

Amongst the list of non-kosher birds found in this week's Parsha one particular bird stands out for its noticeable name, the chasidah, the stork. Rashi wonders why the stork would be known by the name chasidah, which literally translates to the pious ones. What is so pious about the stork? How would it have received this illustrious name? Rashi explains that the stork is in fact a very kind and generous bird. Aside from delivering newborn babies to eagerly expectant parents, the stork also performs innumerable acts of kindness with its fellow birds by sharing its food.

Rav Yitzchok Meir Alter, the Gerrer Rebbe is puzzled by this description of the storks' nature. The Ramban writes that the reason that some birds are kosher and others are not is because of their personality and temperament. The birds that have a cruel personality, which we generally label as birds of prey are not kosher, while the birds that eat mostly vegetation are kosher because they are kinder creatures, as evidenced by the fact that they do not prey on other creatures. The Ramban employs a frequently quoted thought in Judaic philosophy- we are what we eat. We believe that what we ingest actually has a profound impact on our emotional and spiritual wellbeing. If we were permitted to digest cruel birds we too would adopt some of their negative qualities. It is therefore imperative upon us to only eat from kosher birds, which are kinder and generous by nature and thereby avoid acquiring any negative traits. If so, asks the Rebbe, why should the stork be considered an un-kosher bird, it certainly seems to have enviable traits? We should have no concerns about acquiring any undesirable traits from its consumption.

The Rebbe explains that although the stork is kind and generous with its fellow storks, always making sure to share food with them, their kindness is limited only to its own specie and not to any other species. When generosity is limited to one's closest family and friends, but not expanded beyond a limited few, that is not kindness, it is elitism. Kindness is an attitude that does not discriminate towards its recipients; choosing to grace just a select few is far from genuine kindness, but rather a painful and insidious attempt to exclude others.

Elitism is one of the most dangerous ills of society. Thinking that you are better than others; that only you deserve special treatment, and others should not be granted the same privileges presents a perilous state for society. Judaism does not and cannot tolerate such behavior. We are obligated to treat all human beings with kindness and compassion regardless of faith, creed, or nationality. We do not condone any preferential treatment that places one group of people on a pedestal above others. In the best case scenario such elitism only leads to hurt feelings and wounded pride, at its worst it leads to genocide, and G-D, forbid a holocaust.

The Torah is not just telling us to avoid stork consumption, rather encouraging us to develop a deep and meaningful connection, compassion, and concern for the entire world around us. This will insure that we never commit the sin of elitism and truly acquire the label of chasidah, pious individuals, not like the un-kosher stork.

Shabbat Shalom
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