

CHASE AWAY THE MOTHER

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"If you happen upon a bird's nest on the road, in a tree or on the ground, baby birds or eggs, and the mother is sheltering the baby birds or eggs, you shall not take the mother with the children. You shall surely send the mother away, and then take the children, in order that things will be good for you, and your life will be lengthened." [22:6-7]

If it seems unusual to be blessed with long life merely for sending the mother bird away, then the Medrash is still more surprising: "And what is the reward which you take? That if you do not have children, I will bless you with children. If you keep this mitzvah, you hasten the coming of the Moshiach. If you keep this mitzvah, you hasten [the arrival of] the prophet Eliyahu" [who will come before the Moshiach].

The Avnei Azel asks, why is this mitzvah so great? Why does performance of this mitzvah in particular merit such a tremendous reward?

The answer, he says, lies in the impact on the individual who performs it. And then he points us towards one of the most harmful attributes which any person can have: "anochiyus", perhaps best translated as self-centeredness. Wherever anochiyus is found, the emphasis on "Self!", we find trouble as well. This is true in education, religious activities, and interpersonal relations in general. When people are unable to set aside their own personal biases, their desire to take credit, or their desire to enrich themselves, even when doing so is so obviously for the greater good -- the result is anger, discord, and hatred.

I remember seeing this happen. I'll avoid saying where or when to protect the guilty, but it involved a large program hosted by an unnamed institution. Thousands of children, and thousands of adults, attended. Even a camera crew arrived, from a local television station. Initially they sought out the woman who ran the institution -- perhaps the reporter expressed interest in doing an interview, but I didn't hear the beginning of this process. Of course, as a youngster curious about technology, I wandered over to watch as soon as I noticed the camera.

After the reporter toured the site, he decided that the most interesting images and story he could present would be to describe the day's events while standing in one of the "activity areas" (forgive me for not providing specifics) in the middle of the children. I think most of us would agree that scenes with children playing are very interesting, helping to make a good human-interest story -- and, therefore, that focusing on the children was more important than giving center stage to the

adults in charge. Using his best judgment, the reporter decided the pictures of the children playing were more worthwhile, and would do more for the reputation of the institution than interviewing the director. Looking back now, I think he was right, and I think almost anyone would agree.

Nonetheless, the director was fuming. Steam was shooting from her ears, burning its memory into my young mind. She wanted her interview! _She_ wanted to be on television! And thus, she was (in my humble opinion) placing her own honor and fame in front of what was truly best for the institution which had placed her at its head. Whether she was right or wrong, if I, as a small bystander, still remember this today, then how do we imagine the TV station reacted the next time they received a press release from Institution X? Jealousy, honor and desire take a person out of this world, say our Sages -- to the point where the pursuit of personal honor can damage an organization's reputation, or worse.

What, then, do we learn from the Mitzvah of sending away the mother bird? We learn that we cannot take everything for ourselves. We take the eggs which we need, but we send away the mother bird, to lay eggs once again for someone else's benefit. We learn to set aside our own self-interest on behalf of the larger community, the entire Congregation of Israel, or all humanity. And by encouraging us to set aside disputes in favor of peace, keeping this Mitzvah truly brings the Moshiach closer!