



Parashah Insights
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Parashat Ki Tetze
Serving Hashem Step by Step

Planning the Building

“When you build a new house, make a fence for your roof, and do not put blood in your house if a fallen one falls from it” (*Devarim 22:8*).

The simple meaning of this verse is that we should erect a fence around our roof as a safeguard against dangerous falls. However, we may interpret this verse on a more profound level as well, as an analogy to man’s service of Hashem, which is often compared to building a house:

- “Through wisdom a house is built, and it is established through understanding. And through knowledge its rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant wealth” (*Mishle 24:3-4*; see commentaries of *Ralbag* and *Malbim*).
- “May Hashem make the woman who is coming into your house like Rahel and like Leah, who both built the House of Israel” (*Ruth 4:11*).
- “And it was because the midwives feared G-d that He made them houses” (*Shmot 1:21*). Rashi explains: “And He made them houses’ – the houses of priesthood and of the Tribe of Levi and of royalty, which are called ‘houses.’”

“Building a house” is symbolic of the way we build our spiritual life. We may explain the words “when you build a new house” as a directive for continuing our spiritual growth, moving ahead from level to level. We should not remain stuck in



one place, on the same story of our spiritual “structure,” so to speak. We should always strive to add yet another new level to our service of Hashem, as we learn from King David’s words, “they will go from strength to strength” (*Tehillim* 84:8; see *Malbim*).

However, even as we attempt to climb spiritually, caution and careful planning are definitely in order. What exactly do we envision as our next step? Is it something appropriate for us that we will be able to maintain? Or are we reaching above and beyond our present capacities? If we extend ourselves too far in one grand leap, we are more than likely to sustain a very painful fall, G-d forbid. This is why the Torah tells us, “make a fence for your roof.” The roof – the new, higher level we would like to add to our structure – must be safe. It needs the secure limits defined by a fence, to keep us from toppling off our recently acquired peak. Otherwise, lacking sensible borders, we endanger ourselves. In the Torah’s words, “do not put blood in your house, if a fallen one falls from it.” If we shoot up too high, rather than progressing in an ordered, careful sequence suited to our abilities, we will fall and lose everything.

Step by Step

We learn this lesson from the ladder which Hashem showed our Forefather Yaakov in his prophetic dream. Yaakov had just left the protective shelter of the *bet midrash* of Shem and Ever, and was on his way out into the world, where he would be getting married and building a home. At this critical juncture in his life, he was granted a vision of “a ladder standing on the ground and its head reaching the Heavens” (*Bereshit* 28:12). The ladder symbolizes the way we should approach our service of Hashem. As human beings, we are highly physical, created from “the dust of the earth” (*Bereshit* 2:7). As such, our feet are planted quite firmly on the ground. Our soul, on the other hand, is spiritual. It can soar to great heights, reaching the Heavens and cleaving to the Al-mighty. The way to rise above base physicality and reach the Heavens is specifically by way of a ladder – level after level, rung by rung. If we skip over rungs and jump up haphazardly, we will lose our grip and plummet to the bottom, forfeiting whatever levels we did manage to gain.

We find an allusion to this concept elsewhere in the Torah as well, in the verse, “And do not climb up steps on My Altar, so that you do not uncover your nakedness upon it” (*Shmot* 20:23). In order to reach the summit of the Altar and offer sacrifices, it was necessary to ascend a rise. Hashem commanded that this rise be in the form of a ramp, rather than steps, to avoid any possible immodesty during the ascent. This is the literal meaning of the verse.

However, I often explain this verse in the context of our quest for spiritual growth. We may be eager to sprint up to the top of the Altar, but the Torah, knowing our tendency to rush impulsively ahead, issues a timely warning: our advance should be



carefully graduated. If we bound upwards at a faster pace than we really can manage, bypassing the fundamentals which would ensure our safe footing, we set ourselves up for a terrible, humiliating crash. When that happens, our “nakedness will be revealed.” Our shortcomings will become glaringly, painfully apparent, showing all too clearly why we did not reach the peak of spiritual perfection we desired.

