

# **NOAH AND THE DOVE: THE INTEGRAL CONNECTION BETWEEN NOAH AND JONAH**

**SHEILA TULLER KEITER**

The narratives of Noah and Jonah share many features. The Hebrew word for dove, *yonah*, appears in both; both stories involve a boat and a storm; and both contain a reference to destruction after 40 days (Gen. 7:4; Jonah 3:4). Yet there is no mention of the Noah story in any of the classic commentaries on the Book of Jonah, nor is there any mention of Jonah in the commentaries to the Noah narrative. However, the two stories are integrally linked.

The key to understanding that connection lies in Jonah's name. The connection is not only important for understanding the Book of Jonah, it offers an entirely new approach to the Noah story as well. Jonah (*yonah* in Hebrew) means "dove", and the dove is the bird that Noah sends from the ark when the waters have receded. This sequence of events requires close examination.

The dove is not the first bird Noah sends out of the ark. Initially, in fact, he sends a raven (Gen. 8:7), which flies out and immediately returns. While this might indicate that the land was not yet sufficiently dry, Noah changes birds when tries again, sending a dove. Why those two birds, and why the switch?

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, in his *Ha'amek Davar* commentary (Gen. 8:7), explains that these two birds were chosen because they were domesticated fowl belonging to Noah. They were not among the paired animals on the ark, but pets that Noah was allowed to bring with him on the ark as part of his personal effects. Indeed, historically, both ravens and doves have been domesticated by humans for centuries.

The Torah states that Noah dispatched the dove to see if the waters had receded, but it does not specify why he sent out the raven. Both Rashi (Gen. 8:7) and *Ha'amek Davar* comment that the raven did not go out in search of anything, but merely circled the ark and then returned. This is consistent with what is known about ravens. Ravens and crows are very clever. People have kept ravens as pets because of their uncanny ability to mimic sounds. The raven in Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem was thus capable of saying

*Sheila Tuller Keiter attended Orot Israel College and graduated from Harvard Law School. She currently practices appellate law and teaches Torah in Los Angeles.*

"Nevermore." When it comes to eating, ravens are very opportunistic birds. They are omnivores, able to digest even carrion. One would therefore expect the raven, when released from the ark, to check its surroundings for food. Finding none in the immediate vicinity, the raven flew back to the ark, where it knew food was available.

This is rather puzzling. Noah was surely familiar with the behavior of ravens, having kept them as pets, and must have known what the raven would do. Furthermore, if Noah wanted to know if the waters had receded, why did he not just look out of the window from which the raven was dispatched? He did not need a raven to tell him if the ground outside was dry.

I believe that Noah's reason for sending out the raven was far more chilling. He did not send the raven to make sure that the earth was dry enough to leave the ark. Noah feared that the ground was dry but strewn with corpses. After the Flood, *the ark came to rest...on the mountains of Ararat* (Gen. 8:4). From that perch, Noah could probably see below and determine whether the land was still inundated, but he would not have been able to discern its condition in any greater detail. He therefore dispatched a scavenging bird capable of eating carrion to see if his fears were real. Since the raven did not find food of any kind, Noah (with a sense of relief perhaps) had the answer to his question.

Noah then switched to the dove. This time, the Torah states explicitly why he sent the bird: *to see if the waters had abated from the surface of the ground* (Gen. 8:8). Yet this is almost as puzzling as the dispatch of the raven. Since Noah had the window, why couldn't he just look outside and see for himself? Moreover, in the previous verse, the Torah informed us that *the waters had dried up from the earth* (Gen. 8:7). What did Noah hope the dove would tell him that he did not already know?

The answer lies in the nature of doves. *Ha'amek Davar* explains (Gen. 8:7) that they, unlike ravens, are used to flying over long distances. While that may be true, it is *where* they fly that provides a key to understanding this narrative. Doves and pigeons don't just fly anywhere – they fly home. Homing pigeons and those beautiful flocks of white doves released at sporting events and ceremonies will circle around, get their bearings, and eventually find their way back to their coop. They can be taken far away from home to a place they have never been, but they will eventually deduce the way and fly

home. Carrier pigeons do likewise. In a military context, pigeons bearing messages from the front will deliver the information after flying home to headquarters.

