TB *Sanhedrin* 108b, the dove states that she prefers to eat bitter food like an olive located through her own efforts rather than sweet things for which she must depend on others. In reality, doves do not consume leaves.
10. It should be noted, however, that Luther, who partly relied on the original Hebrew, translated the phrase as "a broken olive leaf" rather than as "a twig." See Ezra Shereshevsky, *Rashi: The Man and His World* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996) p. 109, note 82.
11. This *midrash* connects the story of the olive tree with the Land of Israel, indicating that the renewal of life after the Flood was specifically linked with Israel. The choice of an olive branch

was therefore not random but intentional, as it is one of the Seven Species with which the Land of Israel is blessed.

12. The olive tree appears 38 times in the Bible, more than any other fruit tree (not counting the vine, which appears 54 times but is a plant not a tree). The olive is the first tree mentioned in the parable of Jotham (Judg. 9:7-15). Long cultivated in the Middle East (Israel and southern Syria), it is of economic importance due to its fruit, used as food and for the production of olive oil, and because of its very hard, grained wood from which ornaments and other items are manufactured..

13. Ancient Mesopotamian literature includes the *Gilgamesh Epic*, a flood story that differs significantly from the monotheistic biblical narrative. In *Gilgamesh*, a dove is sent first, followed by a swallow and finally by a raven. None of the birds bring anything back to the hero, Ut-napishtim. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972) 6:1354-58; Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) p. 27.



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