

PARSHAS NOACH · EREV SHABBOS

An Olive Leaf in an Uncertain World

What the dove was really telling Noach

The teaching and the story I want to share are from Rav Goel Elkarif, as brought in the sefer נאה דורש. Let us begin with something very familiar in our parsha. When we look at it carefully, there are two very strong questions.

Two questions about the dove

Noach sends the dove out of the ark. He wants to find out whether the waters have gone down. The dove returns in the evening with an olive leaf in its mouth.

וַתָּבֵא אֵלָיו הַיּוֹנָה לַעֵת עֶרֶב וְהָיָה עָלֶיהָ זַיִת טָכָף בְּפִיהָ וַדַּע נֹחַ כִּי קָלוּ הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ.

The dove came to him toward evening, and there was a freshly plucked olive leaf in its mouth. Noach knew that the waters had subsided from upon the earth.

Bereishis 8:11

Rashi brings the explanation of our Sages: the dove was conveying a message through that olive leaf.

יְהִיו מְזֻנֹנֹתֵי מְרוֹרִים כְּזֵית בְּיָדוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, וְלֹא מְתוּקִים כְּדִבֶּשׁ בְּיַד בֶּשֶׂר וְדָם.

Let my food be bitter as an olive in the hand of the Holy One, blessed is He, rather than sweet as honey in the hand of flesh and blood.

Rashi to Bereishis 8:11, citing the teaching of our Sages

Now, the first question is obvious. **Is that the way to speak to Noach after everything he has done?** For an entire year, Noach has looked after this dove. He has fed it and kept it alive. He has cared for the animals in the ark, day after day, through an exhausting year. And now the dove says: I would rather have something bitter from Hashem than something sweet from a human being!

That human being is standing right there. He is the one who has been feeding you! Where is the gratitude? Is that how you repay his kindness?

And there is a second question. **Why is the dove answering a question that Noach never asked?** Noach did not ask, “What would you like to eat?” He did not ask, “Whose food do you prefer?” He sent the dove to find out whether the waters had receded. Why does it come back with a message about the source of its food?

These are two separate questions. One concerns gratitude. The other concerns the purpose of the mission. We have to understand both.

And we cannot simply say that the dove behaved badly. The Midrash connects the olive oil used for the Menorah with this dove bringing light to the world in Noach’s time. That is a merit associated with what it did. So there is something good here. What was the dove really trying to say?

The answer Noach needed

Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv gives a beautiful explanation. The dove was coming to encourage Noach.

Think about the world Noach is living in. Everything outside has been destroyed. Inside the ark, he works from morning until evening, looking after the creatures entrusted to him. He has survived, but what will come next? When he leaves the ark, what kind of world will he find? What will there be to eat? How will life begin again?

The dove returns and, in effect, says: “I went out. I saw that the waters had gone down. But I did not find a world full of food waiting for me. I found an olive leaf that Hashem provided.”

Our Sages discuss where that leaf came from: from the Garden of Eden, or from the Land of Israel, according to the teaching that the Flood did not descend there. Think about what that means: Hashem made provision for this little creature.

“Noach, if Hashem can provide for a small dove in a devastated world, you do not have to face the future as though you are on your own. You have been doing what He asked of you. You are in His hands.”

The dove was bringing more than evidence that the waters had gone down. It was bringing courage to face the world beyond the ark.

Now we understand the first question. The dove was not dismissing Noach's kindness. It was not saying that his care meant nothing. Its message was meant to strengthen the very person who had cared for it.

And we understand the second question. Noach asked about the water. The dove brought back the information, but also the encouragement that made that information bearable. Yes, there is a world outside again. And yes, you can go forward into it.

There is an important difference between having the facts and having the strength to live with the facts. The olive leaf gave Noach both.

What remains from the Akeidah?

We can take this idea further. We have been talking about trusting Hashem when we cannot see what comes next. But how do we serve Him when doing what He asks is itself difficult? The Chida gives us a remarkable way to understand this.

