

PARASHAS VA'ESCHANAN

Opposites Are Equal

(or: Of Parents and Eggs)

What does honoring parents have to do with collecting birds' eggs? Both of these seemingly unrelated activities figure among the list of the Torah's commandments. The obligation to honor one's parents is, of course, one of the Ten Commandments, as we read in this week's portion. There is also a *mitzvah* to send away the mother bird before taking her eggs from her nest. How are these two *mitzvos* connected?

These are the only two *mitzvos* for which the Torah specifies the rewards of fulfillment. In general, the Torah does not speak about specific reward for the performance of *mitzvos*. All we are told is that if we follow the commands of the Torah loyally and sincerely we will be abundantly blessed, but we are not told how each individual *mitzvah* is rewarded. In these two cases, however, the Torah tells us that observance is rewarded with long life. Why does the Torah single these out for special mention? And why is their reward identical?

The commentators observe that in a certain sense these two *mitzvos* are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. Honoring one's parents is the most difficult *mitzvah* to perform properly. At its root it is an expression of gratitude for a debt that can never be repaid. Our parents invest incalculable time, effort and toil into bringing us up, but even more important they give us the gift of life. No matter how much we do for our parents, we can never even the accounts. Moreover, the constant requirement to subordinate our own interests and desires to the needs of our parents goes against the natural urge to be independent and free.

On the other hand, sending off the mother bird before taking her eggs is just about the easiest *mitzvah* to fulfill. Just one wave of the hand to shoo away the mother, and the *mitzvah* is done. What could be easier?

Nonetheless, they both earn the same reward.

This is the lesson the Torah is teaching us here. We cannot measure the value of a *mitzvah* by our own yardsticks. A difficult *mitzvah* is not necessarily more valuable than a simple one. Each *mitzvah* provides a singular opportunity to connect with the Almighty, and if its performed with the proper spirit, it is equal to all others.

Two men came to visit a great sage whom they had not seen in many years. The sage, who was already old and feeble, did not immediately recognize them. He looked more closely, and finally the light of recognition appeared in his eyes.

"I remember you," he said to one of the men. "I traveled to your town twenty-five years ago when I was raising money for an orphanage. You gave me a donation. Yes, yes, I remember you well. And who is your friend?"

"But sir," the second man protested. "How come you don't remember me? I was also there when you came to our town. I also gave you money for the orphanage. In fact, I gave you five times as much money as my friend here did. How come you remember him but not me?"

"My dear fellow," said the sage, "I don't remember how much money your friend here gave me. But I do remember that as soon as I finished speaking he ran up to me with tears streaming down his face and pressed an envelope into my hand. I could see his heart breaking with compassion for the unfortunate children in the orphanage. Many other people also came forward with envelopes and donations but without the tears. I don't remember them."

In our own lives, our state of mind is more important than the actual deeds we do. If we contribute to a good cause, we gain the favor of the Almighty not by the size of our donation but by the feelings and thoughts in which our donations are wrapped. Whether caring for an elderly parent or sending off a mother bird, our passion, love and devotion are the true measures of our achievement..