

Stories For The Shabbos Table

Connecting The Dots

Ki Teitzei has more mitzvos than any other parsha, and many of them look small — sending away a mother bird, leaving behind a forgotten bundle, remembering an old enemy. This week we look at three moments where those small mitzvos ended up shaping history generations later.

STORY 1

The Boy Who Fell

שֶׁלֹּחַ הַשֶּׁלֶחַ לַח אֶת-הָאֵם וְאֶת-הַבָּנִים תִּקַּח-לָךְ לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לָךְ וְהֶאָרַכְתְּ יָמֶיךָ

“You shall surely send away the mother, and take the young for yourself, so that it will be good for you and you will lengthen your days.”

Devarim 22:7

Elisha ben Avuya was one of the great Torah scholars of his generation — a teacher whose own students included Rabbi Meir. But the Gemara tells us that something Elisha witnessed with his own eyes shook him so badly that he eventually left the path of Torah entirely, becoming known afterward only as “Acher” — the Other One.

According to one version in the Gemara, Elisha saw a father tell his son to climb up and bring down some young birds from a nest. The boy was fulfilling two mitzvos that appear in entirely separate parshiyos of the Torah — *kibbud av va’eim* and *shiluach hakein* — which the Gemara, through Rabbi Yaakov, juxtaposes precisely because both are unique in explicitly promising goodness and length of days.

The boy did exactly as he was told. He sent the mother away first, then took the young. And as he climbed back down from the loft where the nest sat — the Gemara describes a *bira*, a tower or rooftop, not the ladder of later retellings — he fell, and he died.

Elisha watched this happen. Here was a boy who had just finished keeping, in a single act, two mitzvos the Torah explicitly promises long life for. According to one account in the Gemara, this was the sight that led Acher astray; a second tradition instead points to Elisha witnessing the tongue of the martyred Torah teacher Chutzpis HaMeturgeman being dragged through the dirt. Either way, what he saw convinced him that the Torah’s promises did not hold up in this world.

His grandson — Rabbi Yaakov, the son of his own daughter — later taught that the Torah’s promise of “length of days” was never a guarantee about this world at all; it pointed to the World to Come. Had Elisha understood that in his own lifetime, the Gemara says, he would not have stumbled the way he did.

FOR THE TABLE: Elisha and his own grandson looked at the same words and reached completely different conclusions. What do you think made the difference?

Kiddushin 39b; Chagigah 15a–b

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STORY 2

The Extra Bundle

כִּי תִקְצֹר קִצְיֶרְךָ בְּשָׂדֶךָ וְשָׂ כַּחַת עִמָּךְ בְּשָׂדֶךָ לֹא תָשׁוּב לִקְחָתוֹ לְגֵר לְיִתוֹם
וְלְאַלְמָנָה יְהִיָּה

“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a bundle in the field, you shall not go back to take it — it shall be for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.”

Devarim 24:19

When Rus returned to Beis Lechem with her mother-in-law Naomi, the two of them had nothing. Rus went out to gather food by gleaning whatever grain was left behind in the fields after the harvesters had passed through. She happened, the Megillah tells us, to come to a field belonging to Boaz.

Boaz noticed her and asked who she was. When he learned she was the Moabite woman who had stayed loyal to Naomi, he told her to keep gleaning in his field and not go elsewhere, invited her to eat with his workers, and made sure she had more than enough.

Then, as she got up to go back to work, Boaz quietly gave his workers a second instruction: let her glean even among the sheaves, and go further — deliberately pull stalks out of the bundles and leave them for her to find. And do not embarrass her.

Shikcha itself only covers one or two sheaves the owner genuinely forgot — three or more forgotten together are treated differently and are not automatically given away. Boaz took the dignity-preserving principle reflected in that narrower mitzvah and went beyond the Torah’s minimum — deliberately arranging extra grain for Rus, without embarrassing her. The Gemara (Bava Metziah 58b) teaches that publicly embarrassing someone is compared to bloodshed; Boaz seems to have understood that preserving Rus’s dignity mattered as much as providing for her material needs.

She returned that evening with about an ephah of barley — roughly 22 to 30 liters, about three weeks’ worth of food from a single day of gleaning. When Naomi saw what she had brought home, she immediately asked where she had gleaned that day — and once she heard the name Boaz, she understood exactly what kind of kindness her daughter-in-law had been shown. Boaz would go on to redeem the family’s inheritance and marry Rus — and from that union, a few chapters later, King David would be born.

FOR THE TABLE: Boaz didn’t just follow the letter of the shikcha law — he made sure his extra kindness never looked like charity. Why might that second part matter as much as the first?

Megillas Rus 1:22–2:23; 4:13–22

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STORY 3

An Old Enemy's Name

תִּמְחָה אֶת־זֵכֶר עֲמֹלֶק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשָּׁח

“You shall erase the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens — you shall not forget.”

Devarim 25:19

The parsha closes with a command to remember what Amalek did on the way out of Egypt, and to erase their memory entirely. This closing passage (Devarim 25:17–19) receives a special public reading each year as the maftir on the Shabbos before Purim — a day known as Shabbos Zachor.

Boaz’s kindness in the last story made him great. Here, kindness in the wrong place does the opposite — not because compassion itself is wrong, but because mercy shown where the Torah demands strictness becomes its own kind of harm.

Centuries before Purim, Hashem commanded King Shaul to wipe out Amalek completely, including their king, Agag. Shaul defeated them in battle, but he let Agag live. The navi Shmuel had to finish, himself, what the king had left undone.

Centuries after that, in the Persian court of Achashverosh, a new figure rises to become the Jewish people’s most dangerous enemy. The Megillah introduces him with a single word attached to his name: Haman — “HaAgagi.” The Agagite. Chazal identify him as a descendant of the very king Shaul had spared.

The threat that nearly destroyed the Jews of Persia traced, generations later, back to a mercy that should never have been granted.

This is why these closing verses of Ki Teitzei are read as the special Parshas Zachor maftir on the Shabbos adjacent to Purim, every single year — not as part of the regular weekly Torah reading. Rashi explains that it’s arranged this way on purpose: so that the wiping out of Amalek falls right next to the wiping out of Haman. Remembering Amalek isn’t treated as ancient history. It’s read as the direct root of the story about to be read on Purim.

Taken together, these three stories trace a single arc: a person’s relationship with Hashem, a person’s relationship with another person, and a people’s relationship with its own history — three different scales on which one small choice keeps mattering long after it’s made.

FOR THE TABLE: Chazal trace Haman directly back to a single act of mercy shown generations earlier by Shaul. What does that suggest about how far the consequences of one choice can travel?

Shmuel I 15; Megillah 13a; Megillah 29a, Rashi; Esther 3:1

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