The Chida explains that our forefathers repaired different aspects of the damage caused by Adam's sin. Let us look at those three areas, so that we can understand where the binding of Yitzchak fits into the picture.

The first area is faithfulness to Hashem. Adam was in the Garden of Eden, surrounded by Hashem's goodness. Our Sages describe even the angels preparing food for him. Yet, when Hashem told him not to eat from the tree, he ate. The Chida sees in that disobedience a defect related to idolatry: turning away from Hashem's authority while standing in the very place of His presence.

Avraham repaired that defect through his unwavering faith. He was prepared to be cast into the furnace rather than abandon his allegiance to Hashem. Think about the contrast. Adam turned away from Hashem's will while surrounded by the blessings of the Garden. Avraham remained faithful even when that faithfulness could cost him his life.

The second area is the loss of life. Adam's sin brought death into the world. The Chida therefore connects this aspect of the sin with bloodshed. Yitzchak repaired that damage through his willingness to give his own life in obedience to Hashem at the binding. Yitzchak was not actually killed; it was his complete willingness to offer his life that mattered.

The third area is purity. The Chida also identifies a defect related to forbidden relations in Adam's sin. Yaakov repaired that area through his personal purity and the purity of the family he established. He remained pure until the age of eighty-four, and all his sons were righteous. His family was whole; none of his sons was excluded from the future of the Jewish people.

So we have three areas of damage, and three corresponding repairs through Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Now let us focus on Yitzchak. The עקדה, the binding of Yitzchak, was a תיקון, a repair, for the sin of Adam that brought death into the world.

And now we can appreciate the Chida's question. If the binding accomplished that repair, why do we invoke its merit every Rosh Hashanah? We ask Hashem:

וְעֵקֶדֶת יִצְחָק לְזִכְרוֹ הַיּוֹם בְּרַחֲמִים תִּזְכָּר.

Remember today, with mercy, the binding of Yitzchak for his descendants.

Rosh Hashanah Mussaf, Zichronos

What are we asking Hashem to remember? If the binding repaired Adam's sin, then it fulfilled its purpose. What is the enduring merit that we are asking Hashem to remember for us, year after year?

The answer is that we have to distinguish between **what Avraham and Yitzchak did** and **the heart with which they did it**. The binding itself repaired the earlier sin. But Avraham and Yitzchak went to fulfill Hashem's will with joy. That joy, that loving willingness to serve Him, remains a merit for their descendants throughout the generations.

There is the deed we do, and there is the heart with which we do it. The repair was accomplished; the merit of their joy remains.

Let us think about that. They were facing something unimaginably difficult. They did not have the ending in front of them. Yet their relationship with Hashem was not reduced to reluctant compliance. They went forward together, committed to doing His will.

That is what we ask Hashem to remember. We are not merely recalling a repair that was completed long ago. We are asking Him to remember the loving, joyful devotion of Avraham and Yitzchak, and to have mercy on their descendants because of it.

And when we say “joy,” we do not mean that difficulty ceases to be difficult, or that a person has to deny his pain. We mean that, even in the difficulty, a person can still feel the privilege of belonging to Hashem and serving Him. The difficulty need not take away the relationship.

Now we can bring that back to our own lives. I may not know how a situation will turn out. I may find the next step very hard. But I can still ask: How can I take that step with Hashem? How can I do what is right with a willing heart, rather than allow uncertainty to turn everything into resentment?

We do not always know how the story will end. We can still choose how to take the next step.

That brings us back to the dove. Noach needed to know that Hashem could provide for him beyond the ark. Avraham and Yitzchak show us how deep that relationship can go: even when the task is difficult, we can remain devoted to Him.

Let me share a story that brings this down into the very real pressures of money, hurt, and family life.

A conversation on the way to London

Rav Chanoch Rigel, a well-known Gerer chassid who wrote many books, related the following story.

