

כי תצא

SHILUACH HAKAN

שלח תשלח את האם ואת הבנים תקח לך למען ייטב לך והארכת ימים

You shall send away the mother [bird], but the young you may take for yourself, that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days (*Devarim* 22:7).

The reward for the observance of this *mitzvah* is a joyful life and longevity, the same reward associated with the observance of the *mitzvah* of honoring one's parents (*Devarim* 5:16).

The errant *Tanna*, Elisha ben Avuyah once witnessed a father who asked his son to retrieve young birds from a bird's nest at the top of a building. The boy sent away the mother bird, following the Torah's edict, only then taking away the young ones. As the boy descended from the ladder, he fell and was killed. Elisha then questioned the propriety of the Torah: where is this boy's "length of days" and where is this boy's "happiness"? Seeing no answer, he became an apostate and rejected Hashem (*Kidushin* 39:). Others say Elisha saw the tongue of the murdered Rabbi Chutzpis the Interpreter (a martyr of the Hadrianic persecution) being dragged by a pig. In all likelihood, both incidents served to unsettle Elisha, to unbalance him to such an extent that he renounced Hashem (*ibid.*).

The *Gemara* suggests that had he known of his grandson's (Rav Yaakov's) teaching that the promise of bliss and long life is to be fulfilled only in the world to come, and one must not expect to receive the reward for a good deed in this world, then Elisha would not have come to doubt the truth of the Torah and would not have become a disbeliever (*Chulin* 142•). It is, however, difficult to comprehend that a *Tanna* of Elisha ben Avuyah's stature, who was eligible to travel with Rabbi Akiva to the *pardeis* (the unrevealed world) (*Chagigah* 14:), was not aware of this principle. Obviously, there was an inherent shortcoming in Elisha's character that portended such a loss of faith. All his learning and all his knowledge did not help him maintain his faith when he was confronted with catastrophe.

Elisha, in hindsight, acknowledged that his Torah career was defective from the start. All the great men of Yerushalayim were present at his *bris*. While all the other guests were busy celebrating, the two great sages Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua made their way to a separate chamber to continue with their Torah studies. The holiness engendered by their study was so great that a Heavenly fire descended which engulfed them with honor. Avuyah, Elisha's father, was so impressed with this holy sight, that he vowed to devote Elisha to a career of Torah study. He wanted the holy glory he had just witnessed for his son; his intention was not pure. Torah must be studied for Heaven's sake, not for personal achievement and status. Because of this, Elisha acknowledged that his Torah career was doomed from the start (*Yerushalmi Chagigah* 9:).

It should be noted that *Chazal* state:

לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה ומצות אף על פי שלא לשמה שמתוך שלא לשמה בא לשמה
A man should always occupy himself with Torah and good deeds, though it is not
for their own sake, for out of [doing good] with an ulterior motive there comes
[doing good] for its own sake (*Pesachim* 50:).

Significantly, the language used by our Sages is that “a man should always....” This means that it pays to live an entire life driven by ulterior motive in order to achieve success, rather than live a life devoid of Torah. In spite of this passage, Elisha’s career was deemed to be tainted because the elite group that was *Tannaim*, of which he was one, is not included in the above injunction. The study of Torah brings reward whether one’s motive is pure or impure, as long as malicious one-upmanship in learning is not a motive (*Tosafos, Ta’anis* 7•). Impure motives imply an intellectualization of the Torah process, without imbuing one’s body and soul with holiness. One can know every Torah fact there is to know, but impurity in motive does not allow for total physical and spiritual assimilation of that knowledge. Hence, when such a person is challenged by a catastrophic occurrence, his entire Torah persona is subject to disintegration. When Elisha was faced with the untimely death of an innocent boy, or provoked by the ignominious treatment of Rabbi Chutzpis, all of his learning could not insulate him from the shock, and he lost all faith. Since his Torah was independent from his being and it was not integrated into his thought processes, he cracked under the pressure.

