



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## DEVARIM > Ki Teitzei

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August 29, 2015

Ki Teitzei

**Fences, Defenses and  
Offences**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Should we lead mediocre lives with less risk of falling and failing and getting hurt, but also with less reward?

Or should we reach for the stars, climbing as high as we may, which involves the very real risk of falling hard and getting hurt?

As they say, the higher they climb, the harder they fall. Perhaps it's best not to climb high and maintain the status quo.

Yet the Torah commands: You must build - build high - innovative structures, dwellings for holiness and purity. How do you fulfill that mitzvah and at the same time ensure that neither you nor others fall off these high structures and get hurt?

By surrounding your roofs with guardrails. Literally and figuratively. Guardrails allow you to fulfill your high purpose without ever getting arrogant or haughty.

As the Mittlerer Rebbe stated, somewhat cryptically, “Even if you become an onion, spirituality you shall share.”

What can onions teach us about arrogance?

## **FENCES, DEFENSES AND OFFENCES**

### **THE KABBALAH OF GUARDRAILS**

#### **1. Falling Down (Joke)**

A man was standing on the roof of his five-story home, cleaning the leaves out of a clogged gutter, when suddenly he lost his balance and fell off the five-story roof. Tumbling down to the ground, he luckily grabbed onto a wobbly branch.

“HELP! IS THERE ANYBODY UP THERE?” he shouted.

A majestic voice boomed from the firmaments above:

“I will help you, My son, but first you must have faith in Me.”

“Yes, yes,” cried the man. “I trust You completely!”

“Let go of the branch,” boomed the heavenly voice.

There was a long pause, and the man shouted up again, “IS THERE ANYONE ELSE UP THERE?”

#### **2. Climbing and Falling**

Life is such that we often fall. Indeed, the higher we rise, the greater the danger and the more prevalent the risk. The cliché exists for a reason: the higher they climb, the harder they fall.

And there are all manner of falls. We may fall from grace or we may fall out of favor. In these failing and flailing times, as we hang from a flimsy branch, faith is most important and paramount.

But if we do fall, how do we pick ourselves up afterwards ... how do we get back onto the horse (so to speak) after we have been thrown and trampled ... how do we rise high again after feeling so low?

And, is there perhaps a preemptive measure that we could take to protect ourselves from a fall in the first place? A safeguard to ensure our high standing and elevated position?

As a matter of fact, there is.

### 3. Parshat Ki Teitzei

Roofs are dangerous. The higher, the steeper, the more dangerous.

In sync with the primary principle of the Torah – that of the sanctity and preservation of human life – there is a mitzvah to surround one's roof with a guardrail to prevent anybody from falling off.

This mitzvah is found in the Torah reading of this Shabbat – *Parshat Ki Teitzei*.

*When you build a new house, you shall make a guardrail for your roof, so that you shall not bring blood upon your house, if one who falls should fall from it.<sup>1</sup>*

This is a literal mitzvah: When you build a new home, you must fence in the roof (and any other hazard such as an open well or pit) with a *maakah*, a guardrail at least 3 feet high.

As we well know, every mitzvah in Torah, in addition to its literal interpretation, contains mystical, metaphorical, psychological and personal lessons.

To peel back the layers of depth contained within this mitzvah of *maakah*, let us scrutinize the Torah verse we just cited and ask a few obvious questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 22:8.

#### 4. Analyzing the Verse

- What's the nuance *a new house*, why not simply say, *a house*? Why new?
- And why does it say, *a house* – why not any structure?
- Why the cryptic warning, *so that you shall not bring blood upon your house, if one who falls should fall from it* – why not say straightforwardly: *to protect human life*?

Says the Sifri:<sup>2</sup>

Surely a person who deserves to fall [will fall]. Nevertheless, you should not be the one to bring about his death, for meritorious things are executed through meritorious people, while things of ill-fortune are executed through guilty people.<sup>3</sup>

What is this trying to teach us?

#### 5. House = Temple

The Sifri on this verse teaches us another lesson:

Earlier on this verse the Sifri says that the word “house” (*bayit*) comes to include the “Temple” (*heichal*). The roof above the chamber of the Temple that housed the Holy and the Holy of Holies, required a guardrail around its perimeter.

But this is highly perplexing,<sup>4</sup> because we know – as the Talmud<sup>5</sup> clearly states – that houses of study and houses of prayer are exempt from *maakah*, the mitzvah of guardrail.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Sifri, a Midrashic treatise on the derivation of Torah law from the exegesis of the verses of Numbers and Deuteronomy, written during the time of the Mishnah by Rav.

<sup>3</sup> Sifri 22:68 as quoted by Rashi.

<sup>4</sup> See Likkutei Sichot vol. 24, p. 137 and sources there.

<sup>5</sup> Chulin 136a.

<sup>6</sup> Either because for the Mitzvah to take affect it has to be your personal roof, or because it has to be a dwelling. See Likkutei Sichot ibid for different opinions.

