

Parshat Ki Tetze Relationship Building as a Mitzvah

Rabbi Phoebe Ana Rabinowitsch

Class of 2022

Our society functions by a system of rules. Laws allow for order, structure; this is the way things are done. With good intention, rules are meant to serve a purpose. Similarly, our religious society is made up of mitzvot — commandments — which direct how we live our lives. Often mitzvot are interchangeable with rules or laws, but is there a critical difference between them?

A rule, as defined by the Oxford University Press is “one of a set of explicit or understood regulations or principles governing conduct within a particular activity or sphere.”¹ Social rules are generally established or developed as a response to society’s pressures and obligations. By contrast, a mitzvah is commanded by God, and its purpose may sometimes be difficult to understand.

This week’s parsha, Ki Tetze, has 74 mitzvot, more than any other parsha in the Torah. Most of the mitzvot are given as a list, covering all kinds of topics, such as laws regarding captives of war, which clothing to wear, the obligation to return lost objects, and the prohibition of planting grape vines and other crops together (Devarim 21:10-14, 22:5 and 11, 22:1-3, and 22:9). Some of these rules are intuitive; for others it is not so obvious what the reason for them might be. At times, a mitzvah might appear to make sense on the surface, but upon further reflection raises questions. This is the case with Devarim 24:14:

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂק שֹׁכֵר עֲנִי וְאֶבְיֹן מֵאַחֵיךָ אֹי מִגֵּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצְךָ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ:

*You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in one of the communities of your land.
(JPS Translation)*

The reason for this commandment is set forth in the following verse:

בְּיוֹמוֹ תִּתֵּן שֹׁכְרוֹ וְלֹא תָבוֹא עָלָיו הַשְּׂמֶשֶׁת, כִּי עֲנִי הוּא, וְאֵלָיו הוּא נֹשֵׂא אֶת נַפְשׁוֹ;
וְלֹא יִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ אֵל ה', וְהָיָה בְּךָ חַטָּא:

You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends on it; else he will cry to the LORD against you and you will incur guilt. (JPS Translation)

The first part of verse 24:14 (and the reason given in 24:15) seems obvious — to not take advantage of a person who is in a particularly vulnerable situation, both by virtue of being poor and by being the subservient party in a relationship in which there is a power differential. What is more surprising is that the second part of this verse makes the point that this obligation applies equally to the laborer who is a fellow countryman and one who is a stranger (*ger*). In other words, the distinction between being a part of your own group or being an outsider should make no difference in how they are treated.

¹ <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

The Torah contains numerous verses commanding the proper treatment of the *ger*, the person who is not part of the Jewish community but who is a permanent resident living alongside that community. For example, we are told to not wrong or oppress the *ger* (Shemot 22:20):

וְגֵר לֹא תוֹנֶה, וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ

and that the justice system shall have the same rules for a citizen and a *ger* (Vayikra 24:22):

מִשְׁפַּט אֶחָד יְהִיֶה לָכֶם, כַּגֵּר כְּאֶזְרָח יְהִיֶה

These provisions are understandable in that they call for fair treatment and common decency to the people living in our neighborhoods.

But then the Torah takes it a step further. In Vayikra 19:34 the Torah tells us:

כְּאֶזְרָח מִכֶּם יְהִיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אֶתְכֶם, וְאַהֲבַת לוֹ כְּמוֹךָ--
כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (JPS Translation)

I often wonder why we need the reason of once being strangers to empathize with another person. Perhaps most people have an innate, subconscious preference for those who are like themselves as opposed to the “other,” and we need the Torah to keep reminding us to fight against this bias. The Torah’s commandment is quite remarkable — it’s one thing to demand fairness and common decency toward strangers living in your community, but love is another thing entirely!

We are also told in Vayikra 19:18:

לֹא תִקֶּם וְלֹא תִטּוֹר אֶת בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ, וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ:

*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen.
Love your fellow as yourself. (JPS Translation)*

Even this verse is asking a lot from us — to love fellow Jews the same way, to the same extent, as we love ourselves.

Love the stranger as yourself. Love your fellow as yourself. How often do we consider these principles in our daily lives? I like to think of myself as a generally kind and caring person, but sometimes I wonder if this is enough to satisfy the obligations imposed by these verses. How might I take a more active role? Saying hello, offering a smile, asking how someone’s doing — all can be a step toward taking a more active role in daily interactions. But is this enough? Should I be going out of my way to look for ways to be supportive of others?

I was participating in an online seminar the other day and one of the panelists spoke about the culture in her workplace, comparing it to that of a previous job. She mentioned that people are generally pleasant and respectful, but that some of her colleagues had been working together for years and did not really know anything about each other, such as their children’s names or that a coworker’s mother also worked in the same building. I suspect that many of our relationships with people we see in our daily lives are similarly superficial.



We can add to these examples our encounters with people who we often tend to only notice in the background, such as the janitors or the bus drivers we encounter. What does it mean that our relationships are so superficial? Should we be striving to deepen even these types of relationships?

In creating a work-life balance, I understand the importance of maintaining boundaries — of not sharing everything with everyone, and of maintaining some level of privacy, both for ourselves and our colleagues. But perhaps the Torah is telling us that we need to consciously think about our relationships with the various people we encounter, and make an effort to see them and interact with them as full human beings, each with a *tzelem elokim* (a spark of Godliness). Perhaps relationship building is a mitzvah.



Phoebe Ana Rabinowitsch holds a B.A. in Religion and Anthropology from American University. Phoebe Ana has completed various internships, including placements with a national voter registration campaign and with Hillel International. She also served as the Multifaith Intern with New Sanctuary Coalition through Truah's Rabbinical Student Fellowship. Phoebe Ana studied at Hebrew University of Jerusalem and at Middlebury College Language Schools. She has studied Torah at Drisha, Hadar, and Pardes, where she was involved in organizing a weekly partnership minyan. She has experience teaching English as a Second Language to adult learners, and Hebrew and Judaic studies at various religious schools in New York City. Phoebe Ana is an active participant in a monthly women's rosh chodesh group that uses Jewish texts to discuss health and wellness and the relationship to being a Jewish woman today. Phoebe Ana

is committed to exploring how beliefs and practices can help create a supportive and nourishing environment, and is interested in further exploring the field of chaplaincy and pastoral education. She lives in Washington Heights, New York.