



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Ki Teitzei

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Ki Teitzei

How to Build the Perfect Nest



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Birds soar to the greatest heights, while also capable of landing on the ground down below. Birds endeavor to nest, protect their young, and pass on their tradition to their fledglings.

Jews are analogous to birds. We soar to the greatest heights, while landing on the ground down below. We endeavor to nest, protect our young, and pass on our tradition to our fledglings.

We once had a nest, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem where the Divine Presence was revealed for all to experience and feel. But what about today – how do we nest today? How do we soar to spiritual heights while simultaneously living upon this material earth down below? How do we protect our young and pass on our tradition? In a world of confusion, how do we wing it?

The answer is found in a *Shiluach HaKen*, the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird.

This sermon examines the interpretation of this mitzvah as presented by the third Rebbe of Chabad, the Tzemach Tzedek, who explains sending away of the mother bird in a most pertinent, relevant, and practical way – and how it is the basis for nesting, teaching our young, and passing on our eternal legacy.

HOW TO BUILD THE PERFECT NEST: LESSONS FROM *SHILUACH HAKEN*

1. Mother Bird (Joke)

Sidney passes by a pet shop in Oxford Street and notices a parrot in the window selling for \$1,000. He goes inside and asks why it costs so much. The salesman tells him the parrot speaks five languages.

“Five languages!” exclaims Sidney. “Does it speak Yiddish?”

“*Vos far a frageh! Zicher, Sure it does,*” says the salesman.

As his mother lives by herself in Miami Beach, Sidney decides to send her the parrot as a present – it will keep her company, he reasons. So he pays the \$1,000 and arranges for the shop to deliver the parrot.

The next day he phones his mother: “Momma, Did you like the parrot I bought you?”

“Mmm, it voz delicious!” she says. “Such a piece of chicken I didn’t have since your father passed. Thank you!”

“What do you mean ‘delicious’?”

“I made a lovely roast with potatoes out of it and saved dem bones for soup. They both came out great!”

“But momma, the parrot wasn’t for eating. It spoke five languages – including Yiddish!”

“Really?! So vhy ven I voz putting her in dem pot she didn’t even say a peep?!”

2. Mothers and Birds

I would like to talk today about two seemingly different topics but which have an integral connection. The first topic I would like to talk about is our mothers – no, don't worry, this isn't a therapy session. The second topic is birds.

The term mother hen is derived from the extreme protectiveness that a hen shows toward her chicks. The same is true of a mother and her children: a mother's first instinct is to protect her children, to shield them from all the world's dangers.

Like a mother bird, building a warm nest for her eggs and fledglings, a mother builds a warm and loving home for her children. Like a mother bird, guarding her fledglings until they are ready to fly on their own, until their innocent potential is realized, a mother is poised over her children, not hovering as a selfish "helicopter parent," but protecting and shielding her children, nurturing and educating them, lovingly cultivating their potential until they are ready to fly away and soar to the greatest heights.

The question is: How do we build perfectly loving nests for our young? How do we nurture and educate them? How do we protect their innocence, and know when to step away so that they may soar on their own?

The answer is found in one of the Judaism's most profound and relevant mitzvot: *Shiluach HaKen*, the sending away of the mother bird in order to take her young.

3. Parshat Ki Teitzei

We read about the *Shiluach HaKen* in this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Ki Teitzei*. Out of the 613 divine commandments, one would be justified in believing that this mitzvah is, perhaps, the most enigmatic of them all – as it involves humans and birds, mothers and children, nests and eggs, traveling on roads and perching on branches, promises of goodness and blessings for a long life.

This mitzvah is derived from the following two verses:

When you chance upon a bird's nest on the road, on any tree, or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, if the mother is sitting upon the fledglings or upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall send away the mother, and then you may take the young for yourself, in order that it should go well for you, and your days should be lengthened.¹

These two verses contain two mitzvot: one positive and one negative: the negative commandment, *You shall not take the mother with the young*, and the positive commandment, *You shall send away the mother and then you may take the young*.

On the face of it, this mitzvah is easy to understand. It is a kindness to send away the mother bird if you need to take her eggs or her young, and for this kindness, G-d promises a rich reward.

