

## Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Yitro

Every year, we get to this Torah portion and naturally focus on its most famous piece. This week, we get the Ten Commandments. Certainly, the volumes of religious commentary on this text are extensive, and the political rhetoric is outrageous. Anything I might say about the use of the "Top Ten" would cause people to see this as political. So, to make my mother happy, I decided to look at a different part of the text. Our tradition spends a lot of time talking about the power of the eagle. The eagle appears in the Jewish Bible twenty-five times, the first time this week. "You saw that which I did to Egypt; and I carried you on the wings of eagles and I brought you to Me." (Exodus 19:4)

The eagle strikes me as an interesting choice for this imagery for several reasons. Most obviously, the eagle is the "King of the birds." Symbolically, as one of the pre-eminent birds of prey, the eagle consumes as it will, but is not itself subject to be eaten. According to the kosher laws, eagles are not amongst the birds that can be eaten. It is powerful and regal. A nation or people who adopt the eagle as its symbol makes the statement that it cannot be defeated. Many nations have so used the eagle throughout history. Despite Benjamin Franklin's attempt to name the turkey as our national bird, our founding fathers acknowledged the power of the eagle and gave it the nod, instead. The late President John Kennedy proclaimed, "The Founding Fathers made an appropriate choice when they selected the bald eagle as the emblem of the nation. The fierce beauty and proud independence of this great bird aptly symbolizes the strength and freedom of America."

When we think of the eagle, we don't often think of it as a nurturing bird. Eagles mate for life. Males build the nest and females take responsibility for young chicks. Female eagles are actually larger than their male counterparts, and many will argue that the two feet larger wingspan makes them more powerful, as well. Mother eagles probably get their way more often than not. But it is this nurturing side, this female dominant characteristic that, for me, makes the eagle the most appropriate choice of symbols for a people. Medieval sage RASH"l teaches us, "All other birds carry their young in their talons, out of fear of a larger predator attacking them from behind and above. The eagle, however, fears no other bird, only man. For this reason it carries its young on its wings, reasoning that if it is attacked by arrows, it would suffer the injury, not their young." The eagle's true strength is not in its predatory power (which keeps it from being kosher), but in its protective strength. The eagle is not the symbol of a strong offense, rather it is the symbol of strong protective stability.

Why the eagle? Perhaps there are several lessons for us. First, just as the eagle mates for life, so too are we, as a people joined forever. I do not mean the Jewish people, I mean all of us – there is no history of one of us that does not somehow impact the rest of us. Second, while the eagle is certainly a bird of prey, so are we. We are hunters and gatherers. While eagle swoops from the sky to catch its food, we create herds of animals from which we select for slaughter and plant vegetable farms from which we gather our produce. We are not unlike the eagle in this respect, as well. In using the symbol of the eagle, we impose upon ourselves hopeful challenges, as well. The eagle's eyesight is keen, resultant from large pupils that minimize diffraction of light. If we opened our eyes more widely, we might see that we walk sightless among miracles. We might come to better appreciate the blessings around us that are available to everyone, wanting to hoard the few that we currently see, only for ourselves less. Even the smallest species of eagles have relatively longer and more evenly broad wings, and more direct, faster flight than most all other birds. As RASH"l stated, the wing span also serves as a great shield, as well. As with the eagle, we really have only other humans to fear. Our hope is that our pursuit of justice is wide spread and even handed. Justice is not to be delayed. At the same time, justice is to be protective and nurturing. We use the Hebrew word *tzedek* for both justice and righteousness. And it is a form of this word, *tzedakah* that we use for charitable aid. We are responsible for carrying each other on our wings, protecting each other from the destructive forces out there.

It strikes me that the most important words of this verse are the last ones, "brought you to Me." The eagle is the vehicle by which we find God. In less narrow theological terms, the eagle provides the paradigm of the behavior needed for healing the world. The sardonic truth cannot escape us that there are species of eagles that are now endangered. Perhaps our time might be more valuably spent talking about what we learn from how we got to the point of receiving the Ten Commandments, than fighting over how we use them in the public arena. Shabbat Shalom.