

Ki Tetse 2 – August 20, 2010

The Torah reading of Ki Tetse shares the famous mitzvah of sparing the mother bird. According to the Torah, the mother bird must not be permitted to see the removal of the eggs from her nest. This mitzvah is only one of two mitzvot that has an explicit reward mentioned in Scripture. The other is, “Honor your father and your mother” which is found in the Ten Commandments. The reward is length of days. In fact, this mitzvah of the sparing the mother bird forms the backdrop of Rabbi Milton Steinberg's epic novel, “As a Driven Leaf”. Rabbi Steinberg uses this novel to address one of the most difficult issues of religious faith – Why do bad things happen to good people? At the beginning of the novel, a young man wishes to carry out the mitzvah of sparing the mother bird from seeing its eggs removed. As this young man pushes away the bird, the ladder supporting him moves and falls to the ground. The young man is killed – the exact opposite of the reward. Rabbi Steinberg uses this story as the turning point in the life of the apostate Talmudic rabbi – Elisha ben Abuyah. Rabbi Elisha becomes a tormented soul as he contemplates the death of the young man.

However, why is the mitzvah of sparing the bird rank with the honor due to one's parents? Why does it carry with it an explicit reward – although sometimes the reward may not be apparent in reality? I think the mitzvah of sparing the bird is emphasized as a teaching of compassion and respect for G-d's creation. Thus, by sparing the mother, the individual is reflecting G-d's own attributes of compassion and justice – midat hadin and midat harahamim, as they are referred to in rabbinic Hebrew. The Torah teaches us reverence for life as life derives its value from God Himself. Life – all life – is seen as a precious gift from an outside Source. The dietary laws of kashrut also teach us this lesson. The blood of the animal must be removed out of reverence for the source of life of the animal. Many of us remember mothers and grandmothers applying that thick kosher salt to a piece of meat in a basin. By the way, kosher salt is perfect in case it snows next winter in Salisbury. Blood is the life source of the animal – it must not be eaten. Reverence for life is the imitation of God's own behavior.

On the other hand, sparing the bird is also a sign of compassion. Along with reverence for life, we must also have compassion for all life. The Torah prohibits the muzzling of incompatible animal species to plow the field. The eating of a limb taken from a live animal is strictly prohibited. The dietary laws require the instantaneous death of an animal by the shohet, the kosher butcher. All of these commandments are motivated by “tsaar baalei chayim” - a sense of compassion for animal life.

Compassion and reverence for life are at the very heart of the religious impulse of Judaism. Life is the most sacred word in our tradition - “Hayyim”. Judaism is the religion that wishes to make ordinary life sacred – to uplift the ordinary and to transform it into the extra-ordinary. As we approach the Jewish New Year, we wish one another, “May you be written and sealed in the Book of Life.” Life is not only to be cherished – it is to be respected and treated compassionately. It is for this reason that sparing the mother bird is rewarded with length of days. Respect for life grants us in turn, a life of dignity and meaning. Although we do not know how long our lives will be, we can lengthen the quality of each day by filling it value. Perhaps the term “length of days” should not be understood chronologically, but rather spiritually. A life may be short on days, but long on purpose. On the other hand, a life can be many years, but those years can sometimes lack significance. The person who values the life of the mother bird will live a life of value. The person who respects his or her mother and father, will in turn, be transform into a person of dignity and worth. Sparing the mother bird may seem to be an insignificant mitzvah, but in reality, it is the essence of what it means to be religious – to respect all life, and to be compassionate to all life.