

Geulas Yisrael #88

Yitro: Wings of Eagles

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In the leadup to Har Sinai, Hashem painted a vivid picture of our splendid future—should we accept his offer of Torah. We would be His "treasure" or his **עם סגולה**, cherished and protected. Additionally, we would serve history as a coalition of priests or a **ממלכת כהנים**, while also showcasing the dignity of a commanded life as a **גוי קדוש**. Our future as the people of G-d held great promise and great opportunity.

Hashem invoked a third image as part of this glorious forecast: We would be transported upon the wings of eagles **ואשא אתכם על כנפי נשרים ואביא אתכם אלי**. Wandering through a parched and waterless desert, the option of being hoisted upon eagles was very enticing. Eagles soar higher than any other bird, protecting their young by hauling them on their backs, out of harm's way. After centuries of persecution and defenselessness, this offer of safety and protection was comforting.

Soaring upon eagles also provided the benefit of rapid travel. Facing the daunting prospect of voyaging through a hot and scorched desert, we gladly welcomed the notion of quick air travel. Being carried to the promised land on winged carriers was preferable to tugging our clumsy donkeys through unending desert dunes. The metaphor of eagle transport offered an enticing travel solution, which according to Chazal we had already experienced, earlier in our journey. In the immediate aftermath of yetziat Mitzrayim, millions of scattered slaves quickly assembled in the Egyptian city of Ramses and, in one day, miraculously traveled over 500 km to an encampment named Sukkot. Supernaturally rapid travel was already familiar to us from the first day after our liberation.

Finally, the promise of eagle travel also invited us to a heavenly encounter with Hashem **ואביא אתכם אלי**. For the first 2500 years of history Hashem seemed very distant from Man. His ways were mysterious and His essence unfathomable. Humanity suffered, what seemed to be endless divine punishments, making

Hashem feel even more indecipherable. The ten plagues, most of which originated in heaven, did little to change that image of a fearsome and distant G-d.

Before Har Sinai could commence that distance had to be bridged. The flight upon eagle wings, was a divine invitation to a heavenly rendezvous. Interestingly, after accepting Hashem's offer of a meeting in heaven, we were treated instead, to a terrestrial encounter. On the great day of Matan Torah, Hashem descended into *our world*, and met us upon a desert mountain. The long-awaited meeting didn't take place upon eagle wings, but upon a mountain summit.

Competing Eagles

Sadly, the gyrations of Jewish history tarnished this radiant image of soaring eagles. In chapter 17, Yechezkeil portrays the scheming of a weak and fickle nation, during the waning days of the first Mikdash. Our nation was caught in the middle of a territorial rivalry between a stronger and a weaker eagle.

Nevuchadnezar of Bavel had already exiled the Jewish aristocracy, but had spared the mikdash and had appointed a Jewish monarch named Tzidkiyahu as a puppet ruler. Had we remained loyal to our commitments to Babylonia, we would have retained our sovereignty and preserved our Mikdash. Instead, we rebelled, looking to a weaker Egyptian eagle for assistance. Ultimately, our flirtation with this Egyptian eagle riled the stronger eagle of Babylonia to invade our country, ransack the mikdash, and to evict the remaining Jews from Israel.

We had been promised a ride upon a divine eagle, but now we were reduced to pinballing between two inconsequential eagles. We had no business with either of these two human eagles, but our religious malfunction subjected us to these petty political rivalries. A lustrous vision had degenerated into a disgraceful political maneuver. Our religious betrayals poured graffiti upon Hashem's original vision.

Eagle invasion

Hundreds of years later, a solitary and overpowering eagle would invade our land and reshape Jewish history. The second tochachah of parshat Ki Tavo is a literary gloss or allegory for the Roman invasion of our land and the eventual destruction of the second Mikdash. This nightmarish passage describes armies invading Israel

from distant lands, in a manner similar to eagles which land from faraway locales: **יִשָּׂא יְקוּקָ עֲלֵיךָ גּוֹי מֵרְחֹק מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ כְּאִשֶּׁר יִדְאָה הַנֶּשֶׁר גּוֹי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִשְׁמַע לְשׁוֹנָן.**

Making matters worse, these attackers spoke an unfamiliar language. We were familiar with Babylonian language and culture, but had never encountered these strange Roman warriors who appeared out of nowhere, landing on our shores by the tens of thousands, and speaking an alien language.

Imagine the terror of watching this fierce army, bearing frightening new super weapons, whose language we could barely understand. I often imagine Western European Jews disembarking to death camps after days-long journeys in crammed cattle cars. As they arrived, breathing their first fresh air in days, they were barked at in German and Ukrainian. The fear and confusion must have been paralyzing as it was to the Jews first encountering the Roman legions. History was repeating itself, as it always does.

The Romans, who had landed from afar like eagles, adopted the *aquila*, or the Roman eagle as the symbol of their imperial and invincible army. Invading and plundering Israel, they perverted our eagle image into a symbol of Jewish suffering. The radiant eagle symbol of Jewish selection had now turned sinister. Such is the terrifying consequence of Jewish betrayal, that we turn blessings into curses.

A Murderous Eagle

Close to two thousand years later we would, once again, watch as this symbol of Jewish pride was weaponized against our people. The Third Reich launched its genocidal plan under the emblem of a ferocious and predatory eagle bearing sharp talons, which would tear European Jewry asunder. Once again, Hashem's redemptive image of *kanfei nesharim* was perverted from a badge of Jewish pride into an icon of Jewish suffering. History was repeating itself, as it always does. We had been grounded for two thousand years, and our eagle dream had become an eagle nightmare.

The Friendly Skies

A few short years after the Holocaust, Jewish history was rejuvenated, and our eagle symbol was reconstituted. Though the state of Israel is fundamentally secular, it still possesses a deep historical sensitivity and strongly identifies with

Tanach as the source of Jewish history and heritage. For this reason, many Israeli military exercises are named after Biblical phrases.

In the late 1940s the ancient Yemenite Jewish community found itself in grave danger. In a series of daring airlifts, close to 50,00 Yemenite Jews were transported to Israel in an operation dubbed "Wings of Eagles" (though it was also referred to as Magic Carpet). This bold rescue restored part of the luster of Hashem's original invitation. Hashem's promise was now being partially fulfilled, as Jews were being miraculously transported home upon wings of eagles. Of course, these modern eagles were crafted from aluminum and powered by jet fuel. As history was being reformatted, an ancient divine promise, which had been notoriously vandalized, was, once again beckoning Jews to Israel. The rebirth of the State of Israel reinstates past glories and past promises.

Air travel

In an overall sense, beyond the airlifting of Yemenite Jews, our redemption is being served by these modern wings of eagles which we call air travel. The emergence of air travel has radically altered the pace of our resettlement of Israel. In the past, travel to Israel took months and even years, as we arrived by foot or, if lucky, by ship. These crude forms of travel made mass Aliyah almost inconceivable. It was impossible to generate a large enough mass of returning Jews to create a stable and sustainable Jewish population. Jews arrived in drips and drabs, never creating a viable autonomous and enduring presence.

Air travel changed all that and there are few images more iconic to modern Aliyah than Jews arriving on El AL Airplanes kissing the ground upon arrival. We are returning on wings of eagles and our return has reclaimed that long tarnished image.

The soaring eagle of Jewish history is airborne once again. The eagle has landed..in Israel.