He once needed to fly to England. There was a small crane in the plane’s baggage compartment. Suddenly it fell onto a row of three seats and broke all three. Every other seat was occupied. That left three booked passengers without places, and Rav Rigel was one of them. They were offered a flight through Paris, where they would connect to a flight to London.

On the flight to Paris, he saw another Jew, a chassid who looked financially comfortable. Two Jews meeting among a plane full of non-Jews naturally greeted one another, and they began to talk.

Rav Rigel asked him about his success. The man was willing to tell the story. Since they did not know one another, he felt he could speak freely.

He lived in New York. He had about sixty descendants, and he was supporting them. They had apartments, they were sitting and learning, and he was providing for them generously. Hashem had blessed him with considerable wealth.

But it had not always been that way.

Thirty-five years earlier, he had been working in America with a business partner. Together they opened a shop and marketed merchandise. Over the years, the partnership became a family relationship: his son married his partner's daughter.

There was real affection between the families. They worked together and were connected through their children. But making a living was difficult. If anyone had told him then that he would become wealthy, he would have thought the person was dreaming.

One day, they learned about a factory whose products they wanted to market. Its owner was an elderly man, a Holocaust survivor. They approached him and got to know him. At first, their meetings were about business. Gradually, the relationship became personal.

The elderly man had no children. He began coming to their home. He ate with them and stayed with them. They became like his family.

Kindness, resentment, and a changing will

But living with him was not always easy. The businessman described himself as rather firm, while his partner was more easygoing. And the elderly man started behaving in their home as though he were in charge.

If the businessman's wife bought a plant for the house, he would tell her that it did not belong in that place and should be put somewhere else. He expressed opinions about where the table should stand. He commented on decorations. He objected to a sofa and wanted it replaced.

Eventually, the wife said to her husband: "I am willing to give him a proper room, a proper bed, regular meals. But he has to stop giving instructions about everything that happens in our home."

Her husband became upset and decided to put his foot down. He spoke to the elderly man in a way that could not be misunderstood: "In my home, I am the one in charge. I am not willing for anyone to give orders here, and certainly not to my wife."

The man was deeply hurt. He said he would not return to that home. The partner's family treated him much better, he said. There, they received him pleasantly and did not shout at him. And he left.

Afterward, the businessman regretted the way he had spoken. He thought about the man's loneliness and bitterness. Here was someone without a family, watching him surrounded by children and grandchildren. He should have judged him more generously.

He went to find him and ask forgiveness. At first the man would not be reconciled. He went again, and again. Finally, the elderly man agreed to forgive him, but with a condition.

Originally, he had written a will leaving his possessions to the two partners, half to each. Now he had torn up that will.

The businessman answered: "Leave the will however you want. I am asking you for one thing: come back to our home. Stay with us again."

The man returned. He seems to have understood, at least to some extent, that he needed to adjust his conduct. The businessman, in turn, tried as much as he could to honor him.

After several months, the elderly man called him over. He told him what had happened during the quarrel: he had torn up the original will and transferred everything to the other partner.

Then he said: "After you appeased me and brought me back to your home, I changed the will again. I wrote a second will, leaving half to you and half to your partner."

He handed him a photocopy of that second will.

Six million dollars, and a family at stake

A little later, the elderly man died. The mourning took place in the businessman's home.

Then came a summons to court. When he arrived, he could scarcely believe what he was seeing.

His business partner, who was also his son's father-in-law, had paid a substantial amount to a highly capable lawyer. They had persuaded the court that there was only one will: the earlier one that left everything to the partner.

The partner did not realize that the elderly man had given the businessman a photocopy of the later will. He had that copy. He could produce it and challenge the claim.

He looked at the amount involved: six million dollars.

He had once lived from hand to mouth. Now an enormous sum was at stake. And the person deceiving him was not a stranger. It was his own in-law, his longtime business partner.

Around that time, one of his descendants was getting married in Israel. He decided that he would first travel to the wedding, take part in the days of celebration, and then think about what to do.

