



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Haazinu

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Haazinu

**Lessons from the American
Bald Eagle**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

The number “thirteen” surrounds the American bald eagle on the Great Seal of the United States.

There is an olive branch with thirteen leaves in the eagle’s right talon and a bundle of thirteen arrows in its left. There are also thirteen stars above its head and thirteen stripes on the shield it supports. And there are even thirteen letters in each of the two of its mottos, *E Pluribus Unum* and *Annuit Coeptis*.

What does it mean? What is the mystical meaning of the eagle?

The Torah has an answer.

What cryptic messages are concealed in this week’s Torah reading? And how can this all teach us the secret of mercy, compassion and empathy?

Based on the concept of Divine Providence and that everything we encounter offers us life lessons, what personal messages does the Torah illuminate for us that we can derive from the Great Seal printed on the currency we carry in our pockets?

The answer is found in this eagle-eyed sermon.

THE ANATOMY OF MERCY: LESSONS FROM THE AMERICAN BALD EAGLE

1. The Quality of Mercy is Not Strained (Humor)

We often hear the term, “Have mercy,” or as they say in Yiddish, *Hub rachmanus*.

What is mercy? What is *rachmanus*? What is compassion? What is empathy?

Is the answer perhaps found in the following humorous anecdote?

The story goes that a certain court jester went too far one day and insulted his king. The king became so infuriated that he sentenced the jester to death. However, the members of the king’s court appealed to him, asking him to have mercy for this man who had served him well for so many years. After a time, the king relented only enough to give the jester his “choice” as to how he would like to die – this was the king’s form of “mercy.”

Don’t worry – this story has a happy ending. True to form, the jester replied, “If it’s all the same to you, m’lord, I’d like to die of old age.”

All jokes aside, what is mercy? For sure it is something deeper than this joke would have us believe.

2. Kinds of Seals

To address the accurate definition of mercy, I need first to discuss seals.

Not the aquatic mammals armed with flippers. Nor the Navy SEALs, armed with Uzis.

The kind of seal that I am talking about is the stamp that seals a document and is emblematic of an institution with gravitas. The kind we just experienced on Yom Kippur. The kind that seals us into the Book of Life.

To shed light upon the meaning of mercy, compassion and empathy, I would like to discuss a unique seal, one which most of us see, consciously or subconsciously, thousands of times in our lifetimes.

The seal I am talking about is the Great Seal of the United States of America.

Based on the fundamental concept of Divine Providence and that everything we encounter offers us life lessons, we can find fascinating personal messages in the Great Seal printed on the currency we carry in our pockets.

3. The Great Seal of the USA

A booklet titled *Our Flag*, published by the United States Congress, is an official description of the flag of the United States of America, the Star Spangled Banner, as well as of other symbols of the USA.

Toward the end of the booklet,¹ under the header, *The Great Seal of the United States*, comes the following description (which I quote in part):

On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress passed a resolution authorizing a committee to devise a seal for the United States of America. This mission, designed to reflect the Founding Fathers' beliefs, values, and sovereignty of the new Nation, did not become a reality until June 20, 1782.

In heraldic devices, such as seals, each element has a specific meaning. Even colors have specific meanings ... Charles Thompson, Secretary of the Continental Congress, reporting to Congress on the Seal, stated: "The colors of the pales (the vertical stripes) are those used in the flag of the United States of America; White signifies purity and innocence, Red, hardiness & valour, and Blue, the color of the Chief (the broad band above the stripes) signifies vigilance, perseverance & justice."

¹ Our Flag, a publication of the United States Congress, p. 41.

And then comes the description of the seal itself:

Obverse Side of the Seal

The American bald eagle is prominently featured supporting a shield composed of thirteen red and white stripes (pales) representing the thirteen original states with a blue bar (chief) uniting the shield and representing Congress. The motto of the United States, *E Pluribus Unum* (meaning “out of many, one”), refers to this union. The [thirteen leaves of the] olive branch and thirteen arrows grasped by the eagle allude to peace and war, powers solely vested in the Congress, and the constellation of [thirteen] stars symbolizes the new Nation taking its place among the sovereign powers.

Reverse Side of the Seal

The pyramid signifies strength and duration: The eye over it and the motto, *Annuit Coeptis* (meaning “He, [God] has favored our undertakings”), allude to the many interventions of Providence in favor of the American cause. The Roman numerals below are the date of the Declaration of Independence. The words under it, *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (meaning “a new order of the ages”), signify the beginning of the new American era in 1776.²

Note that the number “thirteen” is everywhere: thirteen stripes on the shield; thirteen stars in the constellation; thirteen arrows; thirteen leaves and thirteen berries on the olive branch.

