

Sunbird - the Jewish Phoenix

1] Herodotus 5th C. BCE

[The Egyptians have a] sacred bird called the phoenix, which I myself have never seen, except in pictures. Indeed it is a great rarity, even in Egypt, only coming there (according to the accounts of the people of Heliopolis) once in five hundred years, when the old phoenix dies.

Its size and appearance, if it is like the pictures, are as follows: The plumage is partly red, partly golden, while the general make and size are almost exactly that of the eagle. They tell a story of what this bird does, which does not seem to me to be credible; that he comes all the way from Arabia, and brings the parent bird, all plastered over with myrrh, to the temple of the Sun, and there buries the body. In order to bring him, they say, he first forms a ball of myrrh as big as he finds that he can carry; then he hollows out the ball, and puts his parent inside, after which he covers over the opening with fresh myrrh, and the ball is then of exactly the same weight as at first; so he brings it to Egypt, plastered over as I have said, and deposits it in the temple of the Sun.

Such is the story they tell of the doings of this bird.



2] Job 29:18

Then I said: 'I shall die with my nest, And I shall multiply my days as the 'chol'...

איוב כ"ט:י"ח

(יח) ואמר עם־קני אֶגְעֶ' וְכָחֹל אֲרָבָה יָמִים:

3] Bereshit Rabbah 19:5

"The woman saw that the tree was good for eating... she also gave to her husband with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6).

"Also [*gam*]" is an inclusive term; [as well as Adam,] she also fed the animals, the beasts, and the birds. All of them heeded her [and ate of the fruit] except for one bird that is called *hol*. That is what is written: "I will live many days, like the *hol*" (Job 29:18). The school of Rabbi Yanai says: It lives a thousand years, and at the end of a thousand years, fire emerges from its nest and burns it. An egg-bulk remains of it and it then grows limbs, and lives again. Rabbi Yudan ben Rabbi Shimon says: It lives a thousand years, and at the end of one thousand years, its body wastes away and its wings are shed. But an egg-bulk remains of it and it then grows limbs, and lives again.

בראשית רבה י"ט:ה'

גם, רבוי, האכילה את הבהמה ואת החיה ואת העופות, הכל שמעו לה חוץ מעוף אחד ושמו חול, הדא הוא דכתיב (איוב כט, יח): וְכָחֹל אֲרָבָה יָמִים. דְּבִי רַבִּי יֵנְאִי אָמְרִי אֵלַי שָׁנָה הוּא חִי, וּבִסוּף אֵלַי שָׁנָה אֵשׁ יוֹצֵאָה מִקְנוֹ וְשׂוֹרְפָתוֹ, וּמִשְׁתִּיר בּוֹ כְּבִיצָה וְחוֹזֵר וּמִגְדֵּל אֲבָרִים וְחִי. רַבִּי יוֹדֵן בְּרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן אוֹמֵר, אֵלַי שָׁנִים חִי וּלְבִסוּף אֵלַי שָׁנִים גּוֹפּוֹ כָּלָה וְכֹנֶפִיו מִתְמַרְטִין וּמִשְׁתִּיר בּוֹ כְּבִיצָה וְחוֹזֵר וּמִגְדֵּל אֲבָרִים.

4] The Phoenix in Rabbinic Literature, Meran Niehoff 1996

The phoenix myth is thus recontextualized and serves as a culturally significant explanation of an ancient crux: if mortality came into the world as the result of Adam's and Eve's first sin, why do the animals also have to die? Since the phoenix is an exceptional animal that is indeed immortal, the other animals' mortality must also stem from their sinful behavior and cannot be considered as an innate characteristic. Genesis Rabbah therefore suggests that Eve seduced all the animals except the phoenix to eat from the tree of knowledge. The immortality of the phoenix confirms the assumption that death derives from disobedience to God. The rabbis retain the mythological dimension of the phoenix while adapting it to a specifically Jewish context.

5] Sanhedrin 108b:20

Rav Chana bar Bizna says: Eliezer said to Shem the Great: It is written: "After their kinds, they emerged from the ark." Where were you? Shem said to him: We had great suffering in the ark. For a creature that one typically feeds during the day, we fed it during the day, for that one typically feeds at night, we fed it at night. With regard to that chameleon, my father did not know what it eats. One day, my father was sitting and peeling a pomegranate. A worm fell from it and the chameleon ate it. From that point forward my father would knead bran with water, and when it became overrun with worms, the chameleon would eat it. With regard to the lion, a fever sustained it, since when it suffered from a fever, it did not need to eat... Shem continued: With regard to the phoenix [*avarshina*], my father found it lying down on the side of the ark. He said to the bird: Do you not want food? The bird said to him: I saw that you were busy, and I said I would not trouble you. Noah said to the bird: May it be God's will that you shall not die, as it is stated: "And I said, I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the phoenix" (Job 29:18).

