



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Shemini

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April 2, 2016

Shemini

**Kosher Lessons from
Treif Birds**



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

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ABSTRACT

Here is some fowl language: storks, pelicans and owls.

The stork’s Hebrew name is *chasida* – can you guess why?

The pelican’s Hebrew name is *shalach* – do you know what secrets it plucks out of the vast deep?

The owl’s Hebrew name is *tachmas* – can you figure out why it is called a “wise bird”?

This sermon is about bird watching – perchance if we watch and learn from those flighty creatures we may glean something about our own holy selves.

Birds of a feather flock together. From the *treif* stork, pelican and owl, we may learn the most kosher lesson of all: how the many Jews of a feather can truly flock united together!

KOSHER LESSONS FROM TREIF BIRDS

1. Migration (Joke)

Question: Why do storks fly south in the winter?

Answer: Because it's too far to walk.

2. Junk Food (Anecdote)

Some recent science, however, has found that fewer and fewer birds seem to be migrating south.

Why?

They stay behind for the junk food.

At least storks do, according to a recent study,¹ which was the subject of a report in *The New York Times* entitled "Seduced by Junk Food, Storks Are Opting Not to Migrate." I quote:

In Portugal, storks, the birds known in folklore for dutifully delivering babies, have become homebodies.

The reason, according to a study published Tuesday in the journal *Movement Ecology*, is the tasty local landfills in the south-central part of the country. Thousands of birds have chosen to forgo their typical winter migration to sub-Saharan Africa in favor of sticking around to gorge on garbage.

¹ <http://movementecologyjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40462-016-0070-0>.

“Before the ‘80s there were no storks in the Iberian Peninsula in Europe during the winter,” said Aldina Franco, a conservation ecologist from the University of East Anglia in England and co-author of the paper. “Suddenly we saw a few birds and then the number increased and now we have 14,000 birds in Portugal in the winter.”

...Some of their favorite menu items, the researchers found, were rotten fish, leftover chicken and hamburgers. They also observed the birds munching on rubbish like computer parts and bits of paper. In one case they found a stork with a pair of old, dirty jeans wrapped around its beak.

...But the feeding frenzies might end soon because in 2018 the European Union plans to start closing its open landfills in Portugal and switch to composting factories, Dr. Franco said.

She said she is curious to see what the storks will do in the winter without their dump truck buffet. Perhaps, she said, they will revert to the original migratory routes, or find another way to satisfy their garbage cravings.²

(Incidentally, this pressing social issue of garbage-feeding storks was also the subject of a recent *New York Times* editorial,³ which may say a thing or two about where the editors’ heads are at...)

Whatever the case may be, today is the holy and blessed day of Shabbat, and today’s Torah reading “happens” to discuss storks specifically and birds in general? What can we learn from that discussion?

Let’s look and find out.

This week’s Torah reading, *Parshat Shemini*, lists which birds are not kosher to eat.⁴ It is a long list, but we shall limit ourselves to just three of the birds mentioned – the stork, the pelican and the owl.

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/science/seduced-by-junk-food-storks-are-opting-not-to-migrate.html>.

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/22/opinion/elegant-bird-discovers-junk-food.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&r=0>.

⁴ Leviticus 11:13-19.

3. The Stork

First the stork.

In his explanation, the great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi,⁵ quotes the Talmud which states that the Hebrew word for stork is called *chasida*, from the word *chesed* meaning “kindness.” Why? Because, by sharing its food with its fellow storks, it performs acts of kindness (*chassidut*).⁶

Immediately, it is evident that many a lesson in serving our Creator and leading a more meaningful and productive life may be learned from these kind and graceful winged-creatures.

Perhaps by doing some bird watching, and emulating the kindness of the stork, we may glean a thing or two about how to soar in our own lives.

4. The Pelican

The pelican – called in Hebrew the *shalach*⁷ – dives into the ocean to catch fish for its supper.⁸

The Talmud states:⁹

The *shalach* is a bird that draws (*shalach*) fish from the sea ... Rabbi Yochanan, when he saw a *shalach*, quoted [Psalm 36]: *Your judgments are like the vast deep.*

The full verse of that Psalm reads: *Your charity is like the mighty mountains. Your judgments are like the vast deep. You save both man and beast, O Lord.*¹⁰

⁵ See the other commentaries ad loc (i.e. Ibn Ezra) for alternative interpretations. Another great resource is R' Aryeh Kaplan's Living Torah.

⁶ Rashi ad loc from Chulin 63a.

⁷ Other translate *shalach* as the cormorant or the gull.

⁸ Chulin 63a.

⁹ Chulinibida.

¹⁰ Psalms 36:7.

Rashi explains that the pelican is God's messenger whose mission is to perpetuate God's judgment in the vast deep of the sea. When God decides that a certain fish's time is up, the pelican dives down into the vast deep, plucks out that fish, and fulfills his mission in serving his Creator and enacting the Creator's decree.