When the ark came to rest, it was far from home. Noah could obviously look out of the window and see that the ground around him was dry. But what was the condition of his old home? He knew that if he sent out the dove, it would fly home. If the dove eventually returned, Noah would know that its home was not yet inhabitable. The bird eventually returned, having found "no place to rest" (Gen. 8:9), and Noah tried again seven days later (Gen. 8:10).

This time the dove returned with the iconic olive branch (Gen. 8:11). Traditionally, the olive branch represents peace, an end to the destruction of the Flood. Midrashically, the olive branch is a source of food, and a symbol of the dove's (and every creature's) yearning for independence (see Rashi, Gen. 8:11). However, if we keep in mind the nature of birds, it becomes obvious that the dove tried to start building a nest with the olive branch. Doves are nesting birds. Since this dove was again unable to return to its original place, it decided to make its nest on the ark, its home for several months past. The dove wishes to build a nest and if it cannot do so at home, any available place will do.

When Noah sends the dove out a third time and it fails to return (Gen. 8:12), he knows that it is safe to leave the ark and go back home.

The prophet Jonah's name is hardly accidental. Jonah (Yonah) is very much like Noah's dove. His basic inclination is to go home. When God tells him to go to Nineveh, he does not want to leave (Jonah 1:2-3). As a matter of interest, Jonah is the only biblical seer charged with the mission of prophesying to non-Jews, a task that makes him feel distinctly uncomfortable.

Jonah attempts to evade God's command (1:3). When the storm hits his ship, all the passengers and crew are frantic. They busy themselves praying, throwing things overboard to lighten the load, and trying to discover the reason for this calamity (1:4-7). Jonah, by contrast, descends into the ship's hold and goes to sleep (1:5) – or, to put it more figuratively, he nests.

Later, in the belly of the great fish, he does more or less the same. Jonah stays there for three whole days before he finally prays to God (2:1-2). Rashi

(Jonah 2:1) quotes the following midrash to explain the delay: the fish that swallowed Jonah was male. Because there was so much room in its belly, Jonah was too comfortable and had no inclination to leave. God therefore had the male fish spew Jonah out and made a female fish swallow him. Inside this second fish there were many embryos, which crowded Jonah and made him uncomfortable. It was because of this pressure and discomfort that Jonah finally prayed to God. While this midrash concerns itself with a gender shift in the text, it keenly reflects Jonah's personality and inclinations.

Finally, after Jonah proclaims God's dire warning to the people of Nineveh, he leaves the city and literally builds himself a nest, a *sukkah*, outside of town (Jonah 4:5). When God arranges for the worm to destroy the *kikayon* (gourd) sheltering Jonah, the lesson that He endeavors to impart is one of mercy and empathy (4:10-11). God thus shakes Jonah out of his comfort zone, out of his nest, and teaches him to empathize with fellow human beings.

In this sense, Jonah is not only like the dove but also like Noah. When God tells Noah that He intends to destroy the world, Noah dutifully builds the ark. He makes no attempt, however, to warn the rest of humanity or urge them to repent. He does not plead for God's mercy on the rest of mankind. Though *a righteous man and blameless in his age* (Gen. 6:9), Noah lacks empathy. Like Jonah, he prefers to nest in safety and comfort.

Interestingly, even though the dove confirms that the earth is dry and that it is now safe to leave the ark, Noah will not disembark until God commands him to do so (Gen. 8:13-19). One might see this as deference to God, but Noah is more probably reluctant to quit a safe abode. Just as he visualized the earth strewn with corpses when the raven flew out of the ark, now he cannot face the new reality awaiting him and would prefer to remain in his nest. Indeed, after Noah makes offerings to God, his first impulse is to plant a vineyard, make wine, and drink himself into self-imposed oblivion (Gen. 9:20-21).

Noah gave little thought to the destruction God had foretold until it actually happened. By then it was too late. Only as the waters began to recede, and he could see the devastation that had occurred, did Noah begin to appreciate the consequences of his lack of empathy and he was racked with guilt. That fate Jonah was spared because the people of Nineveh, who responded to his be-

grudging message of doom, immediately repented. Yet the lesson Jonah had to learn was the same, man's need for empathy.