But in this day and age, when nobody needs to search for food out in the wild, how is this mitzvah relevant?

And yet we are taught that every word – and certainly every mitzvah – of the Torah is timeless and always relevant. It is also a fundamental Jewish principle that every mitzvah is sourced in and emits from the Master of the Universe. It is the Creator's Will. This means that embedded within every mitzvah is divine DNA whose chemistry contains heaven-trembling and earth-shattering lessons for us. If we must learn a lesson in serving our Creator from everything, how much more so are we compelled to learn from every single mitzvah, no matter how antiquated it may seem to us.

Therefore, it is thus incumbent upon us to understand how the mitzvah of *Shiluach HaKen* is relevant to us today, and in such a way where we may teach it to our chicks and boychicks.

¹ Deuteronomy 22:6-7.

4. A Revolutionary Understanding

The great sages, major commentaries, codifiers, and Halachic authorities discuss the anatomy of *Shiluach HaKen* at length.² Today, however, I would like to take these few moments to share an inner understanding of *Shiluach HaKen* as presented by one of Judaism's great sages and mystics, the Tzemach Tzedek.

The Tzemach Tzedek explains this verse in a revolutionary fashion.³ Dissecting every part of the verse, the Tzemach Tzedek eloquently explains the meaning of each with breathtaking beauty.

First, the Tzemach Tzedek puts the verse and its metaphor into context.

The Jewish people are like a bird. The bird soars to the great heights of heaven, while also landing and nesting on the lowly ground of the earth below. So, too, the soul soars to the greatest heights of heaven, connecting to G-d above, while landing and nesting on the earth below and infusing its grounded matter with heavenly spirit.

The bird is constantly looking for its home, its nest. In the times of the Temple, the Jewish people nested in the holy city of Jerusalem, where the Divine Presence (the *Shechina*) was revealed for all to experience and feel.

This is expressed by the Book of Psalms as follows:

*Even a bird found a home and a swallow her nest, where she placed her fledglings upon Your altars, O Lord of Hosts, my King and my God.*⁴

This was true in Temple times, when the truth was on full display. What about today, how does the Jew nest and soar to great heights while also living in exile in this material world?

² See Sefer HaMitzvoth, Negative #306. Chinuch #544, #545 and Minchat Chinuch. Chacham Tzvi 83. Targum Yonathan. Sifri; Bachya and Chizzkuni ad loc. Chullin 139a-141a and Chiddushey HaRan. Teshuvot Rashba 18, 3:283l. Tur, Yoreh Deah 292. Teshuvot Chavvoth Yair 6. cf. HaKethav VeHaKabbalah.

³ Ohr Hatorah, Devarim Ki Teitzei p. 911-916.

⁴ Psalms 84:4.

Says the Tzemach Tzedek: Hidden within the verses of the Torah that describe the mitzvah of *Shiluach HaKen* lies the answer to this question. These verses describe the Jew's journey and mission in exile, in minute detail and with specific instructions. And they teach us how to cope and thrive – how to continue to fly and soar – even when spiritually displaced, and how to refine and elevate the material world in the process.

5. The Steps to Building the Perfect Nest

[Note: Feel free to use any or all of the pieces below]

Ki yikarei ken tzipor – when you chance upon a bird's nest

The Torah states, “when you chance upon a bird's nest,” thereby excluding nests which are ready on hand and including only those nests that you happen upon by chance.⁵ This refers to the “nests” we encounter and chance upon in our daily lives today when we don't have the Holy Temple.

In Temple times, G-dliness and holiness were always on hand. The divine “nest” was easily accessible, because G-dliness nested and dwelled among us. Today, when we are spiritually displaced (exiled), coming upon a home for holiness, a nest for the divine, is like a “chance encounter,” unpredictable and unexpected.

“Normal” today is not the holy or the spiritual; normal today is materialism. Today, while we are still in exile, turning the twigs of life into a nest does not come easily or naturally; we “chance” upon it. So this is the first thing to know. Without the Temple, you can't expect the nest to be handed to you; you have to happen upon it, and make the effort to recognize these nests.

⁵ Rashi ad loc, quoting Chullin 139a, Sifrei 22:55.

