



## **Parashat Ki Tetzei**

### **Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19**

*According to the twelfth-century philosopher and commentator Maimonides, the parasha of Ki Tetze contains no less than seventy-two of the six hundred and thirteen commandments which, tradition says, can be found in the Torah. Reading through them, it is certainly a diverse list, including laws relating to sexual behaviour, criminal justice, health and safety, personal hygiene, employment, and much more besides.*

*Among the best known of these is the following:*

*"If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life." (Deuteronomy 22:6-7)*

*This seems to be a simple case of acting with consideration for the feelings of other sentient beings, and indeed this is the explanation that Maimonides puts forward (Guide of the Perplexed, Part III, Chapter 49) for this commandment.*

*However, this commandment may have had rather devastating consequences for one second century rabbi. The story is told in Kohelet Rabbah (a collection of midrashim on the book of Ecclesiastes) of Elisha ben Abuyah who, one Shabbat, observes a man climbing a tree, taking from there a bird together with its chicks and, as far as we can tell, living happily ever after.*

*After Shabbat has gone out, Elisha sees another man climbing the tree. This man sends the mother bird away before taking the chicks. However, when he comes down from the tree, he is bitten by a serpent and dies.*

*Elisha ben Abuyah is horrified. The man who broke the commandment (and who also contravened the laws of Shabbat in doing so) goes unpunished; but the man who has followed the letter of the law, far from faring well and having a long life, as the law seems to promise, is struck down for no apparent reason.*

*His colleagues try to explain this perceived injustice by quoting Rabbi Akiva, who had explained that the rewards stated for this law refer to the world to come, rather than this world. However, Elisha is not convinced. In the fictional dramatisation of this story in Milton Steinberg's novel, *As a Driven Leaf*, this is the incident which finally pushes the once great Torah scholar over the*

edge, and into heresy and apostasy, earning himself the euphemistic nickname "Acher" ("the Other").

*Punishment and reward, and the countless examples that we can all come up with of good deeds going unrewarded and misdemeanours going unpunished, are issues that have plagued philosophers and theologians, Jewish and non-Jewish, for centuries. Some people suggest, like Rabbi Akiva, that true justice will only be delivered in the next world. Others have suggested that we are not in a position to judge which of the commandments carry greater or lesser weight in the divine scales; what appears to us to be a minor sin may in fact outweigh all of a person's good deeds.*

*I am not comfortable with either of these approaches, and I can't pretend to have a better solution. However, we might want to think about the idea, borrowed from chaos theory, of the "butterfly effect". This is often expressed as "Can a butterfly moving its wings in Brazil, set off a tornado in Texas?" Any activity, however insignificant, can through a chain of logical consequences have a significant yet unpredictable effect.*

*Everything that we do (or don't do) has an impact on ourselves, on others and on the world around us. The complexity of the universe means that we can't know for certain what that effect will be, and we can't know if what we consider to be a "good" action will turn out to have unfortunate circumstances.*

*In this situation, and especially at this time of year, as we approach the High Holy Days, perhaps the best that we can do is to reflect on this uncertainty, and try to make informed choices, whilst accepting that things may not turn out as we predict.*

## **Shabbat Candle Lighting 7:05 pm**