

The Barnacle Goose And Other Jewish Monsters

There are some awesome monsters in ancient Jewish legends about the Bible. There are the ziz and the leviathan; there is the behomet — so large that it eats the produce of a thousand mountains every day, and needs all the water in the Jordan River to wash it down. The problem is solved by giving the behomet its own special river, the Yubal, which flows from Paradise.



— Raab

Then, of course, there is the giant reem, of which there are only two in existence at any given time, one male and one female; one reem is at one end of the world in the east, the other reem is at the other end of the world in the west. Every 70 years they come together to mate, an act which is fatal to both of them. As soon as the male reem has performed his laborious mating duties, the female bites him to death. She dies immediately after giving birth to a set of twins, male and female. The offspring migrate to the far ends of the earth, east and west, and the

cycle is repeated.

Such legends endure because they touch some half-hidden chords of our own common experience. They provide images which excite new intuitions about that experience. The reem may remind us of a deep strand in marital relationships; or it may send us a flash about east-west detente on the global scene. Monster legends have different meanings for people, according to their circumstance.

There is another kind of monster in Jewish legend, probing somewhat different layers of experience. The Adne Sadeh, known as the "man of the mountain," is an animal in the form of a human being. It is fixed to the ground by its navel cord; and cannot move any further than that "leash" will allow it to move. It eats whatever grows in the limited area around it or whatever creature wanders into its orbit.

Another "fixed" animal of Jewish legend is the barnacle-goose. It grows from a tree, and is forever fastened to that tree by its bill. As a matter of fact, there was controversy as to whether the barnacle-goose was really an animal, requiring slughter by the rules of kashreth; or whether it was a plant.

In contrast is the phoenix, rewarded with eternal life because it was the only bird which refused to eat of Eve's apple. When the phoenix grows old, it loses its feathers, becomes like an egg, and emerges a new bird. The phoenix soars high in the skies, is of a purple color like the rainbow, and its bird-song is rejoicing of life.

In this time of great change and dangerous currents, American Jewry has not yet decided what it will be. There is a tendency to be barnacle-goose, tied to the immediate past, short-sighted, unable to soar, destined to die on the vine. But the imperative at this time is to be phoenix, renewing life out of an unbroken past.

One sign: The overwhelming sea of young faces at High Holy Day services at many San Francisco area synagogues. Another sign: the Working Assembly which will be held at Terman Junior High School in Palo Alto on Sunday, Nov. 17. For the first time, the Jews of the South Peninsula will be getting together as a community to discuss what the Jewish institutions should be doing that they are not doing, or vice versa, about the public issues which critically face the Jews.

The key to renewal is participation. This is not going to be a good season for barnacle-geese.

Earl Raab
Candid Comments