

L'Chaim – To Long Life

The search for long life has been a historic and global effort. The fountain of youth motivated explorers to traverse vast bodies of water. This week's Torah portion, *Ki Teitze*, lists two mitzvot that, if performed, carry with it the promise of long life.

The first mitzvah is the commandment to send away a mother bird before taking her eggs or chicks. If you do that you will have a length of days. (Deuteronomy 22:7) The second mitzvah, toward the very end of the portion, is the mitzvah to conduct fair business practices. We are to have one set of weights and measures – in our pockets in our homes. If we adhere to this commandment, God promises us the length of days on the land. (ibid, 25:15)

At the revelation moment at Sinai, God promised the Jews another opportunity to live the length of days with the fifth commandment: "Honor your mother and father so that your days increase on the land." (Exodus 20:11) The Jewish fountain of youth, the ticket to long life, can be found in the observance of these commandments.

But our tradition counts of 613 mitzvot that we may perform, what about *these* three mitzvot gives them the distinction of carrying the blessing of the length of days?

The first mention of a mitzvah carrying the lengthening of our days is the command to honor our parents. Typically, we read the Ten Commandments as two halves: the first half deals with the mitzvot that strengthen our relationship between man and God, religious commands; the second half deals with mitzvot that improve the quality of relationship between man and fellow man, societal commands.

The fifth mitzvah, however – honor your parents – seems to be misplaced. That is a commandment that should reside in the second half of the tablets, why does the Torah locate the mitzvah of honoring parents alongside the mitzvot of theological content?

Honor your parents is a transition mitzvah. While parents are people, parents are also God-like. (See Ramban, comments to Exodus, ibid) The commandment to honor parents is not simply a task to honor people; it's a mitzvah that demands us to think more deeply about who our parents are. From an act of love and faith, they, like God, created us from nothing. To be mindful of the role our parents played in bringing us into existence is live a full life.

Perhaps, in promising long life for certain mitzvot, the Torah tries to encourage her students to reassess our relationships. Without the Torah's encouragement, we might be completely indifferent to the value of kindness to animals; to maternal love, even in non-verbal creatures. Without the Torah's encouragement, we might justify unregulated business practice. In my shop, I am bound by my civic duty to act with honesty and not to steal, but in my home all bets are off; I can do as I please.

The life that finds significance in the act of shooing away a mother bird and bringing a sense of integrity into our personal lives is, indeed, a very full life.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach

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