

## **Ki Teitzei: An Easy Mitzvah?**

- Nisson Shulman.

Is Shiluach Hakan an easy mitzvah? Yet according to the Gemara, freedom, redemption, geulah and salvation all depend on it! The reason, the basic principle in Judaism that small details are vital to the master plan of the universe and especially to train men and women to reach the goals they ought to attain.

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Shaleach teshalach et haem veet habanum tikach lach. “Do not take fledgling birds for yourself without first sending the mother bird away from the nest”.

Our sages tell us that this is an easy commandment to fulfill, requiring little sacrifice, and yet bringing great reward, such as long life. Pirkei Avot cautions us against taking easy mitzvot lightly, commanding us to be as careful of the easy commandments as the difficult ones, for “we can have no idea how great is the reward for each mitzvah”: Hizaher bemitzvah kala kebachamura, sheeyn ata yodea matan secharam shel mitzvot.

And not only because of the reward; an easy mitzvah can be immensely significant. The Midrash teaches how significant an “easy” mitzvah can be by saying that a great deal depends on the mitzvah of shiluach hakan. Freedom depends on it, for if you let the mother bird go you will also be able to proclaim freedom to enslaved people. Redemption depends on it, for if you let the mother bird go, you will hasten the coming of Eliyahu HaNavi who is the prophet of redemption. Salvation depends on it, for if you let the mother bird go you will hasten the coming of the Mashiach. So says the Midrash.

Well, it surely is a significant mitzvah, if freedom, redemption and salvation depend on its fulfillment. But why should this be so?

It is because of a basic principle in Judaism. For all this and more depends on this small detail in human life. Because one of the basic themes of Judaism is that no detail is unimportant. Details are important in the plan of the universe, and especially important in training man and woman to reach the goals they ought to attain. The easy mitzvot train us for the hard ones. All mitzvot train us for great goals, and bring their attainment closer. Lo nitnu mitzvot ela letzoref bahen et Yisrael (B”R 44, Midrash Shmuel Ch. 4). That is what our rabbis meant when they said that the mitzvot were given to purify our people.

Psychologists tell us about how to reach life's ideals. They say these ideals must not be set so high that they become unattainable. Yet we also know that we cannot forego the principles by which we must live, be they ever so high. Judaism has given us the proper approach that satisfies both these requirements. That approach is to attend to details, one by one, step-by-step, and they will add up to the highest ideals: as the proverb says “Palesn maagal raglecha vekol derachecha yikonu (Proverbs 4:26) “Weigh each succeeding step and all your highways shall be true.”

Little things often mean the most. Many brushstrokes, one after the other, finally make up the masterpiece. So too, many little acts finally make up the ideal life. Training a child to say “please” and “thank you” will help make the total gentleman and lady once that child grows to become an adult. Often you can tell the fineness of a bride or bridegroom in little acts of consideration or inconsideration during the time of preparing for a wedding. An athlete doesn't become great without constant training every step of the way; every little act of practice contributing towards his greatness.

The Shunamite woman was convinced, says the book of Kings, that Elisha was truly a man of God. How was she convinced? Not, says the prophet, by any miracle he performed, nor even by the great things he said, but simply by the way he ate, talked, by little things that are immensely significant about the total person.

And so our rabbis teach that the little deeds, mitzvot, which seem easy, can actually be so significant, that they can well ultimately lead us to the greatest of life's ideals, even to freedom, redemption, salvation, Eliahu Hanavi's announcement of the Mashiach himself.

The small things in our lives will altogether remake our lives. They will surely remake our personalities. And in this season of teshuva, let us be reminded that they will even remake our souls. That is the reason why all the great principles of Torah are also stated in specifics, in real and concrete details; in small deeds, which are daily required. For instance: the Torah commands compassion to all creatures; and specifically requires that we keep the ox unmuzzled when he threshes so that he may eat his fill, and that we may not plow with an ox and a donkey together.

The Torah commands the high principle that we respect the dignity of the human personality. But it teaches this in specific mitzvot. For instance, it teaches that even an executed murderer shall not be left hanging in public view but must be swiftly buried. It teaches that insulting a neighbor is tantamount to bloodshed. It teaches that even the High Priest and even on Yom Kippur, when the whole service and duty would be overset by doing so, must yet himself take up and bury a met mitzvah, an abandoned corpse which he came across when there was no one else to bury him.

The Torah commands that we seek justice, justice only, and then commands specifics: moznay tzedek, hin tzedek, eifat tzedek, that we maintain absolutely correct weights and measures, and practice altogether correct business conduct. Thus we must pay the laborer his hire on the very day of his work. We could go on and on.

There are other faiths that do not pay such attention to details. For to them the great principle of having faith is all-important. The details are not so important. Creed takes precedence over deed. To believe is the important thing. To do is not so significant. Of course this is based on a view of man, which maintains that since the human being is basically corrupt, deeds cannot be expected. Only an outcry of the soul is expected. Judaism however, believes in the human being's powerful potential and therefore expects from the human being the attainment, not only of faith but also of action as well.

Actually, the whole historical process is seen differently because of this. And not only because

we Jews see God as watching over us at every step in our history. For God demands of man a corresponding response to His Providence. God demands that we help share in our destiny. But how?

Not by a leap of faith, but rather through painstaking details. Just as the Almighty requires attention to details that train the person to become pure and noble; just so He requires this from our society so that the society becomes just and righteous; so too He requires us to meet history's demands one step, even one painful step at a time

Perhaps that is why we never lost hope in what seemed to be an endless exile. Perhaps that is why we had a reservoir of strength and readiness to sacrifice greatly, that appeared unbelievable even in the face of the most horrible persecution. Surely that was why victims of pogroms and Holocaust and of the Nazis in our time were able to strive to survive, one day at a time, so that some did, indeed, survive.

And surely that was how our halutzim, our pioneers in Israel, were ready to purchase and work and fight for Israel, a dunam at a time, a penny at a time, each drop of sweat and precious blood by precious drop of sweat and blood. And that is how we built every garden plot and every building in Israel, a stone and a brick at a time.

So we will advance to the time of the Moshiach, step-by-step, with patience, and without wavering from our purpose. And this is the great lesson we have learned from our historical condition. And with this steady, unwavering movement forward, we will indeed reach that time when the mitzvot we do such as shiluach hakan, will bring the fulfillment of all their promise and more; of freedom, redemption, peace, mashiach tzidkenu, bimhera biyamenu amen.

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(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)