

The Plague of Pigeons

Jews around the world were touched by the story of Agam Berger and her mother, and their journey to Judaism since October 7th.

The Plague

The first plague mentioned in this week's parsha is the plague of locusts. The Torah describes how they swarmed over Egypt, covering the entire land, darkening the sky, and devouring every last bit of vegetation. *"They covered the face of the entire land, and the land was darkened, and they consumed all the vegetation of the land"* (Bo 10:14-15).

The stark imagery—*"the land was darkened"*—reminds me of a similar situation that happened here, in the United States, in the not too distant past.

The Bird Flocks

In America's early years, the passenger pigeon was the most common bird in North America. At their peak, they made up a third of all birds in the U.S. By the early 19th century, they were the cheapest source of meat—selling for just 20 cents in New York markets. People thought they were endless. Their flocks were legendary, sometimes containing billions of birds.

In 1823, a well-known ornithologist and nature artist called John James Audubon traveled between Henderson and Louisville, Tennessee—about 55 miles apart—and witnessed an enormous

flock of passenger pigeons. He described how the sky was so thick with birds that they blocked out the sun, like a solar eclipse, plunging the land into darkness, just like during the plague of locusts. The constant flapping of their wings created a steady hum, and for three straight days, the pigeons continued to pass in overwhelming numbers.

Some described these flocks as *“covering the sky like a shimmering river.”* Passenger pigeons were thought to be as abundant and unending as sunlight and flowing water. A letter published in the *Cincinnati News* 160 years ago captures the frustration of one housewife: *“I am exhausted, the smell is terrible, and there are pigeons and eggs everywhere.”* An Ohio newspaper compared the deafening noise of their nesting grounds to Niagara Falls—that was the power of the unceasing roar of their calls.

The nesting grounds of these massive flocks, in the warm southern forests of the U.S., were unbelievably vast. Every spring, during nesting season, passenger pigeons took over hundreds of miles of forest. Trees were packed with nests—each one holding hundreds of birds. The sheer weight of the pigeons was so overwhelming that tree branches would often snap under them.

By 1860, the passenger pigeon population in the U.S. was estimated at a staggering nine billion, and things were getting out of hand. So, the government offered a bounty—one penny per pigeon. This sparked a massive hunting frenzy.

Thousands of people took up the challenge, eager to cash in.

Passenger pigeons were easy prey: they tasted good, and they were incredibly easy to catch. On top of that, there was a booming market for pigeon meat. Every day, thousands of barrels of pigeon meat were shipped from northern Michigan to the rest of the country, making it the cheapest source of protein available. Soon, the flocks began to disappear—until the entire species went extinct.

However, there is more to the pigeon story. Pigeons feature prominently in a special story in Jewish history.

Pigeons in the Torah

At the very end of this week's parsha, in the final verse, the Torah states: *"And it shall be for a sign upon your hand and for totafot between your eyes, for with a mighty hand, G-d took us out of Egypt."* Rashi explains that this refers to *tefillin*—when someone sees them tied between a person's eyes, they will remember the miracle and speak of it.

During the brutal persecutions under Emperor Hadrian, wearing tefillin was a crime punishable by death. The Talmud tells of a man named Elisha who refused to be intimidated. One day, as he walked through the marketplace wearing his tefillin, a Roman soldier spotted him and gave chase. Elisha quickly removed his tefillin and hid them in his hands. When the soldier caught up to him and demanded to know what he was holding, Elisha calmly replied, "Wings of a dove." Miraculously, when he opened his hands, that's exactly what the soldier saw. From that day on, he became known as Elisha Ba'al HaKnafa'im—Elisha, the Master of Wings (Shabbat 49a).

