



THE NEW OLD PATH

BY RABBI BENJI LEVY
CEO Of Mosaic United

Finding Humanity in Animals

One of the greatest moral developments in the last century is reflected in the way we treat animals. From time immemorial, societies subjected animals to sadistic cruelty and savage abuse simply for the convenience or entertainment of humans. Today, however, most developed societies have a comprehensive system of laws in place to protect animals from unnecessary harm. In celebrating and honouring the value inherent in all of creation the Torah was one of the first codes to ever legislate against animal cruelty, several examples of which appear in *Parashat Ki Tetze*.

One of the more famous and enigmatic examples of the protection of animals is the legislation concerning a mother bird and her nest eggs:

If you happen upon a bird's nest...and the mother bird is roosting over the young birds or eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. Rather, you

shall surely send the mother bird away, and take the young for yourself, in order that it will be good for you (*Deut. 22:6-7*).

Maimonides understands the underlying purpose of this law as being to discourage people from taking the eggs or chicks from the nest at all (*Guide for the Perplexed 3:48*). Since such young birds and eggs are most likely unfit for consumption, in the face of this requirement to shoo away the mother bird from her children, many people will not bother with approaching the nest at all and spare it in its entirety. Such behaviour can inculcate compassion forcing confrontation with the emotions of a potentially bereaved mother. Through bringing us to consider the emotional state of a parent, of any species, the Torah is guiding us to heighten, condition and reinforce our understanding for the emotional welfare of all.

Rabbi Obadiah Sforno, a sixteenth-century Italian commentator, offers an explanation of this law that is surprisingly relevant for our own society. He points out that if one were to swipe both a mother bird and her offspring, one would have effectively destroyed that family line. By sending the mother bird away, we offer her the chance of beginning her life anew, of producing more children and playing her part in the perpetuation of her species. In other words, the Torah is raising our awareness

of environmental conservation. When utilising natural resources, one of the most important considerations must always be sustainability. We cannot simply take what we want from the earth, because it cannot always replenish itself to keep up with our desires. The spirit of this law teaches us to be constantly reassessing our relationship with our environment, to ask ourselves whether we are leaving sufficient resources to sustain our children and whether we are calibrating our actions to ensure that we don't exhaust our natural habitat. Sforno's interpretation of this law teaches us that the thoughtless destruction of an entire line of a species is a desecration of God's natural system.

There is an important lesson that we can learn from the explanations of both Maimonides and Sforno in relation to this most unusual commandment. The Torah is painfully aware that our perceived dominion over animals may easily lead us to practice cruelty, greed and destruction upon our helpless fellow creatures. Equally, it is concerned with inculcating the character traits of empathy and kindness witan all of humanity. With the advantages and intelligence, we have over other species, comes great responsibility.

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Through commandments like this, relating to our behaviour towards animals, we are guided towards a life of care and concern to all creatures.

When hiring educators, those with the sacred task of teaching the next generation, I often do so in coffee shops and restaurants. One reason I enjoy interviewing in this context is to see how the potential employee acts towards the people around us – the staff and strangers who could be perceived to be insignificant to our conversation. When sharing this strategy with a student of mine, they quoted Sirius Black, who, in a rare moment of acting as a good role model, tells Harry Potter and his friends, ‘if you want to know what a man’s like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals.’ On the way to the top of the figurative food chain, many can lose their sensitivity towards those lower down. Through commanding us to treat animals in a humane way, the Torah educates us to maintain our humanity in everything we do.

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