

Parashat Yitro – 5769

Butch Pemstein

Very early in the parsha, and very early in the trek to the Promised Land, three months in fact, we learn about an encounter between God and Moses, where the Lord calls out to Moses from the mountain, and tells him to tell the people: “You yourselves saw what I did to Egypt, and how I bore you aloft on the wings of eagles, and I brought you to Me”

Well, it must have been one hell of an eagle, or group of eagles, not your garden variety brand of eagle, or perhaps it was a metaphor. I think, not fully sure, but I think it is the only metaphor in Torah; it certainly is the only statement of the Lord that simply cannot have occurred, literally. As Robert Alter snidely says: no one has succeeded in squaring this grand image with ornithological behavior. . . “

It’s a metaphor. That means it did not happen as described; it describes a fantasy, a fantastic impossibility, and requires that each of us imagine what the text means. It means that each of us applies our own experiences to the interpretation. What are we to take from that image of a people borne aloft on the wings of eagles?

The mind’s eye pictures an eagle with a people on its wings soaring over the danger below, landing safely, all due to the heroics of the Transporter. But if the Redactor had said something like: I brought you to this place by my strength, my action, my ability to defy danger, and so on, what is left for you and me to wonder about? The literary character of the language is meant to cause awe and imagination; to create wonders and dreams and miracles, not to discuss an actuality. A metaphor, with all its allusions and subtle differentiations, all based upon the readers own story, can never be subject to an exact or literal equivalent. A metaphor is a guide to understanding, not the final definition. A metaphor has power and effectiveness because of its ambiguities, not in spite of its inexactness.

So: what can we make of this metaphor? Any takers? Let’s have one of you who will tell us how your personal story lets you define the meaning of the eagles’ wings.

It may describe our **relationship** to God. The image, I bore aloft you on eagles' wings, might be meant to glorify our dependence upon God, to magnify our obligations to Him. Certainly if the move from physical servitude to religious servitude, by the way, that's what the story is all about, is to be honored and remembered, we do glorify and magnify. We say that regularly in our service.

Speed: the eagle flies over natural barriers, mountains, oceans, he flies faster than any of us humans can walk, or even ride on the back of a horse, he carries his baggage on his wings (not actually, he carries his baggage in fact in his talons, but let's stay in the language of the metaphor) and jets away to his destination. Do we tarry on the way? Perhaps, but it's not because the eagle is slow or needs a rest: it's because God wants it that way; because the eagle/God so wills it.

Safety: surely the eagle will assure that we don't fall off, and that if we do, he will rescue us. And place us again on his wings. Whatever fright we have from the trip is allayed by the security of the eagle's ability to soar safely over danger.

The eagle is the **parent** and we are its nestlings. Rashi characterizes the relationship between the eagle and his passengers as parent and child; with the image of protection and letting go, of teaching the young ones to fly, but never letting them go so far out of range that they are truly endangered.

The eagle is imagined as teaching its young to fly. By on the job training. Perhaps the image is not flying, per se, but the approach to adulthood, both as a people and individually. The image is of the eagle as **parent**, of God as parent, preparing us for independence,

The people are placed on the wings, not in the talons. Thus, as **parent**, we are protected from the arrows of the hunter. In effect the parent says to us: you are more important than I, I will protect you with my body.

Buber tells a perfectly delightful little story about why a particular eaglet will learn to fly: How God, by putting the people in a situation fraught with danger, becomes ready as if

a parent, to let them go, albeit with the proper training. The newly fledged eaglets, as yet not daring to fly, huddle together in the eyrie. The eagle rouses his nestlings, stirs his young to flight, gently flapping his wings over them. The God/eagle spreads himself over the people, as once at the beginning of creation, His spirit hovered over the face of the water. But then he spreads his wings, and sets one of the young on his pinion (wing), carries it away, and by throwing it into the air and catching it, teaches it to fly freely. Why the one? Why else? That it may fly ahead, leading the way for the others.

The eagle flies not only horizontally, as in speed and in safety, but vertically, and thereby, as King of the flyers, we are **closer to the heavens**, to God than otherwise. Closer than other peoples, closer than we are at any other time.

Or Hayyam talks not only of the closeness to the heavens but of the clouds of glory that **separate** the eagle and his passengers from the realities of the earth below.

So we have several possible messages to take from the single metaphor: Speed; Safety; Parent and child; closeness to the heavens; relationship of dependence and obligation; teacher; protection. Isn't it glorious how much meaning we can get from this one allusion. And I have not mentioned how the metaphor affects the transition from "you saw what I did to Egypt" to "And I brought you to Me"

How does this metaphor talk to us today? What if God's spokesman tells us: "you yourselves saw what happened to your oppressors, how you were lifted from servitude, how I lifted you on the wings of eagles, and how I brought you to a life of service to me" What resonance does that have to us today? We are all modernists, autonomous humans with our own separate stories, but I still ask: When God says to any one of us "You saw how I took you from servitude to a place of service to me." What is our response? Do we modernists believe that it was all God's work? Conversely, do any of us believe that you provided those eagle wings all by yourself? Didn't we have assistance from parents or colleagues, proponents or opponents? And when given the opportunity, did you help your colleague, your uncle or your child, onto those wings, did you find the wings for a friend or a child.

Perhaps the message to the modern independent skeptic might be: What if, what if I ever need Eagles wings?