In Place

In *Pirke Avot*, our Sages list “forty-eight means by which Torah is acquired.” One of them is “knowing one’s place” (*Avot* 6:6). This means being aware of our spiritual level and serving Hashem in keeping with that level, moving ahead at a pace which allows us to hold on to our accomplishments.

This advice is true not only of our spiritual status, but also of our physical strengths and capacities. For example, if our constitution is not strong, we should not take on voluntary fasts and afflictions not required by *halachah*. If we break ourselves by embracing extras beyond our endurance, we will become the “fallen one” referred to in the verse. It will not work, and we will pay a heavy price. There is another consideration to keep in mind as well. A man may be ready to adopt an optional stricture related to spiritual growth. Before plunging in, he should stop to consider whether or not his spiritual partner, namely his wife, is also ready for this new step. We find this concept in the verse, “a righteous man will flourish like a date palm” (*Tehillim* 92:13). Pollination of the date palm involves the plants’ male and female elements, with pollen transferred from one to another in order to produce fruit. According to some opinions, the date palm combines both male and female in one tree (see *Zohar, Lech Lecha* p. 82b et al; *Sefer HaBahir, Ot Kuf-tzadi-het; Etz Hayyim, Shaar Kuf-kaf-het*, beginning of Chapter 2, and *Bet Lehem Yehudah* loc. cit.).

In this sense, a righteous man is comparable to a date palm. If he and his wife grow together, their growth will be balanced, stable and long-lived. But if the husband begins to vault ahead too rapidly for his wife to keep up, they are headed for trouble. A man’s progress in the service of Hashem should take his wife’s needs and capacities into account, so that his pursuit of advanced levels does not send her tumbling down, with him following in her wake.

Angels’ Wings

The principle of careful, graduated, appropriate progress is true not only of man; it is even true of the angels, as we learn from the verse, “If you go in My ways and keep My charge... I will make you a walker among these standing ones” (*Zechariah* 3:7). The commentators explain that the expression “standing ones” refers to the angels (see Rashi and *Metzudat David*). On their own, angels are static, with neither



growth nor regression. They have no Free Will, and as a result, they go nowhere – they are merely “standing ones.” Their only movement is through man’s deeds. For example, they can ascend to elevate the prayers of the Jewish people, and descend to bring down Divine bounty. Yet even as they fulfill their tasks, they too must be careful not to climb too high or sink too low, as we learn from another verse which describes the service of the angels.

An angel has six wings. “With two he covers his face, with two he covers his feet, and with two he flies” (*Yeshayahu* 6:2). The higher pair covers the face, the lower pair covers the feet, and the middle pair is used for flight. The Arizal explains this profound concept.

The angels’ ascent or descent is very carefully controlled. When they ascend, they use the two wings on top to cover their faces, because Hashem has imbued them with a fear of going higher than they should. This fear prevents them from becoming overly ambitious and seeking to climb beyond their proper place. When they descend, they have a corresponding fear of going too far down. They use the lower two wings to cover their feet, to keep them from going too low. The middle wings represent the level to which they will ascend, which is where they belong. These are the wings they use to fly. Thus their movements are balanced and regulated: not too high and not too low, continually advancing to attain the right level (*Shaar HaHakdamot*, p. 62b,c and *Likute Torah on Yeshayahu*).

The same is true of ourselves and our own service of Hashem. If we fly too high, beyond our capabilities, we will burn out. If we stoop too low, below what we could be doing, we are wasting our opportunities. The Arizal calls this being *mevatel mahut tikuno*, not ascending to the proper level and achieving the rectification which we could have and should have attained (see *Nehar Shalom* p. 25d, 26a).