The reverse side of the seal is not immune to thirteen either: the pyramid has thirteen layers of bricks to it, tipped with the eye encased in the triangle.

Even the mottoes, *E Pluribus Unum* and *Annuit Coeptis* each have thirteen letters in them respectively.

² <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CDOC-108hdoc97/pdf/CDOC-108hdoc97.pdf>

If you doubt any of this, next time you hold a dollar bill in your hand – after Shabbat of course – note George Washington’s handsome mug on the front. But then, turn the bill to the other side to find the two parts (obverse and reverse) of the Great Seal of the United States, flanking the slogan in the middle, “In God We Trust,” atop of “ONE.”

4. The Other Seals

Of course, the Seal of the United States is known to everyone who has ever held a dollar bill in hand. And everyone knows that that the anchor of the seal is the American bald eagle. And it is this eagle that will teach us a profound lesson in mercy and compassion.

What’s less well known is some of the seals proposed earlier, the ones that did not come into being.

There were three committees formed by Congress tasked with designing the Great Seal. The first committee consisted of several authors of the Declaration of Independence, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Perhaps if we look at the seals proposed by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, we will come to understand the inner meaning of the eagle and the number “thirteen.”

This is what that great American founding father, Benjamin Franklin, proposed as the seal of the United States:

Moses standing on the Shore, and extending his Hand over the Sea, thereby causing the same to overwhelm Pharaoh who is sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his Head and a Sword in his Hand. Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Clouds reaching to Moses, to express that he acts by Command of the Deity. Motto: *Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.*

That other pillar of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, proposed this:

The children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.³

This is some trippy stuff. These Founding Fathers were not designing a seal for the Land of Israel, but for the US of A. So what does it all mean? How is it connected to the present day seal anchored by the eagle?

And what does this all have to do with mercy – our subject for today?

5. Thirteen Attributes of Mercy

The answer to the first question is that the early Americans saw themselves as the new Israelites crossing the Red Sea (albeit the Atlantic Ocean), and they saw themselves setting up a new government under God as directed by the Bible.⁴

The answer to the second question is that the number thirteen is very special to the Jews. (To others it is scary.)

As Jews we know that thirteen is the age of Bar Mitzvah. Thirteen is also directly tied to mercy – in particular, God’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, as enumerated in the Book of Exodus.⁵

This mystical secret (of the divine attributes of compassion) were revealed by God to Moses in response to Moses begging Him to forgive the Jews for the sin of the Golden Calf – forgiveness which was finally granted on Yom Kippur. The entire High Holiday idea of return and repentance is based on this secret. We recite and invoke the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy countless times during High Holiday services, especially on Yom Kippur.

Here and now is not the place or time to delve deeply into the intricacies of the Thirteen Attributes.⁶

³ <http://www.greatseal.com/committees/firstcomm/index.html>

⁴ On Two Wings, by Michael Novak. World Perfect: The Jewish Impact on Civilization, by Rabbi Ken Spiro, see chapters 27 and 28.

⁵ Exodus 34:6-7.

⁶ See Sifrei ad loc.

But it's hard to ignore the fact that there are Thirteen Attributes of Mercy and that the Seal of the United States is full of thirteen (or that there were thirteen colonies to begin with).

Some may see that as coincidence.

But we Jews don't see it that way.

Suffice it to say that Jews believe in coincidence as much as bakeries believe in low-carb diets.

Indeed, the Baal Shem Tov taught, "From everything a person sees or hears, he must derive a lesson in the service of his Creator." So why not from the US Seal, the country that emblazons on all its money "In God We Trust"?

6. The Bald Eagle

This is even more compelling when we realize that the American bald eagle is the core and center of the seal itself. Indeed, the American bald eagle – the national bird and national animal of the USA – is symbolic of America itself.

In the Kabbalah, based on Ezekiel's mystical vision of the Divine Chariot,⁷ the eagle is compared to *rachamim*,⁸ to mercy/compassion/empathy.

A highly cryptic and mystical representation of Ezekiel's vision of the Celestial Divine Chariot (*merkava*) has the face of a lion to the right, representing indiscriminate flow of energy (*chessed*). To the left it has the face of a bull, representing the severe discipline of precision (*gevurah*). And at the center it has the face of an eagle, representing balanced compassion – part loving flow, part controlled restraint.

