

## Sabbath Week

SHABBAT SHIRA – BESHALACH

# A Shabbat For The Birds

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*Special To The Jewish Week*

While many people may think that writing a parashah column is easy work — just open a few books, recall some old sermons and presto! — this column took a good deal of introspection, a few minutes over a hot stove, a brief study of ornithology and some good old-fashioned legwork.

It all started a few weeks ago when I boiled up some kasha and took it to Riverside Park with my 12-year-old son Judah in tow. I was on a mission to test a deep-seated memory. You see, when I was a young boy I spent much time in the company of two amazing women, my Great Aunts Minnie and Paulie. They were very pious women, scrupulous in the observance of the most arcane of Jewish customs. Every year on Shabbat Shira, literally the Shabbat of Song, they would feed kasha to the birds.

At least that is what I remembered. Was it a dream or was it real? I asked my rabbi, Stephen Friedman, and he said, yes, it is a custom to feed the birds on this Shabbat. He gave me two reasons. One of them is so complicated would take up the rest of the column, but the short one is that since this is the Shabbat of song, we honor the birds, who every day bring music in to our lives.

But Rabbi Friedman never heard of the kasha part.

I wasn't sure either. Do birds even like kasha? And, if they do, should it be cooked or raw?

Not sure, Judah and I brought both kinds to the park. We figured we'd find out.

Now, of course, this Shabbat means more to me than kasha and birds. It is the next chapter in the great liberation story that has so shaped our people. The Israelites leave Egypt with no plan, but God shows them the way. He splits the sea and drowns their enemies.

Israel raises its voice in a song of praise that recounts His glorious deeds. A slave people no more, they sing out their story: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has completely triumphed. The horse and his rider has he hurled

into the sea"

In fact, the Israelites broadcast the news. "The peoples have heard of it and trembled. Pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Then were the chieftains of Edom in agony. Trembling seized the lords of Moab. All the inhabitants of Canaan melted away. Terror and dread fell on them."

The Shira, as the song is known, is sung in a special tune that I can only associate with my kid brother, who celebrated his bar mitzvah on this parashah many years ago and reads it in synagogue every year at this time. (Happy Birthday, Dov!) As any Jewish child knows, you get to know your sibling's parashah even better than your own. (No pressure!)

Shabbat Shira apparently made a great impression on my life. From that little boy in the park feeding the birds with his great aunts, grew a journalist whose life's work is to tell people's stories, if not in song then in words.

And, certainly most significantly, I married a girl named Shira.

Judah is our youngest child and I was determined to pass on the bird-feeding tradition. It was a cold and gray day, and as we made our way to the park, I got nervous. There wasn't a bird in the sky. "Don't birds fly south for the winter, Daddy?" Judah asked.

Then he spotted one and then another; apparently not all birds.

He let loose a fusillade of raw kasha. The birds descended first in pairs and then by the dozens. Not to be outdone, I tossed out a handful of cooked kasha in the opposite directions.

This is what we learned: Sparrows favor raw kasha and pigeons go for the cooked variety. We watched them peck away and listened for their song. ■



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