KI TEITZEI

This week torah portion is Ki Tetizei and comes the book of Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah. The parasha begins with the line, “When You Go Out” and continues with instructions about how the Israelites should proceed when they enter into battle to conquer the land of Canaan, biblical Israel.

The whole of the book itself is essentially Moses’ farewell address to his people and contains a recap of the most important laws and practices accumulated since the Israelites left Egyptian bondage and received Torah at Mt Sinai 40 years prior.

In fact this particular section of Torah has more commandments 74 out of the traditional 613 than any other parasha that we read on an annual basis .

It is filled with advice not only about how to make war but also:

a. Laws about family
b. Sexual relations
c. Marriage
d. Property
e. Burial

Many of laws that are enumerated are arcane; at times they conflict with our modern sensibilities and social conventions. It’s one of those Torah portions that sometimes leaves one scratching their head wondering why are we still reading this? How is this relevant to the world we live in today?

And while some of it could be dismissed for those reasons, still within these ancient laws and customs are timeless and insightful practices that are very must relevant to our present-day circumstances.

There stand out to me that I wanted to briefly explore tonight.

In our parasha we are commanded, “When you build a new house, you shall make a guardrail for your roof so no one shall fall.”

Its perhaps the first instance of a recorded building code;

At a moment in time when houses had flat roofs, the Torah tells us, “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.” It’s a simple principle — a flat roof, where family and friends might hang out and barbecue, is an inherently dangerous place. We should anticipate that danger and build a railing so no one falls.

But if we look deeper we see at the core of this commandment a fundamental teaching of Jewish law and values.

You are responsible for safeguarding and protecting your neighbor.

Who walks on a rooftop? Not only homeowners, but also workers and guests. Further the Torah details that this must be part of new construction. Why? Because when you sell your home the new owner must have a reasonable expectation that it will be safe.

But the lesson goes further, by requiring this and applying it to anyone who might walk upon your rook the torah is teaching is that we are responsible for our actions, our property, and any objects of danger we witness in the world.

The guardrail requirement provides a practical application of the more abstract principle of – "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" found in Leviticus 19:16, which is part of the Holiness Code." Beyond demanding that we not perpetrate sins of commission against one another, the Torah now concretely prohibits a sin of omission. It's not enough for us simply to refrain from pushing someone off of a roof, we must anticipate and proactively protect against that danger.

When we look at the world, at all the roofs real and metaphorical left unguarded, all the dangers that imperil people, the implications are daunting. As we begin the season of personal reflection of the high holidays, the question of how much responsibility each one of us bears becomes paramount. We must think deeply about whether we have acted to prevent others' wrongdoing and we must begin the work of constructing guardrails, of institutionalizing precautions against destruction, willful or accidental. It's hard work, but if we truly want to avoid "standing idly by the blood our neighbor;" it must be done.

A second commandment that leaps off the page of is "If [walking] along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest . . . and the mother is 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).

The Talmud labels this mitzvah the "lightest" (the most insubstantial) of all the commandments, probably because it takes little effort to perform. Sending away the mother might well involve merely making a loud noise. Indeed, just walking close (or advancing menacingly) might induce the mother to fly away.

Commentators in every generation have wondered why there is so extravagant a reward (a good, long life) for so "trivial" an act! Indeed, one Talmudic commentator points out that the same reward is specified in the Torah for honoring parents. Yet fulfilling that commandment takes a lifetime and often involves money, emotion and effort without limit. He concludes that the equality of reward is the point. The "lightest" of commandments rewarded as much as the

“weightiest” to teach us to treasure and observe all commandments equally–for the reward of any mitzvah is incalculable.

Through this commandment, the Torah teaches that every act is of immense significance. Therefore, no act is inherently trivial. When you eat, you can choose food and prepare it to express reverence for life or commitment to being a Jew (kashrut). When you speak, you can say a word of encouragement, truth or love or you can say a word of malicious gossip, falsehood or degradation.

Maimonides writes in his laws of repentance that every person should consider himself or herself as perfectly balanced between good and bad and the world as perfectly balanced between good and evil. The next action you do–however trivial–can tilt you and the whole world toward the side of good and life or to the side of evil and death. Choose life!