

Rabbi Megan Brumer
Parashat Ki Teizei 5783
August 25, 2023

As a follow-up to the items I have mentioned in this sermon, please save the date for a park cleanup on Sunday afternoon, October 15. I hope you will join me! More details will follow.

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I don't know about you, but I love a good stroll through the woods—taking in the beauty of nature and breathing in the clean, crisp air. Being outside, surrounded by nature, is something that I have learned not to take for granted.

In this week's Torah portion, Ki Teizei, Moses tells the Israelites more than 75 commandments, but one stands out to me. It says: "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."¹

The word "chance" seems significant here. The Hebrew word used is יִקְרָא, encounter, and it means to meet or come upon unexpectedly. It applies to a bird's nest you might encounter on a hike through the woods, or in the backyard of your house, whether you know it is there or not.

This law sounds like two others you might be familiar with: the prohibition against cooking a kid in its mother's milk and the prohibition against killing an animal and its mother on the same day.²

So, why is this important?

Nachmonides, a 13th-century Jewish scholar, says the purpose of these *mitzvot* are to teach us that we should not have a cruel heart and that we should be compassionate.³

Jewish tradition has many laws on how to treat animals, both animals out in the wild and animals in our care. For example, animals that work for us—like horses or mules or oxen—are to be given a day of rest each week just like we are.⁴ In addition, we are told to give food to our animals before we feed ourselves.⁵

These *mitzvot* fall under a category called *tzar ba'alei chayim*, the ethical treatment of animals. In *Genesis*, God gives humans the power to rule over all the animals of the earth.⁶ Throughout human history, we have used that power for both good and bad—for example: eating animals as food, using their hides to make clothing and parchment, using their labor to help us in agriculture and much more. But we need to remember that with great power comes great responsibility.

The Tur HaAroch, written by Jacob ben Asher, a 14th-century Jewish scholar, goes one step further saying, "The purpose of the legislation in both instances is to ensure that our hearts will not become insensitive to animal's feelings, as once they have become such, the next step is insensitivity to our fellow humans' feelings."⁷ This reason brings it home for us. The way we treat animals is indicative of how we will treat human beings. If we use animals for our own ends without sensitivity to their needs or well-being, how are we likely to treat each other?

The Tur HaAroch continues with another reason as well which I identify with, conservation. If, instead of sending the mother bird away when we come to take her eggs, we kill one mother bird and then another and another, we may end up contributing to the extinction of the species in the future.⁸ So many species in the world right now are on the brink of extinction, including multiple species of tuna and salmon which we eat as food. We need to harvest our food sustainably so that we can ensure there are enough resources for our future.

One thing you will learn about me is that I enjoy watching TV. One of my favorite summer shows is *Deadliest Catch*. It is a show about crab fishing in the Bering Sea. From this show, I have learned more about the crab fishery than I ever thought I needed to know, but it has been fascinating finding out more every season. The captains all have quotas of how many they can capture, as well as only catching adult males and sending females and juveniles back to ensure population growth in the future. Every year, surveys look at population growth; and when a species is vulnerable, no matter how popular it is, they shut down the fishery so that the population can bounce back. This is an example of how everyone works together to ensure the future of an important animal population.

Conservation goes further than just the animals we eat. There is a whole ecosystem and food chain surrounding the animals we consider food; and if we break the ecosystem, or remove a species from the food chain, then everything has the potential to fall apart. More than 1,300 animal species are listed as endangered or threatened in the U.S. under the Endangered Species Act, and according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species, more than 40,000 animal and plant species are threatened with extinction worldwide.⁹ These include some that we might not think about, such as elephants, gorillas, lions, turtles and more. Because of this, we need to be aware of every action we take and how it affects nature around us.

Conservation can also focus on natural resources that currently exist in our world and might not exist forever. As a society, we have destroyed forests, depleted fossil fuels and polluted our air and water. As our populations increase, we continue to use more and more natural resources. Therefore, we need to work toward conservation—replenishing whatever natural resources we can and working to save the resources we still have.

I know, for me, sometimes the whole picture can seem overwhelming; and I ask myself, what can I do to make a difference?

We can work to protect our planet in many ways: We can reduce our carbon footprint by examining how we use energy, by reducing food waste and buying less food, by purchasing products that protect forests or are sustainably harvested as noted with the Forest Stewardship Council label or the Seafood Watch Card, and by reducing plastic use to prevent these plastics from entering our oceans. As the butterfly effect shows, one small action can have a much larger impact than can be seen. This action could be negative, but it can also be positive. These and more are small actions that can ultimately make a large impact.

One part of my role as the assistant rabbi here at TBE is social action programming. I want to work with our community to better the world around us through a multitude of activities, such as park cleanups, food packing and *tzedakah* projects. I also want to create learning opportunities to understand the social justice issues that exist in the world, so we can be the best advocates for the causes we believe in. Reform Judaism places a strong emphasis on *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, and I believe that we all need to work individually, and as a community, to engage in acts of *tikkun olam* in whatever form we can.

So, the next time you are strolling through the woods, or are out in nature, be aware of the actions you take and the repercussions that those actions can have upon the ecosystem and the world, both positively and negatively. We want to make sure that the world we live in continues for the next many generations. I know I want to ensure that my grandchildren can have the same experiences that I do strolling through the woods, enjoying the nature around them.

1 Deuteronomy 22:6-7

2 Exodus 13:19, Leviticus 22:28

3 Ramban on Deuteronomy 22:6

4 Exodus 20:10, Deuteronomy 5:14

5 Gittin 62a

6 Genesis 1:26

7 Tur HaAroch on Deuteronomy 22:6

8 Ibid

9 <https://www.epa.gov/endangered-species/endangered-species-species-information-factsheets>, <https://www.iucnredlist.org/>