

**Parshat Ki Tetze**  
**Building a Railing and Spiritual Care**  
**Rabbanit Michal Kohane - Class of 2020**

The Torah portion of this week, Ki Tetze, contains the most commandments of any Torah portion: 74 in total! It has 27 “positive” (dos) and 47 “negative” (don’ts). The *midrash* (Devarim Rabba 6:5) describes how each mitzvah is related to another and how they are all surrounding us all the time:

<p>This is what the text said (Proverbs 1:9): “for they are a gracious accompaniment to your head”... and what is “a gracious accompaniment”? said Rabbi Pinchas bar Chama: everywhere you go, the mitzvot go with you. For if you build a new house, “build a railing to your roof” (Deut 22:8); if you make a door... “write them on the doorposts of your house” (Deut 6:9). If you wear new garments... “do not wear <i>sha’atnez</i>” (a mixture of wool and linen – Deut. 22:11). If you shave, “do not round the corners of your head” (Lev. 19:27). If you have a field to plow... “do not plow jointly with an ox and a donkey” (Deut. 22:10). If you sow, “do not sow a forbidden mixture” (Deut. 22:9) and if you reap, “... leave some sheaves in the field” (Deut. 24:19). Said the Holy One, “ven if you didn’t do anything, and were just walking along the path, the <i>mitzvot</i> walk with you, as it is said, ‘for if you chance on a bird’s nest along the way’ (Deut. 22:6).”</p>	<p>זֶה שְׁאָמַר הַכְּתוּב (משלי א, ט): כִּי לֵוִית חֵן הֵם לְרֵאשֶׁךְ... מֵהוּ כִּי לֵוִית חֵן, אָמַר רַבִּי פִּינְחָס בֶּר חָמָא לְכָל מְקוֹם שֶׁתֵּלַךְ הַמִּצְוֹת מְלוּוֹת אוֹתְךָ, (דברים כב, ח): כִּי תִבְנֶה בַּיִת חָדָשׁ וְעָשִׂיתָ מַעֲקֶה לְגִגְךָ. אִם עָשִׂיתָ לָךְ דָּלֵת הַמִּצְוֹת מְלוּוֹת אוֹתְךָ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים ו, ט): וְכִתְבָתָם עַל מַזְזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ. אִם לְבִשְׁתְּךָ כְּלָיִם חָדָשִׁים, הַמִּצְוֹת מְלוּוֹת אוֹתְךָ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים כב, יא): לֹא תִלְבַּשׁ שְׁעֵטָנִיז. אִם הִלַּכְתָּ לְגִלְחָה, הַמִּצְוֹת מְלוּוֹת אוֹתְךָ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ויקרא יט, כז): לֹא תִקַּפוּ פְּאֵת רֵאשֶׁכֶם, וְאִם הָיָה לְךָ שֶׂדֶה וְהִלַּכְתָּ לְחַרֵּשׁ בְּתוֹכָהּ, הַמִּצְוֹת מְלוּוֹת אוֹתְךָ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים כב, י): לֹא תַחַרֵּשׁ בְּשׂוֹר וּבַחֲמֹר יַחְדָּו. וְאִם זָרַעְתָּ אוֹתְךָ, הַמִּצְוֹת מְלוּוֹת אוֹתְךָ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים כב, ט): לֹא תִזְרַע כְּרֶמֶךְ כְּלָאִים. וְאִם קִצַּרְתָּ אוֹתְךָ, הַמִּצְוֹת מְלוּוֹת אוֹתְךָ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים כד, יט): כִּי תִקְצַר קִצִּירְךָ בְּשָׂדֶךָ וְשִׁכַחְתָּ עֹמֵר בְּשָׂדֶךָ, אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶפְלוּ לֹא הָיִיתָ עוֹסֵק בְּדַבַּר אֶלָּא מְהֵלֶךְ בְּדַרְךָ, הַמִּצְוֹת מְלוּוֹת אוֹתְךָ, מִנִּין, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי יִקְרָא קוֹן צְפוּר לְפָנֶיךָ.</p>
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On the surface, all of these commandments are dealing with our immediate physical environment and existence, starting with, “if you go out to war” and onward. But already

Rashi comments on that opening verse (Deuteronomy 21:10) that the real war, the toughest war of all that this section is talking about, is the internal war one wages against one's own self and one's own evil inclination.

This continues throughout the rest of the reading. The commandments can be understood on a *pshat*, simple level, as directives for a safer, more wholesome living, and at the same time, each offers a deeper spiritual message. Here's but one example.