⁷ Ezekiel 1:10.

⁸ Zohar III, 233a. See also Likkutei Torah, Haazinu, 77c; Ohr Hatorah, Haazinu.

More than just the balance of love and discipline, compassion or mercy is something that the eagle and the eagle alone can convey. And the reason why is found in the Torah portion we just read.

7. Parshat Haazinu

Today, we read the second to last chapter of the entire Torah, *Parshat Haazinu*.

In this portion, the Torah employs a metaphor to articulate the manner in which God guided (and will guide)⁹ the Jewish people:

*As an eagle awakens its nest, hovering over its fledglings, it spreads its wings, taking them and carrying them on its pinions, so the Lord guided them...*¹⁰

The Midrash elaborates:

When the eagle comes to move its fledglings from place to place, it does not pick them up with its feet, as do other birds. Other birds are afraid of the eagle, which soars very high and flies above them. For this reason, they carry their young with their feet because of the eagle. The eagle, however, is afraid only of an arrow. Therefore, it carries its young on its wings, saying, "It is better that an arrow pierce me, rather than pierce my young." So too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, says: "I carried you on eagles' wings,"¹¹ when the Egyptians pursued the children of Israel and overtook them at the [Red] Sea, they cast arrows and catapulted rocks. Immediately, "the angel of God responded ... and the pillar of cloud came between the camp of Egypt and Israel."¹²

⁹ See Rashi ad loc whether this is past or future tense.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 32:11-12.

¹¹ Exodus 19:4.

¹² Exodus 14:19-20, and Mechilta 19:4; Tanchuma Eikev 2.

8. True Compassion and Mercy

True compassion or mercy is not just feeling bad for someone. True compassion is putting yourself between the arrow and the child.

True compassion is shielding the innocent from life's harsh realities. But not in such a way that they are overpowered or stifled. Instead, the oversight is light: *hovering over its fledglings*.

The word *hovering* implies making your presence and assistance felt without asphyxiating your charge. It is an action of subtlety and softness both of which are basic requirements for healthy compassion.

The imagery in the Midrashic description is exactly what Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson proposed as the Great Seal of the Unites States.

But the eagle conveys the message of God's compassion in a more allegorical way. It is upon these principles that the Founding Fathers wished to build the country they were founding, and these principles are reflected in the Great Seal.

The right talon of the American bald eagle on the Great Seal clutches an olive branch, symbolizing peace. The left talon clutches thirteen arrows, symbolizing war. The eagle sits front and center between both, putting itself between the arrows and the nation.

9. Latin Lessons

While we are on the subject of the Great Seal of the Unites States, here are some lessons we may learn from the three Latin inscriptions upon the Seal – lessons clearly derived from Torah thought (which the Founding Fathers famously based so many of their ideas on¹³):

¹³ See the sources cited in note 4.

- E PLURIBUS UNUM – Out of Many One
- ANNUIT COEPTIS – He [God] Favors Our Undertaking
- NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM – New Order of the Ages

E PLURIBUS UNUM – Out of Many One

Many are the elements of life: your family, friends, community, co-workers, hassles, enjoyments. The goal is to make of the many, One. To find One – *echad* (the last word of the Shema) – in all things.

ANNUIT COEPTIS – He [God] Favors Our Undertaking

Ensure that everything you do will be favorable to the One on High. Ask yourself if this undertaking is something that God favors. Surely then you will only undertake things that are favorable.

NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM – New Order of the Ages

We Jews have been around for a long time. Our challenge is not experience or even continuity. Our challenge is to find the newness in the ancient, to make the timeless timely. We do this by realizing that truths never get old, only more true; by remembering that everything in the Torah is as new today as it was back then.

10. On the Wings of Eagles (Conclusion)

[The Torah compares the redemption from Egypt to being lifted and guided upon the wings of eagles.

How do we replicate this today? How do we remove all the limitations (symbolized by Egypt) and soar safely and securely to the Promised Land?

Just look at the opening words of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law: “Judah the son of Teima would say ... Be as light as an eagle”¹⁴

¹⁴ Avot 5:20.

Be as light as an eagle:

- Be compassionate, merciful and empathetic, ensuring that the arrows of negativity never strike the innocent fledglings of the world.
- Soar above the superficial minutiae of the world, taking with you those who do not yet know that they, too, are eagles.
- Protect, but don't smother your children.

Surely then the Holy One will do the same for you and all of us, compassionately carrying His children upon His wings to the Promised Land with the ultimate and final redemption. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!