Al haderech – on the road:

To understand how to “chance upon” a nesting place today, we have to be *on the road*. It requires a journey to discover the divine and the spiritual in our lives. Like Abraham who was told by G-d to leave his home and go to a distant land, we all have to hit the road to come upon the nest. Leaving our comfort zones, traveling step by step, level by level, proceeding dimension by dimension, progressing grade by grade, can we arrive to the bird’s nest – the ability to reach for the highest and land at the lowest. Exile and displacement is a curse, but it is also an opportunity to travel and discover new horizons – the nests hidden in everyday life.

B’chol etz – on any tree:

Where do we build these spiritual nests? On the branches of the Tree called Torah (*etz chaim*, the Tree of Life).

As we read in the Book of Psalms, *The Lord’s trees are sated, the cedars of Lebanon, which He planted.*⁶ This refers to the Garden of Eden, wherein the Tree of Life represents the Written Torah and the Tree of Knowledge the Oral Torah.

Birds build their nests on branches of trees; Torah is the tree upon which a bird of Israel must build his or her nest. Today, in exile, where G-d is found in the “four cubits of the Jewish law,”⁷ we must build our nests on the trees of the Written and Oral Torah, which will ensure that our homes are lighthouses even in the darkest places.

Oi al haaretz – or on the ground:

Ha’aretz, “the land” or the “the ground” refers to mitzvot that are embedded in physical matter, which is called *aretz*. Another way of building nests today is on the ground of righteous actions.

⁶ Psalms 104:16.

⁷ Berachot 8a.

Efrochim oi beitzim – fledglings or eggs:

In times of exile, when the Divine Presence is concealed and the divine source of everything is hidden to the extent that it could be denied and much faith is required to believe in it, you must treat everything in the nest you come upon as a fragile egg, potential not yet realized, or an innocent fledgling, a young one needing much love, care and tenderness.⁸

Vha'em rovetzet al ha'efrochim oi al ha'beitzim – if the mother is sitting upon the fledglings or upon the eggs:

Everything in this world originates from a source, a “mother.” Everything in life is like an egg or a fledgling – a potential life or a young life, born of a mother. Nothing just appears.

Thus, when you travel along the roads of exile, in a material world whose focus is on its own preservation, not on the divine purpose for which we were created. Indeed, this world conceals its Cosmic Mother, its Creator, and you chance upon a nest, built upon the tree branches of Torah and/or the ground of mitzvot, and in this nest you see brilliant potential and innocent youthful energy, recognize that it indeed has a mother, a higher source, which has birthed and nurtured it.⁹

Lo tikach ha'em al habanim – you shall not take the mother with the young:

When you recognize that everything in the nest has a mother, a source that preceded and created the young, then you are prohibited from bunching the two together: When you engage with the young you must be sensitive enough to realize that the creating and nurturing mother should not be mistaken for a potential egg or an innocent fledgling, and you shall not mistake the young potential or innocence for the mature mother.

⁸ Based on Tikkunei Zohar 1a (Introduction), the Tzemach Tzedek explains that in Torah, egg refers to scripture, and fledglings to Mishnah; in emotion, egg refers to those potential emotions still unborn in the mind, and fledglings are those that have already come down and emerged into tangible existence.

⁹ In mystical terms, *Em*, the mother is *Binah*, comprehension/understanding that births the Midot, human emotive attributes, which are potentials (eggs) or fledgling innocents.

This means that the key to releasing the divine potential in the “young” fledglings is to always be cognizant of the Divine “mother” that births these “young.” And when you take the young to actualize their potential, be sure to not take the “mother” with them, recognizing that she is their Creator.

Shalaiach t'shalach et ha'em – you shall send away the mother:

The question is: how to interact with the physical world in such a way that it is holy and elevating, never consuming and selfish. You can eat food which is filled with divine potential, in a selfish way, because you are hungry, without being thankful; or you can eat it by elevating it, making a blessing on it, being conscious of it. This applies to all matter, to all relationships. How to ensure that an experience is elevating and not denigrating?