This is why, when he saw a *shalach*, a fish-plucking pelican, Rabbi Yochanan quoted that particular verse from Psalms. *Your judgments are like the vast deep.*

What does this teach us?

5. Mystical Meaning

The mystics¹¹ teach that the sea embodies the "hidden worlds," where everything is connected with and submerged within its life source. We material land creatures don't see with our naked eyes the hidden creatures of the sea, because everything in the sea is covered over and concealed by the waters of the vast deep.

This bird, the pelican, is characterized by its function – *shalach* – drawing up from the deep. It dives from on high and plucks out the fish, revealing that which is concealed within.

This says to us: Life is like the vast deep. All of the sublimity of the divine exists, but it is covered over by the vast deep concealing its sublime secrets from the material world. We, like the pelican, just need to pluck it out.

¹¹ See Likkutei Sichot vol. VII, pp. 54-64, and sources cited in fn. #36.

6. The Birds Are Treif, Their Lessons Kosher

The pelican is not kosher but it teaches us a very kosher lesson indeed. This is because in God's holy universe, everything that exists teaches us a lesson in serving our Creator.

Perhaps the Torah is using the medium of *treif* birds to get this point across. The Torah (from the word *hora'ah*, meaning relevant instruction) has dedicated an entire section exclusively to identifying these birds, and the Talmud has taken pains to describe their defining characteristics.

Every molecule of existence is divinely supervised. When the pelican (*shalach*) dives to pluck fish from the deep it is doing so at the behest of its Maker, executing the judgments of heaven. And when the stork (*chasida*) kindly and caringly shares its sustenance with its fellow fowl (the opposite of foul play), it too is certainly following its Maker's command.

Here are two practical and easy-to-implement lessons which we may all take away from this.

1. From the stork (*chasida*) we learn kindness (*chesed*) of sharing and sustaining. Every single one of us here in this room (and in this world) receives some sort of sustenance in our lives – whether material, intellectual or spiritual. And from the *chasida*, the stork, we learn that we must share whatever we receive. *Chesed*, kindness, doesn't take much effort. You just have to do it. And here is a 100% satisfaction guarantee or your money back: when you do a *chesed* you will never, ever regret it. This is a guarantee from a rabbi, and rabbis never lie!
2. From the pelican (*shalach*) we learn the need to draw up (*shalah*) the concealed spiritual life from the vast deep. Look around you. Yes, I'll pause for a moment (not an easy thing for a sermonizing rabbi to do) while you look around. What do you see? What you see is not what you get. Looking at this material world with your biological eyes of flesh and blood is like looking at the vast deep of the sea. You see nothing beneath the surface. You could easily come to believe that there is a dark void beneath the waters.

Comes the pelican, diving down from its perch on high, and it plucks out the living organisms from within the vast and mysterious deep. When you look at the surface of the vast deep of the world, you must always remember that, right beneath its rippling façade, lies life teeming with living sparks from the Cosmic Bonfire. Like the *shalach*, it is our job to dive down from our high perch and to pluck out the divine life from within the vast deep, revealing the true wonder in all things, in all creatures, and in all people.

7. The Owl

In the same recitation that mentions the stork and pelican, the Torah also mentions the owl – called in Hebrew *kos* or *yanshaf*,¹² or *tachmas*.¹³

There is a timeless nursery rhyme about that wide-eyed bird, one that may inspire you to go hoo-hoo:

A wise old owl lived in an oak
 The more he saw the less he spoke
 The less he spoke the more he heard.

Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?¹⁴

There is truth to the logic that the more one sees the less one speaks, and the less one speaks the more one hears – and the more one hears the wiser one grows. Hence the nomenclature, “wise owl.”

¹² Leviticus 11:17.

¹³ Leviticus 11:16. So translated in the Living Torah by R' Aryeh Kaplan.

¹⁴ Opie and P. Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951, 2nd edition., 1997), p. 403.

8. Bird Song (Conclusion)

As we have seen from this week's Torah reading, the lessons from birds are vast and meaningful.

And it is not by chance that the Talmud compares Israel to a bird.¹⁵

Let us conclude with a beautiful epigram that touches at the core of who we are:

A bird does not sing because it has an answer.

It sings because it has a song.

Every single one of us has a song that we are born to sing. The surest way to find answers is to sing our respective personal songs.

We do this, firstly, by being *chasida*, kind and loving and giving (*chesed*, *chasidut*) the way storks are, sharing our sustenance – whether it be edible, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual – with our fellow birds. After all, birds of a feather flock together. Secondly, by being a *shalach* – like a pelican we must pluck life from the vast deep, revealing the living spirit that is concealed in that seemingly fathomless depth.

The secret is to know that within the concealed vast deep of life there lives a divine spark that energizes us. We are all birds soaring from the greatest heights down into the shallowest lows to reveal the Divine in everything.

This is how we open cages, flap our wings, free our soaring spirit, and sing our sweet, inspiring song.

Shabbat Shalom!

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¹⁵ Psalms 51:19.