

Shabbat Ki Teitzei  
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Shabbat Shalom.

When people think about the Torah and animals, Noah's ark might come to mind first. Here's a joke about Noah's ark:

Why couldn't Noah catch many fish? He only had two worms! All the dads in the room, feel free to retell.

But the story of Noah's ark is not the only time the Torah talks about animals. It's actually the first of many appearances sprinkled throughout the rest of the Torah, including our Parsha today, Ki Teitzei. Sometimes it's narrative, and other times it's Mitzvot - commandments - about how we are to treat animals.

Let's start with our portion today, which includes the unusual Mitzvah called *Shiluach HaKen*. Here are the verses: *If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life.* (Dt. 22:6,7).

In other words, if you see a bird's nest and you want to take the eggs or the baby chicks, you are allowed to do so, but you must shoo away the mother bird first.

Why might that be?

Here are answers from two famous rabbis:

Maimonides says that animals feel pain too, and we send away the mother bird so it's spared the painful sight of seeing her offspring being taken away. It's about the animal.

Nachmonides disagrees and says it's not about compassion for the *bird* since human needs override those of animals. Rather, the Torah wishes us to act compassionately so that we instill this trait of compassion in ourselves. In other words, it's not about the animals but ourselves.

In short, the Torah wants us to cultivate habits of *kindness* toward others, even if they are not people. Especially if they're not people. Because these habits will eventually extend to how we interact with other people.

Don't think of this Mitzvah as a one-off either. No, the ethical treatment of animals is a pattern woven throughout the whole Torah. Consider these other Mitzvot given 5000 years ago:

-Animals slaughtered for meat must undergo slaughter known as *Shechita*, which takes the life as painlessly as possible. Otherwise they are not Kosher.

-Animals too must rest from their work on Shabbat.

-An ox and donkey may not plow while tied together because they work at different paces and might injure themselves.

-If an animal is carrying too heavy a load on its back, you must remove some of the load to make it manageable, as it's forbidden to cause them needless pain.

-You must feed your animals before you feed yourselves.

-When an ox is working in the field, you cannot muzzle it to prevent it from eating as it works.

-You cannot slaughter a mother and its young on the same day, as that would be cruel.

And there are yet other examples that guide us to treating them ethically.

Why would the Torah be so concerned about caring for animals? They too are G-d's creations, teaches Genesis. Originally Adam and Eve were *not permitted to eat meat at all*. Only after the wickedness of Noah's generation did G-d concede to humanity eating meat without the blood. But Adam and Eve were vegetarians. Chew on that, people.

At the same time, the Torah acknowledges that people are superior to animals. The same Genesis teaches that only people were created in G-d's image. People were created last, after animals, and G-d told people that we "can rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things on the earth" (Gn. 1:26). Indeed, we were permitted to kill certain animals for religious sacrifices back then - though not today - and of course we are allowed to eat meat today. As mentioned earlier, it's only kosher if meat is killed in a specific way that causes minimal pain to the animal itself.

I believe the Torah is supremely concerned about caring for animals because how we treat animals is a window into our character.

We know this intuitively.

Imagine that you are at a large gathering at someone's house. Someone needs to get through a door, but the family dog is sleeping in front of the door. And that person kicks the dog to get it to move. That cruelty to the dog says a lot about who that person is. Avoid that person. It reminds me of the Noahide law, one of seven commandments given to all humanity after the flood, that prohibits eating a limb from a live animal. It's just plain cruel.

And character is revealed the other way too. I performed a wedding recently for a couple. One key moment in their relationship, a moment when the bride knew that the groom was someone she wanted to spend her life with, was when she asked him to watch her dog when she was out of town for a few days. As bad luck would have it, the dog got sick. Not panicking, the boyfriend on his own spent much more time caring for this dog than he expected, and he took great care of it until she got back from her trip. Seeing him care for this animal that wasn't even his convinced her that this man truly had a kind heart. He was someone she wanted to be part of her family.

In fact, a similar story is told about our own leader Moses. The rabbis in the Midrash wonder why G-d selected Moses to be the one to lead the Jewish people. What was the early sign of his greatness?

Here's the legend: One day Moses was tending the sheep of his father-in-law, when one little lamb ran off. Moses chased after it, intent on not losing a single sheep. Eventually the lamb stopped to drink water at a brook. Instead of scolding or hitting the lamb, Moses said: "I understand you ran off just because you were thirsty. You must be so tired. Let me carry you on my back as we return to the flock." So Moses carried the lamb all the way back. G-d saw this and said: "Moses, you are the perfect shepherd for this flock of sheep, kind and compassionate and caring for every last one. I want you to be the shepherd for My flock, the people of Israel." Here we learn of Moses's character from his interactions with an animal, from a sheep. This fact is actually encoded into his Hebrew name. Moses is Moshe, Mem Shin Hay. Take those same three letters, change the vowels and you get the word *MiSeh*, which means, from the sheep. We learn the character of Moshe...*MiSeh*.

The Torah guides us to cultivate habits of kindness. It's easier to be kind to another when we are on the same level. But when we people are above animals on a spiritual

level, it may be tempting for some people to take advantage. That's precisely why the Torah insists we be kind to animals.

I want to take this a little further. I think this message of being kind toward others not perceived to be on our level is in relationship to people too.

It's important for me to reinforce that the Torah believes that *all* people are equal in G-d's eyes. Genesis says outright that Adam and Eve were created in G-d's image, and they were not Jewish, just human beings. For G-d, and ideally for us, no person is more valuable, or on a higher level, than anyone else.

But people are people, and sometimes we have warped understandings of each other. Unfortunately it's in human nature to assign more worth to some than others.

Imagine you work for a large company and there's a meeting for the whole staff. When the CEO enters the room, many people are going to show her lots of respect. This could be because of her character or simply because of her title and position. What about when those earning minimum wages enter the room? What about them? Do as many people say hello to them?

Again, the Torah calls us to do precisely that, to see that humanity in every last person, even if they have a job or a status that is not perceived by others to be equal. The more each of us can do this, the more we can create a society grounded in equality and kindness.

I remember a story shared by the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks about Prince Charles, now King of England.

“For a [special] service in 2001, Prince Charles came to the synagogue. There he met members of the community as well as leaders of Anglo-Jewry. What was impressive is that he spent as much time talking to the young men and women *who were doing security duty* as he did to the great and good of British Jewry. For security reasons, people volunteer to stand guard at communal events – part of the work of one of our finest organizations, the Community Security Trust. Often, people walk past them, hardly noticing their presence. But Prince Charles did notice them, and made them feel as important as anyone else on that glittering occasion. Greatness is humility.”

What begins with animals never ends with animals. When we widen our hearts to be kind to others, especially those not like us, we create a society better for all of us.

Shabbat Shalom.