**When You Go Back Out**

**On the first Shabbat back in our sanctuary, Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch discusses this week’s parasha, “Ki Tetze” — “When You Go Out.”: “Perhaps because ‘Ki Tetze’ begins with going out to war, much of the rest of the parasha is about striving for peace, social order, compassion and decency. The Torah emphasizes that even if violence is permitted, we do not strive for violence. These are decrees intended to inculcate humanity in us.”**

It is good to be back. We are dipping our toe in the water – slowly and carefully. All of our health and safety protocols are by the book – even more rigorous than state and city guidance.

All those who will join personally — on Kabbalat Shabbat, for b’nai mitzvah and the High Holy Days follow the protocols. You have an obligation, not only to yourselves, but also to us — everyone else. Pre-register because we have limited capacity. Wear masks. No need to bellow out your prayers. I can’t believe I am saying that — because we have worked hard over these many years to encourage you to chant and sing loudly. But God also understands quieter — and even non-verbal — prayers.

All congregants who do not feel comfortable in the sanctuary, I urge you to follow your instincts. We will continue to provide and enhance our virtual outreach to you. But we felt from the beginning that when state and city authorities successfully lower community spread — and offer guidelines for reopening — we would try to reopen for two reasons:

First, I think we will be living with this coronavirus at least until next summer and, therefore, we must learn to adapt — to live as safely as possible with this new reality for as long as it takes.

And second – many of our families want – and need what we can provide only in person. Dozens of students need to be bar and bat mitzvahed this year. Many of our congregants are weighed down by emotional distress after months of sheltering in place — and, for them, worship in squares on a screen does not relieve their distress, nor does it provide the spiritual uplift they need in these times.

We will get through this period. It will not last forever. In the meantime, act responsibly and do what is best for you.

It is appropriate — on our first Shabbat of going back out to our sanctuary — that the Torah portion of the week is “Ki Tetze,” which means: “When you go out.” The name of the parasha is taken from the first verse, which speaks of going out to war.

*“Ki Tetze la’milchama al oyvecha”* — “when you go out to war against your enemy.”

Isn’t this what so many Americans feel today? That the streets are like war zones? That there are people they trust who look like them, think like them, act like them — and then there is everyone else. And everyone else is an enemy. The anger, rage, intolerance, violence in our country seem worse today than many of us can ever remember.

Perhaps because “Ki Tetze” begins with going out to war, much of the rest of the parasha is about striving for peace, social order, compassion and decency. In the end, while violence might be sanctioned by the Torah in certain exceptional circumstances, Judaism does not promote or encourage violence. It seeks peace.

There is one passage in the Torah portion that I have always loved: “If along the road you come across a bird’s nest and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go — and take only the young.”

Why? What is the point of this law? After all, Judaism does not generally prohibit consumption of animals or fowl except those — like birds of prey — specifically deemed un-kosher. For all the rest — eggs, fledglings, chicks, mature birds — they are all permitted to us.

So if we are entitled to take a mother and her eggs, why are we prohibited from taking them together at the same time? Why not just grab the whole nest and take it home to feast? Why not take just the eggs and give no regard to the mother? Why not take just the mother and ignore the fledglings or the eggs? Why take only the young — and only after you have scattered the mother?

Maimonides —Rambam — suggests three responses:

First: Because. Why scatter the mother before you take the young – because the Torah says so. God must have had a reason. But even if that reason is beyond our comprehension, you still have to follow God’s will. These are commandments not suggestions. How compelling would it be if we were to have called them “The Ten Suggestions?”

But the problem with this explanation is that human beings want answers. We want to know the reasons for laws. We are not automatons and, over time, we will ignore laws that make no sense to us. Even our children eventually cease listening when we tell them, “You do it because I said so.”

And therefore Maimonides gives a second reason:It is in order to spare the mother bird suffering — emotional pain. This is an explanation pleasing to modern sensibilities. Animal welfare, a concept Judaism knows well called “*tza’ar ba’alei Chayim,*” has become a standard expectation — at least in the West. If we were to take the eggs or fledglings – in the presence of the mother – Maimonides suggests that it would cause her emotional distress. She would feel the pain. Some contemporary experts assert that there are animals that feel emotions recognizable to human beings — and that the mother-offspring relationship in nature is unique and cuts across species.

But the problem with this explanation is that we are permitted to kill animals. Even if animals do feel emotions, we have still taken the young. Is the mother’s emotional pain lessened because she did not witness the hunter taking her eggs? When she returns to an empty nest, is her pain diminished because she had not seen the deed? Perhaps, but, still, we have taken her young. If, in fact, she feels distress, the fact that she did not see the taking of her young would not eliminate her distress.

And therefore, Maimonides gives a third reason: The law has nothing to do with the feelings of the mother bird — and has everything to do with our own feelings. Even if animals do not feel as we do, we should feel the cruelty of killing the young in the presence of their mother. It is not necessarily that the mother bird has emotions we would recognize as human — but we are human. And if we practice cruelty to animals, even if the animal does not experience that cruelty as a human would, still, we are being cruel.

Modern science validates ancient wisdom: that, often, cruelty to people begins with cruelty to animals. There is a direct connection between people who torture animals and people who torture people. Gratuitous cruelty to a bird – often leads to gratuitous cruelty to a person. It is far less likely that one who “wouldn’t harm a fly” – would be capable of harming a man – or a woman.

Mark Twain wrote about this in Tom Sawyer Abroad. Huck thinks to himself: “I see a bird setting on a limb of a high tree, singing, with its head tilted back and his mouth open, ad before I thought I fired, and his song stopped and he fell straight down from the limb, all limp like a rag, and I run and picked him up, and he was dead, and his body was warm in my hand, and his head rolled about, this way and that, like his neck was broke...

“I couldn’t see nothing more for the tears; and I hain’t never murdered no creature since, that wasn’t doing me no harm, and I ain’t going to.”

Huck Finn feels morally sullied by killing a bird. He swears that he will never harm any creature that wasn’t doing him harm. He recognizes that cruelty is cruelty, whether it is cruelty to animals or cruelty to humans: They are connected. Not only that human beings and animals are on the spectrum of God-created creatures, but that killing is connected.

Nachmanides — Ramban — writes:

The ruling on the mother bird is not based on the Almighty’s pity for the animal — otherwise God would have forbidden their slaughter. The reason is to teach us compassion and the avoidance of cruelty.”

These are decrees intended to inculcate humanity in us. The intent of our Torah portion is to emphasize that even if under rare and exceptional circumstances violence is permitted — even if war is allowed — we do not strive for violence. The opposite: we strive to eliminate violence. Even the laws of warfare specify limitations. You cannot do anything you want, even in war.

When you start going out now — to work, to school, to synagogue — remember to be kind. Have compassion for others – for those who might have had it even worse than you during these long painful months. Mark Twain warned against those who he described as “possessing the look of a man who can endure pain in another person.”

And if these months have been kinder to you than to others; if you have not lost your job, have not lost income, have not fallen ill, have not mourned a loved one — stay compassionate. Even if you have not experienced violence, hatred, racism — try to understand the pain of others. Do not confuse your good fortune with merit. It may simply be that you have been lucky.

Victor Hugo wrote: “Success often deceives us because it resembles merit. Winners of the lottery are revered. We confuse fortune with greatness. The brilliance of the stars is confused with the star-shaped footprints of a duck in the mud. There is always more misery in the depths than compassion in the heights.”