

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Ki Teitzei

It's difficult for two Jews to agree on anything. In fact, skeptics say that "two Jews, three opinions" underestimates the situation. However, there is one thing that we all could agree on when studying this week's parsha: there are a lot of mitzvot here! Of course when contemplating the 74 mitzvot this week, it naturally calls to mind the staggering total of 613 mitzvot of the Torah. The question almost asks itself: why so many mitzvot? Didn't we get the point after the first hundred? And, perhaps the most stereotypically Jewish response: Can't we bargain Him down?

This question is so obvious that we never examine the root assumptions that it is based on. We view the mitzvot as external additions to our lives. Some things we view as part of normal life, our work, our social life, and our internal realities, and some things we view as part of our Jewish life. There are certain times of year when the Jewish side seems to dominate (read High Holidays), but nevertheless the two sides remain distinct. However, the Midrash, commenting on a series of mitzvot in this week's parsha, paints another picture.

"They [the mitzvot] are a charm of grace for your head" (Proverbs 1:9)... Rabbi Pinchas son of Chama said: Everywhere you go, the mitzvot accompany you. "When you build a new house, you shall make a fence for your roof," if you make a door, the mitzvot accompany you, as it says, "And you shall write [a mezuzah] on the doorpost of your house," If you wear new clothes, the mitzvot accompany you, as it says, "Do not wear shaatnez,"... The Holy One Blessed Be He said, "Even if you aren't involved in anything particular, buyou are walking down the road the mitzvot accompany you"... as it says, "When there will happen to be a bird's nest before you."

(D'varim Rabbah 6:3)

The imagery of mitzvot escorting us around town is beautiful, but what does it mean? Does this mean that we can drive in the carpool lane even when we're by ourselves?

As Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz (1875-1936) explains, hidden within the Midrash's imagery is an idea which requires a major paradigm shift. No longer should we see mitzvot as static obligations which exist completely disconnected from our lives. Rather, they are directed at our lives; their role is to accompany us as we engage in those activities that we call normal life. Building a house, wearing new clothes, even walking down the street – the mitzvot are deliberately aimed at aiding you in these situations.



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Why do we need the mitzvot's company? Here's where the paradigm shift truly kicks in. Because we naturally view the mitzvot as being separate and disconnected from the rest of life, we have a tendency to see the mitzvot as burdens which often make life difficult. The Midrash is asserting that our perspective is backwards. Really life itself presents us with certain challenges, and the mitzvot are the solutions!

A simple example: A person could naturally view Shabbat as a burden; after all, there are so many restrictions which limit our ability to spend our time as we wish and act as we please. Thus, we see Shabbat as being in conflict with our normal life. However, according to the Midrash, really we should look at it the other way around. We have a problem. Life gets so busy and naturally consumes all of our energy and time. How can a person possibly maintain a spiritually vibrant existence if our physical existence takes up all our time and focus? As the *solution* for this problem, G-d gave us Shabbat. By actively forcing us to take a day off every week and devote it to our spiritual existence, the Torah ensures that we do not get swallowed up by the treadmill of life.

Another example: A person builds a new house. It is natural to feel a sense of absolute possession (mortgage notwithstanding) – “a man's home is his palace,” as the saying goes. The problem is that when we try to lock the outside world out of our homes, we may not notice that we threw G-d out also. A spiritually sensitive Jew recognizes he needs help dealing with those natural feelings of possession and ownership. How can he make sure that he remains conscious of the fact that the house is given to him to be used as a tool for doing good in this world? Enter the mitzvah of *mezuzah*. The *mezuzah*, with Shema written inside, is a declaration that just as we accept G-d's kingship upon ourselves when we say Shema, so too we are accepting G-d's kingship upon our homes when we place the mezuzah on the doorpost. Every time we walk into the house and notice our mezuzah it can remind us that our house is not only ours; it is a gift from G-d.

Hence, the need for so many mitzvot. Life presents us with many complicated situations, and the mitzvot escort us as we try to meet those challenges. While it's true that we all agree that there are a lot of mitzvot in the Torah in general and this week's parsha in particular, let us not view them as a lot of problems, but rather as a lot of solutions

Shabbat Shalom!