Why then would the Beit HaMikdash – the Temple itself, the synagogue of all synagogues, the ultimate house of study and prayer – require a guardrail?<sup>7</sup>

This question is answered beautifully (as are our questions on the verse's unique language) when we learn the mystical meaning of this mitzvah.

## 6. Mystical Roofs

Rabbi Yeshaya HaLevi Horowitz, the great 16th century mystic known as the Shaloh,<sup>8</sup> explains this mitzvah in a profound and personal way.<sup>9</sup>

“Your roof” refers to pride and haughtiness – your high place, when you feel higher than and superior to others. Our arrogance is our roof, which we can easily fall off of and hurt ourselves. That is the nature of arrogance: It blinds us and is a major cause of our mistakes and errors in judgment. Worse, our arrogance and haughtiness may cause others to get hurt. Arrogance is also one of the primary causes of war and bloodshed.

Thus says the Torah:

*You shall make a guardrail for your roof – you shall control and confine your arrogance, with a guardrail of humility – so that you shall not bring blood upon your house, if one who falls should fall from it – so that your roof, your arrogance, shall never cause another to get hurt and never cause bloodshed.*

Our highest places, our arrogance and pride must be surrounded with a fence/guardrail to ensure that neither we (nor anyone else) will fall down.

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<sup>7</sup> See Likkutei Sichot ibid for a halachic explanation to this question.

<sup>8</sup> An acronym for his magnum opus Shnei Luchos HaBris.

<sup>9</sup> End of commentary to our portion. See also Ohr Torah from the Maggid of Mezritch ad loc (Kehot 2006, p. 225).

## 7. Unanswered Questions

This explains the unique language of, *so that you shall not bring blood upon your house* – you shall not allow your structures, your home, your intellect that gives rise to your arrogance and pride, to ever cause the spilling of blood or harm to another.

But how does this explain the words a new house? How does this explain *so, if one who falls should fall from it?* And how does this answer why the Holy Temple required a guardrail but synagogues and houses of worship do not?

The purpose of life is to build a new house, to fashion something novel, to create something unprecedented – to build a divine home out of the matter that we have been given, a holy structure that is new, that never existed before.<sup>10</sup>

The Holy Temple in Jerusalem, with its Holy of Holies, was (and is) the template for our purpose here on earth. As God commanded, *Make for Me a sanctuary and I shall dwell within [the people ... that is, within every single one of] them.* The goal is for every person to make a home, a sanctuary for the Divine.

How do we build such a sacred sanctuary? Out of physical materials. When we apply our physical and natural and material, biological, emotional and intellectual faculties towards a higher purpose, we build a divine temple, a home for God.

## 8. What the Torah is Really Saying

So now we understand better what the Torah is really saying:

*When you build a new house* – when you effectively fulfill the purpose of your being by building matter and transforming it into spirit, in a new and innovative way, like no has ever done before and never will

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<sup>10</sup> See extensively Likkutei Sichot vol. 24, pp. 137-145.

do again – *you shall make a guardrail for your roof* – you must ensure that this highest of all purposes, the roof of all existence, is surrounded with a guardrail, is ringed in humility and humble purity – *so that you shall not bring blood upon your house* – so that your highfalutin goals, your holiness, your holy of holiest, your religion should never, ever cause any blood to be spilled – *if one who falls should fall from it* – that the fallen of the world, the fallen people, the fallen sparks, the fallen potentials, the fallen and broken parts of the world should never, ever fall away from and be affected negatively by your holy temple, by your high mission and lofty goals. The higher you are, the more holy you are, the more humility and purity you need. This is why you need a guardrail.

One could think that the guardrail applies only to material arrogance, i.e. arrogance caused by physical things – look, my house is bigger, my car is nicer, my skills are in greater demand. Arrogance of a spiritual nature, however, would seem to be fine.

But, that's not how the Torah sees it. Even the roof of the very chamber in the Temple that housed the Holy of Holies, had to be protected with a guardrail, so that blood would never be spilled because of its heights.

Our holiness, our holy of holies, must never cause ourselves or others to get hurt. The sanctity, safety, protection and preservation of human life is the single most important Torah principle – be it our life or some else's.

The higher we are, in fact, the more failsafe measures (i.e. more sensitivity and humility) we require.

## 9. The Synagogue vs. the Temple

But this still leaves the obvious question unanswered: Why then does a synagogue not require a *maakah*, a guardrail?

The guardrail was meant to primarily protect from arrogance that effects a person when he is involved with the outside world, or to protect others from falling and being hurt by our arrogance (rooftops).



Synagogues, houses of study and prayer, are primarily spaces of self-refinement, where we deal individually with our spirituality, as we pray and study and connect to God. In this self-contained space, where we are not involved with the world around us or with others, we don't need to be concerned about the effect the roofy arrogance will have on us or others.