סנהדרין ק"ח ב:כ'

אמר רב חנא בר ביזנא אמר ליה אליעזר לשם רבא כתיב למשפחותיהם יצאו מן התיבה אתון היכן הויתון א"ל צער גדול היה לנו בתיבה בריה שדרכה להאכילה ביום האכלנוה ביום שדרכה להאכילה בלילה האכלנוה בלילה האי זקיתא לא הוה ידע אבא מה אכלה יומא חד הוה יתיב וקא פאלי רמונא נפל תולעתא מינה אכלה מיכן ואילך הוה גביל לה חזרא כי מתלע אכלה אריא אישתא זינתיה דאמר רב לא בציר משיתא ולא טפי מתריסר זינא אישתא אורשינה אשכחינה אבא דגני בספנא דתיבותא א"ל לא בעית מזוני א"ל חזיתך דהות טרידא אמינא לא אצערך א"ל יהא רעוא דלא תמות שנאמר (איוב כט, יח) ואומר עם קני אגוע וכחול ארבה ימים

6] Psalms 50:9-12

(9) I claim no bull from your estate, no he-goats from your pens.
(10) For Mine is every animal of the forest, the beasts on a thousand mountains.
(11) I know every bird of the mountains, the creatures of the field are subject to Me.
(12) Were I hungry, I would not tell you, for Mine is the world and all it holds.

תהילים נ':ט'-י"ב

(ט) לא־אֶקַח מִבֵּיתְךָ פָּר מִמִּכְלֹאתֶיךָ עֲתוּדִים:
(י) כִּי־לִי כָל־חַיֹּת־יָעַר בְּהֵמוֹת בְּהֵרֵי־אֶלְף:
(יא) יִדְעֵתִי כָל־עוֹף הָרִים וְחַי שְׂדֵי עֲמָדִי: (יב)
אִם־אֶרְעַב לֹא־אֶמַר לָךְ כִּי־לִי תִבְלָה וּמִלְאָה:

7] Bereshit Rabbah 19:4

“For God knows that, on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be as God, knowing good from evil (Genesis 3:5)...

Rabbi Yehuda ben Rabbi Simon said: [The Snake said:] ‘Everything that was created after its counterpart dominates that counterpart. The heavens were created on the first day and the firmament on the second. Does it [the firmament] not hold them up?! The firmament was created on the second day and the vegetation on the third – does it [the firmament] not supply water for it!? Vegetation was created on the third day and the luminaries on the fourth – do they [the luminaries] not cause its [the earth’s] produce to grow!? The luminaries were created on the fourth day and the birds on the fifth – the ziz is a very large bird and when it flies it obscures the orb of the sun. Humanity was created after everything in order to dominate everything. Hurry and eat [the fruit] now, before God creates additional worlds and they will dominate you.’ That is what is written: “The woman saw that the tree was good...” (Genesis 3:6) – she saw the arguments of the serpent.

בראשית רבה י"ט:ד'

אמר רבי תנחומא השאלה הזו שאלוני
באנטוכיא, אמרתי להם כי יודעים אלהים אין
כתיב אלא כי ידע אלהים כי ביום אכלכם.
רבי יהושע דסכנין בשם רבי לוי אמר התחיל
אומר דלטוריא על בוראו, אמר מאילן הזה
אכל וברא העולם, והוא אומר לכם לא
תאכלו ממנו, שלא תבראו עולמות אחרים,
דכל אינש ואינש סני בר אמנתיה. רבי יהודה
ברבי סימון אמר כל שנברא אחר חברו שליט
בחברו, שמים בראשון, ורקיע בשני, אינו
סובלן, אתמא. רקיע בשני, ודשאים
בשלישי, אינו מספקין את מימיו, דשאים
בשלישי, ומאורות ברביעי, אינו מבשלין
פרותיו, מאורות ברביעי, ועופות בחמישי.
אמר רבי יהודה בר סימון זי עוף טהור הוא
ובשעה שהוא פורח מכסה גלגל חמה, ואדם
נברא אחר הכל לשלט בכל, קדמו ואכלו עד
שלא יברא עולמות אחרים והן שולטין בכם,
הדא הוא דכתיב (בראשית ג, ו): ותרא האשה
כי טוב וגו', ראתה דבריו של נחש.

