

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

eagle fears no bird, and thus can place its young on its back. The midrash draws a parallel between a person walking on the path. If he has his young son walk in front of him, the son may be attacked by robbers; if he puts him behind him, the son may be attacked by a wolf. So he places his son on his shoulder, where no harm can come to him. Just as children are safe on their parents' shoulders, so too Israel was safe on God's metaphorical wings.

But the midrash adds a puzzling note that puts a wrinkle in our story. The eagle, the midrash states, fears no one but humankind. Better the arrows shot from below hit God than hit God's children. To extend this to the metaphor, God fears no other creature or power in the world, but God does fear humankind. Why add that the eagle fears humanity? Why not state simply that the eagle fears nothing?

To say that human beings can "harm God" may be a bit of an overstatement, even with regard to the very personal, immanent God we encounter in the Bible. But it would be true to say that human beings can unleash destruction and pain in the world that God is powerless to stop. We know this from humankind's wanton destruction of the environment and most of all from humankind's incredible potential for cruelty to others.

But if we look at this metaphor another way, we may learn another message. In the midrash's image, humans ride above God's wings, in a place of safety, and humans stand below, aiming their arrows to the skies. God exists in the middle, protecting the innocent and thwarting the aims of the wicked. When God, and by extension, religion, mediates between human beings, there is the potential for violence to end. An entire nation can ride God's wings to freedom and independence. But when God is placed above other human beings, God is protected, but people are not. People's arrows, aimed at God, end up striking other humans.

And so my dear Eagles, whose first string and backup quarterback are both noteworthy, not only for their ability to throw the ball and duck sacks, but also for their devotion to Christianity, let us not pray that God is on our side during the Superbowl. After all, do we really think God cares about who wins a football game? Instead, let us pray instead that God is always in the middle, protecting the innocent and thwarting the aims of the wicked.

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## **TORAH SPARKS**

### ***Parashat Yitro***

**February 3, 2018 | 18 Shevat 5778**

Annual | Exodus 18:1-20:22 (18:1-20:23 in some books) (Etz Hayim p. 432-450; Hertz p. 288-301)  
Triennial | Exodus 18:1-20:22 (18:1-20:23 in some books) (Etz Hayim p. 436-450; Hertz p. 290-301)  
Haftarah | Isaiah 6:1-7:6; 9:5-6 (Etz Hayim p.451-455; Hertz p. 302-305)

## **On the Wings of Eagles: A D'var Torah for Super Bowl Week**

*Dr. Joshua Kulp, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva*

This week, my beloved football team, the Philadelphia Eagles are preparing for their third Super Bowl, and hopefully, their first victory. The parsha is Yitro, and as Jews have been doing for thousands of years, I too cannot help but look for a sign of hope in the parsha. Maybe, finally, after 47 years of frustration (that's how old I am) my perennial losers will actually win. (If you are a Patriots fan, feel free to scan the parsha to find signs that your mighty team, possibly the greatest sports franchise in American history, will continue their oppression of the rest of the league. A bit like rooting for Pharaoh). Remarkably, the parsha contains perhaps the most famous reference to the eagle in all western literature. In Exodus 19:3 God tells Moses, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." God is an eagle— what better omen could there be for a victory on Sunday!

But the verse is a bit puzzling— what is special about an eagle that God uses this particular bird as an example? The midrash (and Rashi in its

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wake) explains that all other birds place their young between their feet, to better protect them from other birds that hunt from above. But the

## Dvar Haftarah

**Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Not unlike other prophets, including Moses, Isaiah was reticent about being God's messenger, beset as he was with feelings of inadequacy and sinfulness. After seeing a vision of angels singing God's praises, he says about himself: "Woe is me, I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." (6:5) But God sends an angel to bolster Isaiah's self-confidence with a symbolic act. Taking an ember from the sacrificial altar, the angel touches it to Isaiah's lips declaring: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt shall depart and your sin be purged." (6:7) This act makes it possible for Isaiah to accept and perform his prophetic mission.

In the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 119b, the sages give this verse a new context, transporting it from the story of Isaiah the Prophet to the home of every simple Jew who observes Shabbat. We are taught: "Rav Hisda said in Mar 'Ukba's name: He who prays on the eve of the Sabbath and recites 'Vayakhulu hashamayim va'ha'aretz – and [the heaven and the earth] were finished', the two ministering angels who accompany man place their hands on his head and say to him, 'and your guilt shall depart, and your sin be purged.'" (Shabbat 119b) In essence, observing Shabbat provides us with the same absolution Isaiah received!

What are we to make of Rav Hisda's unusual teaching? Rabbi Yom Tov ben Avraham Ishbili (Ritba - 14th century Spain) explains it this way: "... anyone who does not recite 'Va'yakhulu' to testify to God's creation of the world, sins by withholding testimony (See Leviticus 5:1). Therefore, to someone who does recite 'Va'yakhulu', [the angels] say: 'your sin is taken away'. This is why 'Va'yakhulu' is said in the synagogue, so that we might offer testimony standing."

When we recite 'Vayakhulu hashamayim va'ha'aretz – and [the heaven and the earth] were finished' - either in synagogue or when making kiddush at home, we are giving testimony that God is the creator of the world who rested on the seventh day and made it holy. For Rav Hisda, such testimony is like prophecy, and giving it makes one like a prophet. Both involve accepting, and fulfilling, one's responsibility to make God known to the world. When we verbally declare God as Creator of the world and the One who established Shabbat, we are purified through one of Judaism's greatest acts of faith, allegiance and love.

## Table Talk

**Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Yitro, Moshe's father in law, arrives with Moshe's wife and children. The people of Israel arrive at Mount Sinai. A covenant is made between God and the nation, culminating in the awe-inspiring event of the Revelation at Sinai.

- 1) Yitro (Jethro), Moshe's father in law, meets up with Moshe at the beginning of the Parasha. Yitro is described not only by his family relation to Moshe, but also as 'the priest (Kohen) of Midyan' (18:1). Why do you think that the Torah included that?
- 2) Chapter 19 tells the story of the revelation at Sinai. The Torah tells us that the people arrived at Sinai on the third new moon 'on this day' (19:1). Rashi brings the following Midrash: *It should have said "on that day." What is the meaning of "on this day"? That the words of the Torah shall be new to you, as if they were given just today. What difficulty did Rashi find in the language that the Torah chose? What idea did he develop from this choice? How might we apply it in our lives?*
- 3) Mount Sinai is a stop in the desert, not the final destination of the people. Why do you think that God did not give the Torah inside the Land of Israel?
- 4) The people are told not to come near the mountain during the revelation (19:11-13). What effect do you think that this distancing might have had on the people's experience of the event?
- 5) The Torah describes the experience of the people as 'seeing the sounds and the lights and the sound of the Shofar, and the mountain smoking' (20:14). Why do you think that a verb for sight was used to describe an experience of sound?

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