At the wedding, he met Rav Shmuel Vosner. He took the opportunity to consult him and told him what had happened.

Rav Vosner told the businessman: "As a matter of Torah law, the rightful claim is yours. You can bring your business partner to a Torah court." In other words, the businessman had a justified claim to his share of the inheritance. He was not being asked to concede that his partner was right.

The businessman answered: "In my whole life, I have never been involved in a Torah-court case. And now we are talking about my own in-law. Everyone will be talking about the two in-laws fighting. Without a doubt, it will affect the relationship between my son and his wife. What does the Rav suggest that I do?"

That was the real question. He had a claim. He had a document. But he also had a family.

Rav Vosner answered him gently. He reminded him of the words:

נָעַר הָיִיתִי גַם זָקֵנְתִי וְלֹא רָאִיתִי צַדִּיק נִטְּשָׁה.

I have been young, and I have grown old, and I have not seen a righteous person abandoned.

Tehillim 37:25

A Jew who yields to another person, Rav Vosner told him, will not lose out. He acknowledged that this was an enormous sum. But since the man was asking for his advice, he suggested that he try to manage without it.

The businessman left with a firm decision: he would let it go.

He had not told the story to anyone else. Rav Rigel was the first person to whom he told it afterward. And he felt able to share it precisely because they did not know one another and probably would not meet again.

Now listen to how the businessman finished his story.

From that point onward, he said, everything he put his hand to prospered. He was no longer someone who possessed six million dollars. Hashem had blessed him with ten times that amount.

That was how he explained the wealth with which he was supporting his family. He believed that the blessing had come through his willingness to let go, and through the Rav's words of encouragement.

He could have spent the rest of his life carrying the grievance. Instead, he chose to protect his family and place his future in Hashem's hands.

What we take into Shabbos

Now, we have to hear this story properly. Rav Vosner did not tell the businessman that he had no rights. He said explicitly that Torah law supported the businessman's claim to his share of the inheritance. The businessman described the particular price that a fight might exact from his family, and then asked for guidance. The advice was given to that man, in that situation.

And we cannot turn the outcome into a formula: give up six million dollars, and you will receive sixty million. We do not know the accounting of Heaven. The story tells us what this man experienced, and what he believed had brought blessing into his life.

But there is a question here for each of us. When something happens, do I become so absorbed in what I have lost, in the injustice, in the uncertainty, that I can no longer see anything else? Or can I pause and ask: What does Hashem want from me now? What am I trying to preserve? What kind of person do I want to be as I go forward?

Noach was looking at a world after the Flood. This businessman was looking at a betrayal and the possibility of a bitter family conflict. Their situations were different. But both needed the strength to face a future they could not control.

We know something about that feeling. We follow the news. We worry about the Jewish people, about Israel, about the people we love. A person can keep checking for the next update, as though one more piece of information will finally make everything certain.

Of course we need to be informed, to act responsibly, to help where we can, and to pray. But knowing what is happening and knowing how to live with it are two different things. Noach needed the report about the water. He also needed the olive leaf's deeper message.

We do not know what the next week will bring. We do know that we can enter it with prayer, with kindness, with responsibility, and with a living connection to Hashem.

And perhaps that is something to take into Shabbos. The world does not become settled simply because the candles have been lit. But we have been given a time to step back, to be with our families, to pray, to learn, and to remember in Whose hands we live.

Sometimes the thing we need to put down is a grievance. Sometimes it is the demand that we know the ending before we take the next step. Sometimes it is the feeling that everything depends on us alone.

**The olive leaf was small. The message was enormous:
there is a future beyond the ark, and you do not have to
face it alone.**

May Hashem give us the wisdom to do what is ours to do, the strength to release what we need to release, and the joy of serving Him even when the way ahead is uncertain. May He bring peace and protection to our people, healing to those who need it, and blessing to our homes.

Good Shabbos.