

## Shalom Bayis Newsletter - Issue 5

### Don't Kill the Sparrows

In 1958, China embarked on what it called "The Great Leap Forward". As part of this program, the Chinese Communist Party of Mao Zedong instituted a policy entitled, "The Four Pests Campaign". The four pests being mosquitos, rats, flies, and sparrows. Ok, mosquitos, flies, and rats we can understand. But what was the problem with sparrows?

Well, they were suspected of consuming two kilograms (roughly four pounds) of grain per sparrow per year.

Sparrow nests were destroyed, eggs were broken, and chicks were killed. Millions of people organized into groups and banged noisy pots and pans to prevent sparrows from resting in their nests, with the goal of causing them to drop dead from exhaustion. In addition to these tactics, Chinese citizens also shot the birds down from the sky.

As hard as it may be to believe, the campaign was incredibly effective. With startling swiftness, the sparrow population in China was pushed nearly to extinction!

Smashing success, right? Well, no. Actually, **NO!**

You see, what the Chinese did not take into account at that time is the fact that sparrows eat things other than grain. Think locusts. And other creepy crawlies that like to munch on grain more than sparrows. Without the sparrows, crops were terribly susceptible to the onslaught of these far more destructive critters.

Coupled with the droughts and floods that hit China during the end of the 1950's and the early 1960's, the campaign to destroy the sparrow population as part of the "Great Leap Forward" is actually credited as playing a major part in the "Great Chinese Famine" of 1959-1961.

That famine claimed the lives of tens of millions (!) of Chinese citizens. The

Great Chinese Famine is regarded as one of the greatest manmade disasters of all time. So, at least the “Great” part they got right.

The problem with what the Chinese did is that they broke Chesterton’s Fence. Chesterton’s Fence is a heuristic inspired by a quote from the writer G. K. Chesterton’s 1929 book, “The Thing”.

Chesterton describes the classic case of the reformer (what we would nowadays probably call a “social justice warrior” or a “progressive”) who notices something, such as a fence, and fails to see the reason for its existence.

The fence is blocking his path forward, but progress is a must!

So, what does the progressive do? Well, tear down the fence, of course! Chesterton exhorts, though, that before the progressive proceeds with his intention to tear down the fence, he better figure out why it is there in the first place.

Otherwise, the unintended consequences are likely to result in more harm than good.

Put in brief, the motto of Chesterton’s Fence is: Don’t tear down a fence until you know why it was put up in the first place. And, of course, it’s not just fences that this piece of wisdom is talking about, but anything that one may be inclined to do away with. Like sparrows.

Or one of your spouse’s “quirks”.

It can be awfully tempting, this idea of changing someone to suit your sensibilities. If your spouse is on the more spontaneous-less-organized side of the spectrum, it can be only natural to insist on more order. Come on, now, put things away promptly. Don’t leave your things scattered about. Have a schedule and stick to it...

Or how about this... Why are you so quiet all the time?! You need to be more open. Express yourself. Talk more! Be more social...

Yes, indeed, it can be awfully tempting to attempt correcting the other to suit

**your** way of doing things. After all, it's not easy to put up with a quirk that irks day in and day out for years on end. But... don't forget the rule of Chesterton's Fence. Or the Chinese sparrows. Don't tear down the fence until you know why it was put up in the first place, and don't go killing sparrows until you have figured out what role they play in the ecosystem.

Without a doubt, relationships, and marriage in particular, demand a great deal of negotiation. And, sometimes, change *is* in fact in order, or perhaps even obligatory. It of course depends what is the precise item currently on your chopping block, and what are the particular set of circumstances within which it is manifest.

That being said, no-one wants to be, as the *Ramchal* so aptly puts it in *Mesilas Yesharim*, like the proverbial horse blindly rushing headlong into battle.

For all you know, the particular characteristic or behavior that you are interested in excising plays a key role in your spouse's persona. You may discover that cutting it out or stamping it down would be akin to a surgeon who intended to remove tonsils and accidentally removed the patient's larynx!

For all you know, it may well be that it is that very characteristic or behavior that endeared your spouse to you in the first place when you were dating. Attraction can be a fickle thing and the complacency of familiarity has a devilish way of mutating seduction into scorn.

So, before you try to kill that sparrow that seems to be eating your grain, remember the rule of Chesterton's Fence. Don't try to undo something unless you have first fully understood the purpose that it serves.

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