But the Temple was different. The Temple was all inclusive, encompassing our purpose as a nation. Yes, it was about refining our individual selves, but *primarily* about refining others and the world. The Temple required us to transform matter into spirit<sup>11</sup> and to shine outward,<sup>12</sup> to go outside of our comfort zones to make a dwelling down below for God. Therefore, the Temple, the global home of the Divine, required a guardrail, much more than a place of personal refinement.

When we are cocooned in the warm embrace of the *Beit Midrash* or *Beit Knesset* or *Beit Tefilah*, when we are walled off from the world in the safe sanctuary of the yeshiva, house of study, house of prayer, there is no threat that we or others will fall off the roof – which is a metaphor for arrogance. After all, such a place is shielded from the outside world and it's just us and God, us and Torah.

But, when we go out into the world *and build a new house*, when we do something innovative, turning matter into spirit, influencing the outside world – whether it's our own personal home or through the Temple – it is then that we must build a guardrail to protect ourselves and others from arrogance. And, even more importantly, to ensure that our roof (i.e. our highest self) has the humility to never influence the world negatively.

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<sup>11</sup> I.e. offerings, elevating animal life to the ethereal.

<sup>12</sup> Menachot 86b.

## 10. Me and Them

You might say, “I’m doing what I have to do, building a new home and influencing people. Is it my responsibility if someone is unstable and falls? Or if someone has already fallen? How am I supposed to protect them from themselves?”

Says the Sifri:

Surely a person who deserves to fall will fall, but you should not be the one to bring about his death, for meritorious things are executed through meritorious people, while things of ill-fortune are executed through guilty people.

So, if someone falls off *your* structure, what does that say of your divine home?

## 11. The Onion (Chassidic Story)

On the other hand, one may argue: Perhaps it is better that I not build a new home in the first place, so as not to put anyone at risk of falling off my roof?

To that says the Torah an emphatic no! You are obligated to build a new home, you are charged with the mission of transforming the material world into a divine home. Yes, it’s true that every great accomplishment comes with risks. Building a home – or for that matter, anything worthwhile – comes with a roof, with the risk of becoming arrogant. Therefore, build a guardrail to protect you and others from arrogance. But never deprive anyone from the benefits of a home due to the risks involved.

The second Rebbe of Chabad, Rabbi Dovber, better known as the Mittlerer Rebbe, insisted that all of the Chassidim that would travel to Lubavitch had to teach and share Chassidic teachings with all the communities and synagogues that they passed on their way.

One of the younger Chassidim, who complied with the Rebbe's instruction – and did so in a very articulate manner – once complained that, when teaching Chassidut, he was overcome with a feeling of arrogance. He thus desired to cease teaching.

The Mittlerer Rebbe responded to him, “Even if you become an onion, Chassidut you shall teach!”<sup>13</sup>

What did the Mittlerer Rebbe mean?

Onions are inedible on their own. Yet, they spice and flavor all manner of dishes – from soups to kugels to cholents – magnificently.

Even if you become inedible like an onion, even if your arrogance is repellent and bitter like the smell of an onion, you cannot deprive others from the teachings that spice and flavor their lives. Your job is to spice the world, but you yourself are secondary just like an onion. But you have a serious purpose in the dish/mission that is yours.

However, since there is the risk of becoming arrogant, therefore you have the obligation to ensure that you do not hurt anyone by building the proper guardrails, but you must fulfill your purpose here on earth.

## 12. Mountain Climbing (Joke)

A ranger training group was learning mountain climbing.

One of the men slipped and fell down into a crevice.

“Are you hurt?” the others called down, leaning over the seemingly bottomless ridge.

“I don't know yet,” a weak voice was heard, “I'm still falling!”

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<sup>13</sup>Printed in Likkutei Sichot ibid p. 144.

### 13. New House, Eternal Home (Conclusion)

Once you fall, it's hard to stop. The best way to protect yourself from getting hurt, is to implement safety measures to preempt the fall in the first place.

Building a fence is a lot healthier than falling to the bottom, where others must pick up your shattered pieces.

The key to all this is hidden in our Torah reading:

It states: *When you build a new house...*

The word new means that what you have done is indeed new – no one has ever done or could do what you could do. No one ever, past, present or future – not Moses, Abraham, Maimonides, not your neighbor, parent, boss or employee. Not one of them could ever build what you built.

You have to build a new home – with your unique voice, with your individual song and spirit, which is new and innovative – for, with it, you will influence the world as only you can. And when you build that home, to ensure that it is holy and pure and in line with the Torah, you have to surround it with the guardrail of humility, guaranteeing that the new and innovative structure you built will only lift people up to the highest places while mitigating the risks of falling or getting hurt.

When we all build such *new* and *innovative* homes for the Divine, embraced by a fence of humility, we will surely witness the building of the ultimate Divine Home, the Third Temple. May it happen speedily in our days. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!