YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT NOACH**

**The Sending Forth of the Raven: On Midrash, the Plain Meaning, and Separating from the Community**

**I. Noach, the raven, and the conversation between them**

The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* relates a conversation that took place between Noach and the raven when Noach sent the raven from the ark:

"And he sent forth a raven" (*Bereishit* 8:7). Resh Lakish said: The raven gave Noach a triumphant retort. It said to him: "Your Master hates me, and you hate me. Your Master hates me – [since He commanded] seven [pairs to be taken] of the clean [creatures], but only two of the unclean. You hate me – seeing that you leave the species of which there are seven, and send one of which there are only two. Should the angel of heat or of cold smite me, would not the world be short of one kind? Or perhaps you desire my mate!" He said to him: "You evil one! Even that which is [usually] permitted me has [now] been forbidden: how much more so that which is [always] forbidden me!" And from where do we know that they were forbidden? From the verse: "And you shall enter into the ark, you, and your sons, and your wife, and the wives of your sons with you" (*Bereishit* 6:18); while further on it is written: "Go forth from the ark, you, and your wife, and your sons, and your sons' wives with you" (*Bereishit* 8:26). Rabbi Yochanan said: From this we deduce that cohabitation had been forbidden [on the ark]. (*Sanhedrin* 108b)

This strange dialogue may cause readers to raise an eyebrow. What led *Chazal* to offer such a fantastic *midrash*, with no apparent foundation in the plain meaning of the verses?

It is not only the raven's words that are strange, but also Noach’s initial thinking: Of all the birds, why was it specifically the raven that Noach chose to send on this mission? Was he not already aware of the point raised by the raven and the concern of its potential extinction?

Aware of this difficulty, *Chazal* in *Bereishit Rabba* bring Noach's argument in full:

"And [the raven] went forth to and fro" (*Bereishit* 8:7). Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda son of Rabbi Simon: It began to answer him, saying: "Of all the cattle, beasts and birds that are here, you send me?" He said to him: "What does the world need you for? You are fit neither for eating nor for a sacrificial offering…" (*Bereishit Rabba* 33,5)

God, however, immediately counters Noach's argument based on the principle that nothing was created without a reason and that everything has a role and a purpose:

Rabbi Berakhya said in the name of Rabbi Abba bar Kahana: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: “Accept it, for in the future the world will need it [=the raven].” He said to him: "When?" He said to him: “‘Until the waters were dried up from off the earth' [the second half of *Bereishit* 8:7]. A righteous man will stand up in the future and dry the world, and I will need it for him." This is what is written: "And the ravens brought him [=Eliyahu] bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening" (I *Melakhim* 17:7). (Ibid.)

With this, our astonishment only grows stronger: Why does Noach ignore God's words and send the raven forth, despite the important role it will play in the days of the prophet Eliyahu?

We will first try to understand the source and foundation of these puzzling *midrashim* based on the plain meaning of the verses. We will then try, in the wake of the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim*, to understand Noach's actions that seem to contradict an explicit Divine command. It seems to me that the *Or Ha-Chaim's* explanation reveals an important principle in midrashic methodology, and especially in the way that he himself explicates the Torah, and it also teaches us an important lesson that is relevant to our own lives.

**II. The sending of the raven vs. the sending of the dove**

` Forty days after the mountaintops become visible, Noach decides to check whether the water has really receded from the surface of the earth and the time has come to leave the ark. Ostensibly, this test has four stages: the sending of the raven, and the three times the dove is sent:

And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noach opened the window of the ark which he had made.

1. And he sent forth a raven, and it went to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth.

2. And he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground.

But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth; and he put forth his hand, and took her, and brought her in to him into the ark.

3. And he stayed yet another seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark.

And the dove came in to him in the evening; and lo in her mouth an olive leaf freshly plucked; so Noach knew that the waters were abated from off the earth.