This principle can be better understood by examining the life of Yosef *Hatzadik*. When Yosef was confronted by Potiphar’s wife and urged to commit adultery (*Bereishis* 39:12), he had to muster all his spiritual energy to face the challenge. Mere Torah knowledge, the mere ability to espouse words regarding salacious behavior, would not have been sufficient. He would have easily yielded to temptation had he not conjured up a mental image of his father admonishing him against immorality (*Sotah* 36:). The ability to invoke his father’s teachings was only possible due to intense practice. Yosef integrated Torah into his very being — Torah was not a mere act of intellect — it had been internalized. With it in his arsenal, he was able to confute spiritual disaster.

The *Gemara (Yerushalmi Chagigah* 9:) offers additional insight into Elisha’s spiritual demise. His mother imbued him with an appreciation of foreign music, which he carried throughout his life, and Greek song never ceased from his mouth (*Chagigah* 15:). One could not grow in Torah, especially at that time, and simultaneously maintain allegiance to a foreign way of life. It is certainly permissible, and even mandatory, to be involved with *Olam Hazeih*, but to have foreign ideals compete with the supremacy of Torah will only result in tragedy. This virus of foreign ideals, coupled with the impurity of his motives in the acquisition of Torah, led to Elisha’s downfall.

Elisha had failed to perceive the depth of the *mitzvah* of *shiluach hakan*. The Ramban (*Devarim* 22:6) explains that it is our own deficiencies which impede our understanding of the reason behind the commandments. The rationale for the *mitzvos* is multileveled, and the explanations of the *mitzvos* are revealed to each individual in direct proportion to his acquisition and understanding of Torah ideals. The commandments were given “for the purpose of refining man.” *Mitzvos* eliminate all evil belief from our hearts and imbue us with the Truth (see *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:26).

Rashi (*Berachos* 33:) explains that *shiluach hakan* is not intended necessarily to teach mankind pity, but is solely a decree from Hashem. These decrees govern even seemingly insignificant, and perhaps even implausible, life situations; nevertheless they must be adhered to. Man is merely a servant of Hashem, and a servant must follow his Master's orders blindly. The Rambam (*Hilchos Tefilah* 9:7) reaffirms Rashi's teaching by pointing out that if the Torah's intent were to teach man to have pity for animals, how then could ritual slaughter be permitted?

It is now difficult to comprehend a seemingly contradictory statement by the Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* (3:48). He writes that the reason for the commandment to release the mother bird, and not to kill it and its young in one day, is to warn mankind against undue distress against animals under such circumstances. It is patently unfair, unjust, that the mother bird should be made to suffer simply because she demonstrates mercy and loyalty to her young. She could have abandoned them and left them on their own. Instead, she elected to remain attached to her offspring and resolutely watch over them. In recognition of her devotion, the Torah commands us regarding the *mitzvah* of *shiluach hakan*. The Ramban (*Devarim* 22:6) concurs with the Rambam that the reason for this *mitzvah* is to actually eliminate a cruel heart from man and to teach him compassion and kindness.

What must be understood is that this *mitzvah* (as with all *mitzvos*), is a "two way street." There is an obligation that man has to Hashem, and then there is a benefit that Hashem wants to bestow upon man. On the one hand, the commandment is designed for man to demonstrate his loyalty and commitment to Hashem, as a slave to his Master. Rashi (*Berachos* 33:) and the Rambam in *Hilchos Tefilah* see this aspect of *shiluach hakan*. On the other hand, Hashem wishes to impart something additional to us. He wants to teach us the concept of pity and the importance of not exploiting someone's loyalty. In this "two way street" paradigm, man must understand that his sole purpose is to serve Hashem, period; but at the same time, Hashem has arranged that the *mitzvah* brings to man a further spiritual refinement.

Ultimate reward for the performance of *mitzvos* aside, it must be understood that the primary purpose of a commandment is to be a building block to perfection. *Mitzvos* refine and discipline men into achieving an elevated status as human beings. Elisha intellectually understood the rationale and Halachic implication of *mitzvos*, but due to the deficiencies of his developmental years, he failed to integrate and assimilate the benefits of *mitzvah* observance into his own essence. Elisha's failure to grasp the multilevel nature of *shiluach hakan* (as with all *mitzvos*) proved tragic.

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