

Shavuot 1  
On the Wings of Eagles  
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Chag Sameach.

It's not just *what* you do, but *how* you do it. Not just *what* you say, but *how* you say it. I'm not the first to say this, but that's because it's a truism that is universally understood.

If G-d had simply delivered us from slavery to freedom, Dayeinu. That would have been enough, and we would talk about it every year, as we do at the Passover Seder. But the Torah gives us a captivatingly beautiful image for *how* exactly G-d did this, one we recall in today's Torah reading. Exodus 19 tells us that G-d said to the Israelites: "you have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me" (Ex. 19:4). Kanfei Nesharim. Eagles' wings. Now that's an image that's easy to remember.

Let's go deeper and unpack this metaphor. Exactly what does this mean in full?

First, here is Rashi working off a Midrash: "as an eagle which carries its young upon its wings. Scripture uses this metaphor because all other birds place their young between their feet since they are afraid of another bird that flies above them, but the eagle fears none except people — perhaps he may shoot an arrow at it — since no bird can fly above the eagle; therefore this bird places its young upon its wings, saying, 'Better that the arrow should pierce me than my young!'"

In other words, G-d will take the hits for the Israelites. Rashi continues, "G-d did this, as it were, when the Egyptians cast arrows and stones, but the divine cloud caught these and protected Israel."

To sum up, this image demonstrates G-d's love for the Jews and willingness to take an arrow, as it were, to protect them. This expression conveys emotional attachment and physical protection.

Second, here is another Midrash: "An eagle can soar from low points to great heights incredibly quickly. So too Israel quickly ascended great heights." In other words, with eagles, we all know they can soar up to the sky in no time. But this Drash looks at Israel through a different lens. *Spiritually* Israel ascended great heights in a short amount of time. In just seven weeks, Israel picked themselves off the doormat of being slaves to

Pharaoh and elevated themselves spiritually to enter into a covenant with G-d Almighty at Sinai. Israel quickly reached their own great heights, matched by the eagle.

The third Drash I selected from Nechama Leibowitz's essay. Eagles soar commandingly horizontally - like how G-d transported the Israelites quickly and safely over the split sea on dry land. And eagles soar vertically - just as the eagle is the king of the birds and flies alone above all, so too G-d is the ultimate Ruler, alone and above all.

Rabbi Schwab picked a bad day to miss my sermon: it's all about his favorite team, the Eagles!

But this is only the opening note in this expression's history. If you say the words "Kanfei Nesharim" to Israelis, many will think about Operation Magic Carpet, an operation in 1949-1950 that brought 49,000 Yemenite Jews to Israel in a story that mimics that of our biblical ancestors' in many ways.

Here is how Yefet Ozery, who works for Ben Gurion University in Israel, remembers the story, as recorded by Joanne Palmer:

*In 1949, "Yemen was a very backward country," Mr. Ozery said. "We didn't have news. We didn't know what an airplane was."*

*Once on the road, he and his father met a stranger, also on donkeyback. That man was an Ashkenazi Jew. "He didn't look Jewish, but he said 'Shalom aleichem' to them. They just looked at him, startled. They said 'Who are you?' and he said 'I am a shaliach' — a messenger — 'from Eretz Yisrael.'" From Israel, a state of whose existence they had not heard. "They said 'You don't look Jewish.' But the shaliach started reciting the Shema, and by the end of the first paragraph they said 'We believe you.'"*

*The three men were able to talk to each other because Yemini Jews still spoke biblical Hebrew as a living language.*

*"The shaliach said 'You should go back to our homeland.'*

*"Look,' he told them. 'We have our own state now. We have a leader whose name is David'" — Ben-Gurion — "'and another leader whose name is Moshe.'" That was Moshe Sharett, who followed Ben-Gurion as prime minister.*

*“They asked ‘How would we get there?’ and he said ‘The airplanes would be waiting for you in Aden,’” a British-controlled Yemini seaport about a two-week donkey ride away. “So they asked him ‘What is an airplane?’ and he took a piece of paper out of his pocket, and he drew on it, and they looked at it, and they said, ‘It looks like an eagle. That’s what G-d promised to send us to take us there.’” In [Exodus 19](#), G-d talks about bringing the Israelites out of Egypt on eagles’ wings, and the promise of the ingathering of the exiles on eagles’ wings echoes in Jewish dreams.*

*“So my father and his friend turned around and went back to the village, and they told the rabbi. And the rabbi said to assemble everyone in the synagogue. They said Hallel,” the service of gratitude and thanksgiving that’s said on holidays, “and they said Shehecheyanu,” the blessing for new things, “and then the rabbi told everybody to be ready to move in five days.*

*“So we went to Aden, and the JDC and the Jewish Agency took good care of them, and they prayed that G-d would send the eagles.”*

*And then soon the planes came for them, and they went to Israel.*

*That was the airlift sometimes known as Operation Flying Carpet, but known to the people who it brought to their new lives as On Wings of Eagles.*

*“I asked my grandmother if they really thought the planes were eagles, and she said that they knew they weren’t really birds, ‘but we knew in our hearts for sure that this was what G-d meant.’*

*“And then the whole community was flown to Israel by Alaska Airlines.*

*Mr. Ozery has wondered about the faith it must have taken to leave everything, on the word of an unseen stranger, and strike off in search of a new, better life. “I asked my grandmother how that happened. Why they went. How did you trust him? You didn’t see the shaliach yourself.”*

*“They had no concerns,” he said that his grandmother told him. “No worries, despite the fact that it was dangerous to be on the road, particularly with babies.*

*Why?*

*“She told me, ‘I felt, we all felt in our hearts that this was the time for geulah.”  
Redemption.*

*Eight hours after it took off, the plane landed, and the Yemini Jews began their new lives in Israel. They were not storybook lives, as lives tend not to be, but as hard as many of those lives were, as difficult as assimilation into Israeli culture proved to be, their lives were far better than what the Yemini Jews who remained experienced.*

The Yeminite Jews found deep significance in these two words, Kanfei Nesharim, wings of eagles. It was something that happened in the Exodus long ago, but it also enabled a new Exodus from Africa to Israel in their own day. That a plane resembles a bird establishes the connection, but at its core, it's truly an emotional connection, symbolizing G-d's love and protection for the Jewish people then, now, and always.

Chag Sameach.