4. And he stayed yet another seven days; and sent forth the dove; and she returned not again to him anymore. (*Bereishit* 8:6-12)

Noach's interest in the question of whether or not the waters had receded is completely understandable: after a long stay in the ark, he eagerly awaits the end of the flood. Even if Noach needs an explicit command in order to leave the ark (see *Tanchuma Noach* 14), his desire for an indication that the flood is over makes sense. The process of sending the dove can also be explained simply – at first it finds no rest, then it brings an olive leaf in its mouth, and ultimately it does not return at all, which indicates that it found another place to live and dry land was indeed uncovered.

The puzzling and unusual element in this account is the sending of the raven, which differs from the sending of the dove in several significant ways:

1. First, in contrast to the dove, the reason for whose being sent is spelled out in the verse: "to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground," the raven's sending is not given a reason.

2. In addition, the dove brings results with each and every sending, whereas with the raven there are no results at all.

3. Finally, the return of the dove is described at length, with Noach taking an active part in it: "And he put forth his hand and took her" – in complete contrast to the raven, which never returned: "And it went to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth."

It seems that these differences force us to explain the sending of the raven in a different way. As mentioned, the Torah does not say the raven was sent to determine the level of the water; there is no mention of any goal, and the raven does not complete that mission. All this requires explanation, and probably constitutes the basis for the extensive midrashic expositions offered by *Chazal* on the matter of the raven.

**III. Why the raven?**

We started with the basic, fundamental question of why Noach chose to send the raven despite the risk of extinction of its species. I will mention several answers proposed by other commentators, and then try to explain how the *Or Ha-Chaim's* answer illuminates the above differences between the sending of the dove and the sending of the raven.

Rabbi S. R. Hirsch relates to the nature of the raven, a bird that lives in places that are desolate, without humans:

Noach first of all sent the raven, a bird that normally does not seek the vicinity of man… That is also probably the reason that with the raven it does not say "from him," as it does with the dove which is used to being with human beings, and of which it says at its return: "and he took her, and brought her in to him." If the dove does not come back it must have already become quite comfortable outside. (Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, *Bereishit* 8:7)

According to Rabbi Hirsch, the raven was specifically chosen for the mission because it is used to being in places of destruction. Therefore, it will feel most "comfortable" in the land after its destruction.

This character of the raven appears in several places in the Bible. When Yeshayahu describes destruction, he uses the raven as a sign that the place has indeed been destroyed:

But the pelican and the bittern shall possess it, and the owl and the raven shall dwell therein. (*Yeshayahu* 34:11)

In this way, we can also understand why it was specifically ravens that maintained Eliyahu in his isolation during the drought (see I *Melakhim* 17:6). Rabbi Hirsch also infers this from the words in our *parasha*: Regarding the dove it is stated that Noach sent it "from him," because it wanted to be near him, as opposed to the raven that Noach merely sent away. Similarly, we can understand why Noach took care of the dove when it returned, but did not take care of the raven.

The Radak and the Chizkuni (8:7) also refer to character traits of the raven. Both mention the raven as a creature that eats animal carcasses, a characteristic we find in *Chazal* (see, for example, Mishna *Taharot* 4:4). Thus, the raven will be the first to notice that the water has receded – because it will find food:

He said: The raven eats meat and will find the carcasses of man and beast, and if the water will have so receded that it finds carcasses cast on the ground, it will bring meat in its mouth and we will know that the water has receded. (Radak 8:7)

However, these explanations do not account for Noach's lack of concern about the danger of extinction involved in sending the raven, pointed out by the Gemara in *Sanhedrin*. Does precision regarding when the water receded from the surface of the land justify the extinction of an entire species?

