

*Re-entering the World with Courage and Compassion:
Leaving Our Arks and Learning to Take Flight Once Again*

Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

First Day of Rosh Hashanah 5783

Last winter, one of the rarest birds in the world was spotted in Massachusetts. It's called the Steller Sea Eagle. You might have seen pictures of it in the newspaper or heard reports about it on NPR¹. It is an enormous dark bird, with unique white markings on its wings. It also has a large gold beak and a wingspan of eight feet.

This particular eagle, which is native to Asia, flew more than 5,000 miles across oceans and continents all by itself.

For nearly two years, bird watchers have been following its journey across North America—from Alaska to Texas to Eastern Canada to Massachusetts and most recently to Maine.

If you Google “Sea Eagle sightings,” you will learn that there is a whole community of people called “bird chasers” who jump into their cars with binoculars and cameras to catch a glimpse of this amazing creature every time there is a report about a new sighting.

The bird chasers have even given the Eagle a name: Stella.²

According to bird experts, many birds like Stella go through a “phase of wandering” early in life. But since Stella hasn't returned to her place of origin in nearly two years, it's more likely she will stay in North America and make a new home for herself with other types of birds rather than return to her native country.

¹ www.npr.org/2021/12/22/1066831352/rare-sea-eagle-from-asia-spotted-in-massachusetts-favorite-movies-of-2021

² With gratitude to Jordan Namerow for telling me about Stella

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Wow!

What a journey.

What a way to live!

What a lesson in resilience and courage.

Imagine flying across the world, leaving behind all we know, and embracing the uncertainty of what is ahead?

It feels a little strange sharing a story about an eagle who flew thousands of miles from her home in the midst of a pandemic, when so many of us barely left our homes or neighborhoods during this same time period.

But much like Stella the Sea Eagle, we are all learning what it means to embrace uncertainty and take flight in new, often frightening ways.

We are learning how to rebuild our lives and engage in community with a renewed sense of purpose and possibility.

That is what Rosh Hashanah is all about—but how much more so this year!

Stella's story reminded me of another tale of a brave and beautiful winged creature that goes on a journey into the unknown.

I am thinking of the biblical story of the dove from Noah's Ark.

As you might recall, this bird is sent off into a new world—one that is unknown to her or any other living creature. And when is the dove released into the new world?—after the calamity of the Flood.

Like Noah, his family, and the remnant of animal life aboard the ark, we have spent much of the last two and a half years protecting ourselves inside our respective arks.

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The 19th-century Hasidic master, the *Mei ha'Shiloh*, comments on God's command to Noah to build an ark:

The meaning of the word “ark” —*tevah*— is as follows:

God gave Noah advice and protection on how to survive until the time of fury passed.

This teaching is not just for Noah, but for everyone whose heart is not yet refined.

We can learn how to hide and protect ourselves from any evil that moves through the world.

Thus the sages taught that if you see pain and strife coming toward you, run into the chambers of Torah, and the pain and strife will flee from your midst.

Torah will provide you with guidance on how to protect yourself.³

This teaching plays on the Hebrew word *tevah*, which can mean “ark,” but also “word.”

Like other Hasidic masters before him, the *Mei ha'Shiloah* understands that both the ark and the word can serve as places of refuge.

Noah's Ark was a place of refuge during a time of strife, fear, and danger. Similarly, Torah can serve as a place of warmth and shelter in times of trouble.

The *Mei Hashiloach* invites us to envision the ark as a place of “protection,” but also as a place of *eitza*—of “advice” or insight (in-sight). It is here that we can learn new and

³ *Mei ha'Shiloah* Volume I, Noah (Translation by Rabbi Or N. Rose)

different things about ourselves, our relationships to loved ones, to community, to the earth, and to God.

One way in which our spiritual masters refer to Torah is as *hokhmah*—“wisdom.” In doing so, they remind us that we can discover wisdom, Torah, or “sparks” of divinity in scrolls, books, forests, lakes, and yes, even Zoom rooms!

The key, of course, is being open and attentive enough to see, hear, taste, touch, and feel this wisdom wherever we find ourselves.

It is important to note that in the Noah story, our protagonist emerges from the ark and really struggles with life after the flood.

He does not walk on to dry land as a perfected being, who has completely refined his heart after 40 days and nights locked away in his ship, moving from one chamber of Torah to the next.

Noah has to learn how to re-enter the world after the flood. It is a new reality for him and for everyone else who survived this terrible devastation.

Their trauma is real, deep, and lasting.

Like the survivors of the flood, we, too, struggle in different ways as we emerge from our “arks” and seek to renew our lives.

Part of the gift of this biblical tale is that we learn that we are not the first or the last people to struggle with hardship, and we are not alone on the journey. We also can learn from the mistakes and insights of those who came before us.

Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom HaZikaron*, “The Day of Remembrance.” The term “remembrance” is used at different points in our service to refer both to God’s memories and to ours.

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But what are we supposed to remember today?

The Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* 3:1 states:

דַּע מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ...

Know from where you come, and where you are going...

The notion is that we need to look back as we look forward.

We need to know where we came from, the path we took to arrive at our current location, and where we wish to go.

It is no accident that the watchword of the season is *teshuvah*—we turn and return, and turn again...

Over the past two and a half years we have learned a great deal of wisdom while quarantined in our arks.

It is now time to ask ourselves how we can make use of these hard-earned insights as we step out into the world again.

Where were we?

How did we arrive here today? Where do we want to go next?

In preparing this *d'rashah*, I asked several of you to share some of your pandemic wisdom with me.

Here are a few of the “sparks”

I gleaned from my outreach.

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Think of this list as a compliment to the long list of “sins” —the *Al Chet*—we will recite several times on Yom Kippur (and as you listen, you might even want to gently touch your heart):

- I have discovered that I actually enjoy living a simple, quiet life.
- I have learned how much I need people in my daily life.
- I have learned how important my identity outside of the house and family is to my spirit.
- I have learned that I am relentlessly hopeful.
- I have learned that working on relationships with loved ones, even when we have painful differences, can lead to greater understanding and connection.
- I have learned that there is a difference between what I want to do, and what I **actually** want to do.
- I have learned that fostering a practice of gratitude takes effort.
- I have learned that a sense of humor is valuable, even in the most serious situations.
- I have learned that sometimes not saying anything is better than what's on the tip of my tongue.
- I have learned that taking care of this planet AND one another is not a choice.
- I have learned that binging "The Crown" during shut down is now paying off!

So what else did you learn that you want to recall today?

What wisdom do you want to call forth as you seek to envision your life in this new year?

As you do so, keep in heart and mind the sacred words—*teivot*—of our chosen psalm for the year, Psalm 145:

God is close to all who call out to the Divine...

Karov Adonai le'khol Korav...

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But we continue by saying that this relationship can only happen if we call out in truth—*be'emet*.

So what are the **truths** you need to identify in the days, weeks, and months ahead? How can these **truths** bring you closer to yourself, to each other, and to God?

Lastly, remember Stella the Eagle!

Remember that like this magnificent creature, you have made the courageous decision to take flight.

And like this resilient and adaptive bird, you are not alone.

Not only is God present to you, but as we learn to flap our wings again, we are also blessed with the gift of community.

All of us know just how hard it is to leave the protective coverings of our private arks, embrace the uncertainty of our new world, and try to fashion lives of meaning and purpose.

Shanah Tovah!

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