By sending the mother to a higher consciousness. The mother is analogous to the *Shechina*, G-d's indwelling presence on earth which rests upon her children, protecting them. So, you may take the young, you may take the potential and innocent matter of this world, if it results in elevating the mother. Every experience on the road must be measured by taking the mother of that experience into account and making sure that her elevation takes precedent.

How do we engage with the material world (the eggs or fledglings) without being consumed by it? By “sending away” the mother – by not taking the Divine mother, the divine source, into captivity, but allowing it instead to soar. Even when we engage with the material world, we must always remember that the “mother”, the core divine soul remains above the experience. Only then can we experience transcendence in this world.

Only when your intention in engaging with the material world is to “send” and elevate the Mother *Shechina*, then and only then can one partake of the *Shechina*'s fruit, her “young” so to speak.

Shalaiach t'shalach et ha'em, the double phrase, *Shalaiach t'shalach*, “send you shall send,” teaches us that every interaction with the fruit of this world, the young, must result in the “sending,” the “elevating” of the mother, of the source of that fruit. Only then...

V'et habanim tikach lach – and you may take the young for yourself:

When every interaction you have with potential and innocence is predicated upon and contingent upon elevating the mother, making the *Shechina* proud, sending the protector and nurturer through the proverbial roof, then you may internalize the young matter and make it part of your divine self. Now, when you eat, whatever you consume becomes part of your deepest self, your divine image, your soul.

L'maan yitav lach v'harachta yomim – in order that it should go well for you, and your days should be lengthened:

When we live in this way, the guaranteed outcome is a good and long life. Why a long life? Your children are your life. Your biological children, certainly, but also every good deed you do is your spiritual child.¹⁰ You birthed it. So when you live by the principles described in *Shiluach HaKen*, inevitably your biological and spiritual children will be incredible, well-balanced, nurtured, loved, and ultimately allowed to spread their wings, themselves perpetuating these divine ideals, teaching them to their children and their children's children – this natural outcome is good for you for all eternity.

6. Your Nest, Practically Speaking

In short, your home is your nest.

Here are some principles that could be practically applied to enhance your nest, help nurture your young, and provide them with the skills to perpetuate our tradition in their own homes, nests, families and loved ones for all generations:

1. Infuse your home/nest with the idea that every “chance” encounter or “chance” experience is really Divine Providence giving you the ability to build a micro-nest in that moment.

¹⁰ Toldosay'hem shel tzaddikim maasim tovim – Bereishis Rabba 30:6. Rashi Noach 6:9. See Soteh 46a: Mai Peiri? Miztvos.

2. As much as possible, build your home/nest upon the trees of Torah. Your home should be a tree house, so to speak. How? Ensure that your children have a Jewish education, making it your primary not secondary aim. And day to day, share the inspiring words of Torah with others.
3. Build your nest upon the grounds of physical mitzvot. For example: A) place a physical charity box in your kitchen and have your young fledglings put in a coin daily; B) have holy books in your home readily seen and available for learning; C) your Shabbat table should be physically and tangibly majestic, with wine, challah, delicious food in abundance, loads of guests, etc; D) the conversation and interactions at home/nest, between you and your spouse and you and your children, should always be sublime and loving, never hurtful.
4. Always remember that your children are A) potentials not yet fully hatched; B) young and innocent and in need of their parents protection and nurturing. Your job is to help them discover and have confidence in their potential and provide them with the framework to always maintain that innocence, even when they are fully matured birds soaring to the greatest spiritual heights and building their own nests upon (and with) material earth.
5. Never forget where life's gifts, your home/nest, your young, your potential and innocence comes from. When your home always remembers the Source of everything, G-d Al-mighty, then everything you do will be focused on the Divine. And anyone who walks into your home/nest (guests, family, friends) will see this and the entire nest will transcend into something beyond.

7. Nest Practices (Conclusion)

May it be the will of our Creator that through the merit of our traveling on the road, building nests upon the trees of Torah, upon the grounds of mitzvot, that our Creator will indeed build for us the ultimate and eternal nest in Jerusalem, as the Book of Psalms states:

Even a bird found a house and a swallow her nest, where she placed her fledglings upon Your altars, O Lord of Hosts, my King and my God.¹¹

Speedily in our days!

Shabbat Shalom!

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¹¹ Psalms 84:4.