Malbim brings two explanations in his attempt to answer this question. Let us start with his second interpretation, which follows the same direction that we have been going thus far: the purpose of sending the raven was to test the level of the water, but nevertheless it was preferable to send the raven. In favor of his explanation, Malbim mobilizes a Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (108b) according to which the raven had mated in the ark. He further cites a verse from *Tehillim* (147:9): "He gives to the beast his food, and to the young ravens which cry," which led *Chazal* to view the raven as a creature that does not take care of its young:

And black as a raven: With whom do you find these [=words of Torah]? … Rava said: With him who makes himself cruel to his children and household like a raven. (*Eiruvin* 21b-22a)

Malbim writes:

That is to say, *all* of the animals certainly did not mate in the ark, for if they had, the ark would not have been able to contain them, and there was special providence that they not bear young that year. And similarly all the birds, even though the spring had already passed, which is the time of their coupling, when they lay their eggs and have young, did not lay eggs; only the raven laid eggs, and there were already young ravens, and so if it [=the raven] were to be lost in the water, the raven species would not become extinct, and therefore he sent it. However, the very fact that it laid eggs was by way of providence, so that Noach could send it forth, for birds sitting in their nests will not leave their nests in any circumstances. Only the raven is cruel to its offspring. Therefore he sent it free and it went to and fro. (Malbim, *Bereishit* 8:7)

According to Malbim, the raven was the most suited to be sent: it already had offspring in the ark, and it would agree to abandon its young.

All these interpretations, however, fail to explain why the purpose of the sending is not mentioned with regard to the raven, and why the raven does not return at all after having been sent away. Rashi, following the Gemara's exposition in *Sanhedrin*, says the raven suspected that Noach was lusting after its mate, and therefore did not go out on its mission at all:

It did not go on its mission, for it suspected that he [=Noach] lusted after its mate. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 8:7)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* expands upon Rashi's interpretation and explains why this suspicion arose specifically with the raven:

Or it was in accordance with what *Chazal* said (*Sanhedrin* 108), that the raven mated in the ark, and thus it reasoned that Noach lusted only after the female raven, since he saw it mate, and *Chazal* said (*Avoda Zara* 20b) that seeing the act arouses lust, and thus they forbade the matter. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bereishit* 8:7)

On the other hand, there are commentators who understand that the raven did in fact complete its mission, and the fact that it went to and fro indicates that the ground was not yet visible. But this is difficult; why did the raven go to and fro until "the waters were dried up from off the earth"? And if we say that the raven continued as Noach’s agent until it achieved its goal, why was it necessary to send the dove?

**IV. The Raven's Unique Mission**

So far, we have assumed that the raven was indeed sent for the purpose of examining the surface of the ground, although, as mentioned, the Torah does not state this explicitly.

We also find novel approaches among the commentators, according to which the purpose of sending the raven was completely different. Malbim, in his first explanation, follows this path with the use of historical assumptions that attribute special powers of divination to the raven. He explains why it was specifically the raven that was sent on this mission, and also answers the difficulties that we raised:

He didn't send him to see whether the water had receded, for if so, it should have said, as it says regarding the dove: "to see if the waters were abated [from off the face of the ground]." Rather, in ancient times the power of divination was attributed to the raven, and special cages were assigned to them, alongside which their priests conjured the future, based on [the raven's] flight to the right or to the left, up or down, noisily or in silence, and many other similar signs (as *Chazal* said about "for a bird of the air shall carry the voice" [*Kohelet* 10:20] – "this is the raven" [*Vayikra Rabba* 32,2], and the *Zohar* expands upon this). Therefore, he sent it free where it wanted to go (which is the meaning of the verb *sh-l-ch*, as in "then you shall let her go where she wants" [*Devarim* 21:14]), so he would be able to see according to its flight the situation of the air and the water. It went to and fro continually, and Noach had signs from its flight. (*Malbim*, *Bereishit* 8:7)

This creative interpretation raises several significant difficulties. The first difficulty is the historical assumption ("in ancient times the power of divination was attributed to the raven"), which requires a source. The second difficulty is that, even according to Malbim's understanding, the raven was indeed sent for the purpose of clarifying the water level, so the question remains – why is this not written? The third and most serious difficulty is: How is it possible that Noach, who listened to the voice of God and built an ark against all the predictions of the world, chooses at this stage to utilize divination!