<p>When you build a new house, you shall make a railing for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it. (Deuteronomy 22:8)</p>	<p>כִּי תִבְנֶה בַּיִת חֹדֶשׁ וְעָשִׂיתָ מַעֲקֵה לַגֶּגֶר וְלֹא־תָשִׂים דָּמַיִם בְּבֵיתְךָ כִּי־יִפֹּל הַנֶּפֶל מִמֶּנּוּ (דברים כב:8):</p>
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The roof of the ancient world, and still today for some, was a usable, happening place, where one could dry fruits and seeds, hang laundry, sleep in the summer, or sunbathe in winter, play, sit, bathe, sing, chat with friends and more. The roof can tell us much about those who live beneath it—the people, their environment, their familiar-tribal-social and even economic well being. The Torah looks at roofs too, and the *mitzvah* here to build a railing makes sense. The roof that is described here is part of everyday, active, viable living space, and therefore, like any other room in the house, should have safety measures so no one .

The Sifrei Devarim (229) points out that there is a double mitzvah here:

<p>“And you shall make a railing for your roof” – a positive commandment. “And do not bring bloodguilt on your house” – a negative commandment. “And you shall make a railing for your roof,” the Torah only mentions a roof, how do I know I should fence pits, bushes, caves etc? Therefore the text says, “do not bring bloodguilt on your house.”</p>	<p>ועשית מעקה לגגך, מצות עשה. ולא תשים דמים בביתך, מצות לא תעשה. ועשית מעקה לגגך, אין לי אלא גג, מנין לרבות בורות שיחים ומערות חריצים ונעיצים? תלמוד לומר ולא תשים דמים בביתך.</p>
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Thus, the commandment to place a railing around the roof is extended beyond the roof itself, to guarding against any obstacle that can cause any damage to another, once it is



within one's domain of responsibility. In this vein, the Talmud (Ketubot 41:b) instructs us not to raise a bad dog in one's house, or place a rickety ladder nearby, all because of the negative commandment—"do not bring bloodguilt on your house."

Interestingly, although most *halakhic poskim* disagree with him on this, for Rambam, placing a railing was such an important *mitzvah* that one should say a blessing over it:

<p>Blessed are You, Hashem.... Who sanctified us in His commandments and commanded us to make a railing.</p>	<p>ברוך אתה ה'... אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לעשות מעקה.</p>
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But, then again, we may wonder: placing a railing is such an obvious idea! And so is not placing dangerous obstacles before people! Does the Torah, whose words are so precious, really need to tell us something so simple?

The exceptionally prolific CHIDA (Rav CHaim Yosef David Azulai, 1724-1806) adds a less obvious layer, which appears in his commentaries *Chomat Ana"ch* and *Nachal Kedumim*. He points to the fact that, in *gematria* (the substitution of numbers for letters of the Hebrew alphabet, a method of exegesis to gain insights of the text), the word used here, "*gag-cha*" – meaning, your roof– is numerically equal to God's four-letter name (26). Accordingly, what is meant here, beyond our stone and mortar homes, is that we have "soul-homes," or homes for our soul; and in those, we should have a "railing"—what today we might call "boundaries"—around our spiritual selves as well, to encourage us in our process in the *teshuva*, and keep up protected from potential pitfalls. Our emotional/ spiritual "*gag*" (roof) is the highest point in our being, our mind, our thoughts, and much of our connection with the Divine. Getting emotionally involved, being spirituality engaged, are wonderful gifts and yet, at the same time, they can also be challenging and at times, even dangerous. Thus, that "home" within us, also needs to be safely guarded and protected.

Ki Tetze is usually read during the beginning of the month of Elul, the month of *Selichot*, when we turn our focus to much spiritual work. We tend to think of all other people we have harmed and how to make things better with them. But maybe, this *parsha* is also an invitation to take a moment with ourselves and our own "roof" and "railing," to tend to our own boundaries and fences, to gain a greater sense of wellbeing as we usher in the New Year.

Shabbat Shalom.





Now back in Israel where she grew up, Rabbanit Michal Kohane continues to be a teacher of Torah and Talmud in Israel and abroad in various settings: school, adult-ed, scholar in residence and more. She's completed her chaplaincy certification, and is now working on her official tour-guiding license in Israel. Prior to that, Rabbanit Michal was a long-time leader and educator in Northern California, serving as rabbi, Federation executive director and more. She was also the Rosh Kehila of the Prospect Heights Shul in Brooklyn. An avid learner, Rabbanit Michal holds a BA in Studies of Israel and Education, an MS in Jewish Studies, an MA in Clinical Psychology, and a PsyD in organizational psychology. She writes regularly: her first novel, Hachug ("Extracurricular") was published in Israel by Steimatzky and her weekly blog about Torah, travel and life can be found at [www.miko284.com](http://www.miko284.com).