We can understand this by considering an aspiring student entering a new *yeshivah*. What is the right class for him, and which lectures should he attend? If he is pushed ahead to a class where the students surpass him in both learning and maturity, he will be lost. Not only does he gain nothing by overextending, he is bound to lose his balance and fall. So too, if he is sent down to a class below his level, he squanders his time and talents, because he could have achieved much more. It takes great wisdom to gauge the appropriate level where he can excel and achieve his maximum potential.

Spiritual Satisfaction

Our Sages describe the futility of never-ending material ambition. “A person does not leave this world with even half his desires in hand. If he has one hundred, he wants two hundred” (*Kohelet Rabbah* 1:34, 3:12). Getting all that we want will not necessarily make us happy. This is the natural human tendency concerning physical and material aspirations; the more we have and the greater our material success, the



more we want. Regardless of the extent of our worldly achievements and acquisitions, we will never be satisfied.

Apparently, the same should be true of spiritual accomplishments as well. If it is simply our nature to always want more than we have, should we not also want more spiritually? In fact, we find this idea in the title bestowed on our Torah scholars, who are known as *talmide hachamim*, literally “students of wisdom.” No matter how much Torah they know, they continue to view themselves as students who are eager to learn more, hear more, and know more. They are lifelong learners, because they will never be satisfied with what they already know.

And yet, there is a vast difference between mundane and spiritual aspirations. The fact is that the constant drive for further material gains leaves us drained and parched. This is not the case with spiritual accomplishments. Hashem has endowed them with a unique quality which sets them apart from worldly ambitions: regardless of how much still lies ahead, they are satisfying at every level. While we should always set new goals and work towards higher levels, every level brings its own joy; why should we let it go?

This principle is illustrated by an incident in the life of Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad, known as the Ben Ish Hai. Even as a young man, the Ben Ish Hai was already a Torah scholar of note. When he was only twenty-six, he wrote to his mentor, the saintly Rabbi Eliyahu Mani, the chief rabbi of Hebron, asking about certain hidden Kabbalistic meanings of the prayers. Based on his questions, Rabbi Mani assumed that the young Rabbi Yosef Hayyim planned to begin conducting his own prayers according to the profound Kabbalistic intents found in the *Siddur* of the *Rashash*. Rather than encouraging him to take on this pious practice, he advised against it. He cited our Sages’ teaching, “Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his lot” (*Avot* 4:1), explaining that as our early authorities (cited in *Pri HaAretz*) teach, this refers to our spiritual lot as much as to our material lot. Every stage of our service of Hashem brings its own particular satisfaction, and we should not lose it by trying to rush ahead too fast (*Rav Pe’alim*, Vol. III, *Helek Sod Yesharim* 13).

Rabbi Mani illustrated his point with a vivid parable from the *Tanya*. A thirsty man stood in the middle of a clear blue river, surrounded by sweet, pure water. Rather than quenching his thirst with the water at hand, he frantically studied the horizon, searching for... water. What was there for the taking had no appeal; he was sure that only what lay ahead was really worth having.

Our progress should always be balanced and carefully thought out, never impulsive. We should not spring recklessly forward, hoping to achieve spiritual satisfaction.

If we do, we are likely to get hurt. Instead, we should derive the maximum benefit and enjoyment from where we are and what we have, using our current level as a secure steppingstone to the next stage.



Within our Fence

The Torah tells us, "When you build a new house." When we seek to develop our spiritual structure, building an edifice in Hashem's honor, we must "make a fence for our roof." Our plans for growth should be carefully structured – fenced in, so to speak – so that we do not leap too high or lean too low, risking a terrible, devastating fall. We should serve Hashem with joy *now*, where and as we are.

The Torah further tells us, "do not put blood (*damim*) in your house, if a fallen one falls from it." *Damim*, translated here as "blood," also means "money." In our homes and our lives, we should not give first place to money and material acquisitions. If we do, we are destined to crash. We will never be happy with our lot, because money and trinkets only whet our appetite for more, and more, and more. Spiritual gains built on a solid, step-by-step foundation will bring us both tranquility in the present and the means to go continually forward in our service of Hashem in the future.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.