The *Or Ha-Chaim* offers his own novel interpretation. When you read this interpretation after having considered the difficulties raised above, it seems that while it is true that nothing is stated explicitly in the Torah, what we have here is a marvelous midrashic exposition with basis in the plain meaning of Scripture. This exposition also teaches us an important moral and spiritual principle.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* suggests that the raven was not actually sent out on a mission at all, but was expelled from the ark:

The verse should be understood in light of the statement of *Chazal* (*Sanhedrin* 108) that **the raven mated while in the ark and that Noach knew about it. This is why he expelled the raven from the ark as soon as he opened its window**. This is why the verse states: "And he sent forth a raven," but does not mention: "to see if the waters were abated," as it says later with respect to the sending of the dove. And this raven would go to and fro, meaning, Noach would send it away and it would keep returning, until the waters were dried up. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 8:7)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* thus interweaves the midrashic exposition of *Chazal* with the plain meaning of the verses. He goes on to explain the distinction in the verses between the sending of the raven and the sending of the dove:

When Noach wanted to know how far the waters had receded, he sent out the dove. This is what is stated: "And he sent forth a dove **from him**," meaning, on a mission, for him to see whether the waters had receded. He had not been able to find this out from the raven, which had been expelled and not sent on a mission, as opposed to the dove, which was sent on a mission, and it relayed the information to him, that it found no rest for the sole of its foot. Noach immediately put forth his hand, and took it, and brought it into the ark, as it is stated: "And he put forth his hand, and took her, and brought her in to him into the ark." That is, to the place [in the ark] designated for its protection. This was not the case with the raven, which had been expelled, and when it returned, Noach would send it away another time. (Ibid.)

This interpretation is a wonderful example of the combination that is found in many places in the *Or Ha-Chaim –* the combination of midrashic expositions that at times seem exceedingly distant from the wording of Scripture, and a precise reading of the verses themselves.

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* interpretation also solves all the difficulties that were raised above regarding the sending of the raven. Indeed, the purpose of sending forth the raven was not to see whether the water had receded, but rather to expel the raven, which had not complied with the rules established by God when the animals entered the ark (see Rashi, *Bereishit* 7:7). According to this explanation, it is clear why the raven was chosen to be sent, as it was the only one that had to be punished. It is also understandable why the raven went to and fro until the ground became visible, and also why Noach did not send forth his hand to take it – since he was trying to prevent the raven from re-entering the ark.

In addition to the beautiful connection between the plain meaning of the verse and its midrashic interpretation, it seems that this interpretation gives rise to an extremely important spiritual and moral principle. The ban on sexual relations in the ark stems from a disconnect between an individual’s desires and the reality of the world around him. The *Or Ha-Chaim* teaches us here, using the words of *Chazal* and the plain meaning of the verses, that separating oneself from the community leads to exile and restlessness. Even before examining the condition of the land, the first thing Noach did when it became possible to open the window of the ark (see *Bereishit* 8:6) was to expel the separatist from the community.

While it is true that the *Or Ha-Chaim* does not relate to the midrashic conversation with which we opened this *shiur*,[[1]](#footnote-1) it is possible to suggest that Noach was ready to make a reckoning with the raven which had separated itself from the community, even at the cost of the raven's extinction.

Perhaps, in the wake of the *Or Ha-Chaim's* words, we can also understand God's response about the raven's role in the days of Eliyahu. Noach saw separation from the community as something for which there is no atonement – but God informs Noach that in the future, the ravens will "atone" for their actions. Perhaps precisely due to their separation from the community, which also characterizes the prophet Eliyahu, the ravens will succeed in maintaining the prophet.

If it is possible to add a further exposition to that of the *Or Ha-Chaim*, perhaps it was because of the raven's act in the ark, an act that constitutes separation from the community, that the raven "merited" the two natural qualities mentioned above – living in desolate areas and cruelty to its offspring – qualities that express a connection to a lack of life and distancing from the community, respectively.

Thus, we have seen a novel interpretation of the *Or Ha-Chaim,* a beautiful combination of midrashic exposition, a precise reading of Scripture, and a response to the questions arising from the verses – together with an important spiritual and moral message.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In the continuation of his comments, he brings it as an additional explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)