Why a dove? The Zohar explains that the straps of the head tefillin resemble the wings of a dove, while the hand tefillin represents the Shechinah, which is compared to a dove in Song of Songs. Doves always stay with their mate—if one is taken, the other follows. The Jewish people, like the dove, seek to be close to G-d. When we put on tefillin, we reach out to Him, and He, in turn, draws near to us (Zohar Chadash, Sifra DeTzniuta). This is why tefillin are linked to doves, and it's also why many have the custom to wrap the straps around both sides of the tefillin box after davening, mimicking the image of a dove's wings.

They Always Come Home

And perhaps this special spiritual representation is reflected in physical pigeons too:

Chaim Sperling is one of Israel's leading experts on pigeons. He has been raising pigeons since he was 12 years old and is considered the country's most prominent and experienced pigeon breeder. At his home, Sperling keeps around 50 parrots and parakeets, about 40 ducks from eight different species, around 30 pheasants, about 10 chickens, and approximately 150 pigeons and doves, including homing pigeons and peacock pigeons.

Sperling has an entire theory about the "supernatural" mental abilities with which pigeons are blessed. "Since the dawn of history, we've known that pigeons can find their way home," he says. "But to this day, no one knows how." There are many scientific theories on the subject, but there is still no widely accepted explanation for how a pigeon—an animal with a

relatively small brain—can find its way back to a specific loft from hundreds of miles away.

A common hypothesis suggested that pigeons navigate using Earth's magnetic field. However, recent research has shown that alterations in the magnetic field near their lofts do not impact their ability to return home. Other studies explored the possibility that pigeons possess an extraordinary visual memory, allowing them to recognize their lofts precisely, but even when researchers altered the loft's appearance and its surroundings, the pigeons still found their way. Theories based on scent were also disproven. Sperling cautiously proposes a different explanation.

“I believe pigeons have telepathic abilities. When I enter a cage to catch a pigeon, from the moment I open the door—even before I make a move toward it—that pigeon will immediately try to escape. All the other pigeons remain calm, but the one I'm after starts flapping wildly. I've tried everything—avoiding direct eye contact, not looking at it at all, even walking backward. It makes no difference. The pigeon I have in mind to catch seems to know in advance that I'm coming for it.”

Like Doves

Last Thursday, another group of hostages was released, including Agam Berger. She had been kidnapped on October 7, just one day after starting her army service as a lookout. Since then, her mother, Meirav Berger, deepened her connection to Judaism—keeping Shabbat, following kosher, and observing family purity—all in the merit that her daughter would return safely.

About two weeks ago, when it looked like Agam might be released on Shabbat, Meirav made a public request: if her daughter came home that day, she asked that no one take pictures. She explained how much she wanted to honor the holiness of Shabbat and added that the home Agam was returning to was not the same one she had left—it was now a home filled with Jewish practice and deep faith in God.

What was discovered this week is that Agam had also formed her own spiritual connection during captivity. In Gaza, where she endured unimaginable suffering for 482 days, she chose to keep Shabbat. When her captors ordered the women to cook for them on Shabbat, Agam refused, insisting she would not light a fire or prepare food.

She also kept kosher as much as she could, refusing to eat non-kosher meat even when food was scarce. She and the other captives avoided bread on Passover and fasted on Yom Kippur. Because of this, she became noticeably weak and pale in her final months in captivity—but despite the impossible conditions, she never wavered in her commitment.

For all those long months, mother and daughter had no phone calls, no messages—no way to communicate. Yet, they felt deeply connected, as if through an unspoken, almost *telepathic* bond. Each sensed what the other was thinking.

Jewish tradition teaches that the Jewish people are compared to a dove. (Pigeon and dove are from the same family.) Just as a dove always finds its way home, so too, the Jewish soul is drawn to its source. The Talmud explains that a dove's only protection

comes from its wings, just as the Jewish people are uplifted and safeguarded through their traditions and mitzvot—the wings that carry them closer to God.

May we soon see the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "*Who are these that fly like a cloud, like doves returning to their nests?*"—with the coming of peace, redemption, and a brighter future for the Jewish people.