

Parshas Ki Seitze – Rabbi Jonathan Shooter

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The Torah gives the commandment that upon discovering a nest, one must send away the mother bird before taking its young or its eggs, "so that it will be good for you and will prolong your days" (Devarim 22:7). The Midrash states that there are some mitzvos for which the reward is honour, and others for which the reward is wealth. The Midrash continues that for this particular mitzvah, one is promised that if one doesn't have children prior to performing it, he will be granted them afterwards as a reward. This is alluded to in the beginning of the above verse: "you shall surely send away the mother and take the young for you." Although the basic understanding is that after sending away the mother, one can keep the young, the verse can also mean that one who performs the mitzvah, will "take" for himself the young, i.e., be rewarded with young. How can the Midrash say that this is what the verse refers to, when we find the verse explicitly talks about long life being the reward for this mitzvah's fulfillment? The Ksav Sofer answers that in fact there is no contradiction. The two rewards are really the same thing. It is inferred from the Gemara (Nedarim 64b) that a person who leaves children behind him is considered as if he hasn't died. Through his children, his memory will last throughout the generations. This is the intent of the Midrash. If you don't have children, Hashem will give them to you, and through them the verse's promise will be fulfilled. The "prolonged days" will be through descendants. There is only one other place in the Torah where these rewards — that it will be "good for you" and you will have length of days — are promised. This is in the portion of the Torah dealing with the mitzvah of honouring one's parents. Let us examine three different approaches to answering the question of why they carry the same reward.

Rav Yaakov Weinberg explains the common factor between these two mitzvos. Both require recognition of mesirus nefesh (self-sacrifice). The Torah tells us to honour our parents because of the great self-sacrifice that parents undergo for their children. By promising "length of days," people will come to appreciate this. On the other hand, if someone tries to take the young of a mother, the mother will remain with its offspring rather than fly away, in order to save them, even at great cost to itself. This is the maternal instinct in full force — a mother willing to sacrifice her own freedom in order to protect her young. Taking the young in front of the mother bird is taking advantage of the maternal instinct and of the mesirus nefesh it naturally exhibits for its young. By sending it away, one shows appreciation for the mesirus nefesh that even a bird has, which is why one is also entitled to length of days.

Through these two mitzvos, the Torah is giving great recognition to the sacrifices, trials and tribulations that a parent undergoes. The Mishnah (Berachos 33b) says that if one says about the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird that "Hashem is merciful on the bird," he is to be silenced. According to one opinion, this is because really it is a decree of Hashem with no other reason. The Vilna Gaon explains that there are two mitzvos where long life is promised, to show that perfection is achieved in a person only if he uses two opposite character traits, such as mercy and cruelty. If a person is using only one trait, it does not prove that he is righteous; it only demonstrates that this is his nature. If one serves Hashem with two opposite traits then it can be attested to that he is righteous.

Therefore, Hashem gave the mitzvah of honouring parents. This manifests itself especially when they are elderly and one has to have mercy on them. Then there is the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird. The Yerushalmi says that sometimes, in its sadness at being sent away, the mother bird will drown itself in water. Certainly this is very cruel. Therefore, the reward for one's keeping both mitzvos is length of days, to show us that since he is using two opposite character traits, his service of Hashem is complete. This is also seen in the verse "To execute vengeance upon the nations...that will be the splendor of all His devout ones" (Tehillim 149:7-9). Even though His people are righteous by being merciful, it is praiseworthy that they will use the opposite trait when necessary and take revenge on their enemies.

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