8] The Greek Apocalypse of Baruch, 1st-3rd C. CE

...and he showed me a chariot and four, under which burnt a fire, and in the chariot was sitting a man, wearing a crown of fire, and the chariot was drawn by forty angels. And behold a bird circling before the sun, and about nine cubits away. And I said to the angel, What is this bird?

And he said to me, This is the guardian of the earth. And I said, God, how is he the guardian of the earth? Teach me. And the angel said to me, This bird flies alongside of the sun, and expanding his wings receives its fiery rays. For if he were not receiving them, the human race would not be preserved, nor any other living creature. But God appointed this bird thereto. And he expanded his wings, and I saw on his right wing very large letters, as large as the space of a threshing-floor, the size of about four thousand modit; and the letters were of gold. And the angel said to me, Read them. And I read, and they ran thus: Neither earth nor heaven bring me forth, but wings of fire bring me forth. And I said, Lord, what is this bird, and what is his name?

And the angel said to me, His name is called Phoenix. (And I said), And what does he eat? And he said to me, The manna of heaven and the dew of earth. And I said, Does the bird excrete? And he said to me, He excretes a worm, and the excrement of the worm is cinnamon, which kings and princes use.

9] Vayikra Rabbah 22:10

...Rabbi Menchama, Rabbi Beibai, Rabbi Acha and Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Rabbi Yonatan said: In place of that which I have forbidden for you, I have permitted for you. In place of the forbidden fish, Leviathan the kosher fish; in place of the forbidden birds, Ziz-Sadai the kosher bird, as it says: "I know all the birds of the hills and Ziz-Sadai is with Me" (Psalm 50:11).

Rabbi Yehudah son of Rabbi Simon said that at the time he spreads his wings, he darkens the ball of the sun, this is from what is written: "Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, Spreads his wings to the south?" (Job 39:26).

And why is it called the Ziz? Because it has many kinds of tastes, the taste of this and the taste of that...

ויקרא רבה כ"ב:

...רבי מנחמא ורבי בבי ורבי אחא ורבי יוחנן בשם רבי יונתן אמרו תחת מה שאסרתי לך התרתי לך, תחת אסור דגים לויתן דג טהור, תחת אסור עופות זיז עוף טהור הוא, הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים נ, יא): ידעתי כל עוף הרים וזיז שדי עמדי. אמר רבי יהודה ברבי סימון בשעה שהוא פורש את כנפיו מכהה גלגל חמה, הדא הוא דכתיב (איוב לט, כו): המבינתך יאבר נץ יפרש כנפו לתימן, ולמה נקרא שמו זיז, שיש בו כמה מיני טעם מזה ומזה...

10] "Our Young Poetry" by Hayim Nachman Bialik 1907

No living organ remains of the ancient Judaism apart from a burnt egg of 'sand' coming out of its nest. Finally a 'resurrected' chick will break out of the egg, a chick small and soft, naked and bare, but with it young, new chirping will come to our world, chirping that is beautiful and pleasant, that is reminiscent of a bright, warm spring day, with soft green shoots beyond the fence... And this cheerful chirping will give rise to the voice of a renewed national poetry

לא נשתיר מן היהדות הישנה אבר חי אלא כביצת ה"חול" השרוף היוצאת מקנו, ביצה זו שנתבקע ממנה לבסוף אפרוח "התחיה", אפרוח קטן ורך, עירום ועריה, אבל צפצוף חדש וצעיר בא עמו לעולמנו, צפצוף נעים וענוג, שמזכיר יום בהיר ופשוט של אביב עם נצנים רכים ו ירוקים מאחורי הגדר... ומתוך צפצוף עליז זה עלה גם קולו של הפיוט ה"לאומי המחודש".

11] Ayala Dekel, Director of Bina the Secular Yeshiva of Tel Aviv

In all mythologies, there is a concept of hope after loss and death. The possibility for Tikkun (amendment/fixing) exists in the phoenix itself – and it is very strong... There is something in the phoenix that tells us: never give up. It is no coincidence that it appears in the context of Job, who has to rise from the ashes and start his life anew... This is a very significant theme both in Hazal (*the Sages and their literature*) and in fantasy. Hazal had to deal with exile, a difficult life, poverty.

So many times in life we are at a moment when everything seems lost. As a mother, I can say that even in childbirth - right before the baby is born, there are moments when you think you are going to die. I remember it from the birth of my first son. From the pain, something was born.