

THE MITZVAH DOMINO EFFECT

The Torah portion of Ki Teitzei contains 74 of the Torah's 613 mitzvahs—27 positive commandments and 47 prohibitions—more mitzvahs than any other parshah. A portion so rich in mitzvahs is naturally filled with profound life lessons as well.

One of the most beautiful aspects of any mitzvah is that, as a reward for performing it, we are given the opportunity to perform another. “A mitzvah brings another mitzvah ... for the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah,” the Mishnah promises. (*Ethics of the Fathers 4:2*)

Rashi highlights this concept, explaining that the juxtaposition of several mitzvahs in this parshah illustrates how one mitzvah leads to another, and then another, in a continuous chain.

Consider the mitzvah of *shiluach haken*, “the sending of the nest.” The Torah instructs:

“If a bird’s nest chances before you on the road, on any tree or on the ground, and [it contains] fledglings or eggs, if the mother is sitting upon the fledglings or upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother [from] upon the young. You shall send away the mother, and [then] you may take the young for yourself, in order that it should be good for you, and you should lengthen your days.” (*Deuteronomy 22:6-7*)



Credit: Sefira Lightstone, Chabad.org

Essentially, if someone finds a nest and wants to take the eggs or young birds, they must first send the mother away. Now, says Rashi, watch what happens:

With the prosperity you will merit as a reward for fulfilling this commandment, you will build a new home, and you will then be positioned to fulfill the mitzvah of *ma’akeh*, which is outlined in the subsequent verse:

“When you build a new house, you shall make a guard rail—a *ma’akeh*—for your roof, so that you shall not cause blood to be spilled in your house, that the one who falls should fall from it.” (*Deuteronomy 22:8*)

As a further reward for fulfilling the commandment to send away the mother bird, you will also be blessed with vineyards and fields.

This will obligate you in the mitzvahs of *kelayim*—the prohibitions against mixing species of grain or vegetables, crossbreeding animals, and plowing your field with an ox and donkey simultaneously (or any two types of animals). (*Deuteronomy 22:9-10*)

Additionally, you will be blessed with fine clothing, obligating you in the mitzvah of *shatnez*—the prohibition against wearing cloth that contains both wool and linen. (*Deuteronomy 22:11*)

Thus, by reading verses 6-12 of a single chapter we see the mitzvah domino effect—one mitzvah leads to another!

Divine Calculus

The mitzvah of sending away the mother bird before taking her eggs



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or chicks would appear to be a lesson in compassion. The Talmud, however, refers to this mitzvah as a *chok*, a Divine decree for which no reason is given. The Mishnah admonishes that anyone who adds to the prayer service, “Your mercy extends upon the nest of birds,” is to be silenced. In other words, don’t presume that the reason for this mitzvah is G-d’s compassion.

True, in our limited understanding, it may seem that it is all about mercy and compassion. But when we assume this, we are, in a sense, selling G-d short, “limiting” Him by attempting to define Him by our human perception. The mercy He displays toward the bird is, in fact, a heavenly decree beyond our understanding.

Just because we think we know G-d’s reasons for something doesn’t mean we are right. This is crucial to keep in mind when performing mitzvahs. We must do so only because G-d commanded us, and not for any other reason.

Attracting Goodness

Taking a closer look at the mitzvah to build a fence around your roof, we find that the Torah uses an interesting expression: build a protective fence so “the one who falls” shouldn’t fall.

This touches on a fascinating theological question: G-d runs the

world; life and death are in His hands. People don’t just fall off roofs—everything is predestined. One might argue, “If this guy is destined to fall off the roof, why would I be held liable? If he is not meant to fall, he won’t fall, regardless of whether I build a fence!”

This argument is actually partially correct. No one falls off a roof without it being part of G-d’s plan, which is why the person is referred to as the “one who falls.” Nevertheless, it doesn’t have to be *your* roof! Let it happen through someone else.

G-d enables good people to do good things. When a poor person is destined to be fed and cared for, G-d finds good people—those who seek to do good deeds—and allows them to be the ones to help.

This reminds me of a story about a Boy Scout who kept arriving late to his meetings. His scoutmaster repeatedly warned him to stop. One day, the boy came late again, and the scoutmaster said, “That’s it. Late again? A half hour late? Do you have a good excuse?”

The boy responded, “Of course I do. I was helping an old lady cross the street.”

The scoutmaster replied, “That is a good deed, but a half hour? Explain that.”

With a mischievous grin, the Boy Scout responded, “She didn’t want to cross!”

Good things are brought about through good people, and the opposite is true as well. When something negative must occur, G-d finds the type of person who ignores the mitzvah of building a protective fence around his roof, and the person destined to fall to his death falls specifically from that person’s roof.

Separation and Sensitivity

The mitzvah of *kelayim* includes the prohibition against having animals of two different species work together in the field, such as jointly plowing, threshing, or pulling a wagon. “You shall not plow with an ox and donkey together.” (*Deuteronomy 22:10*)

One reason for this mitzvah is to maintain the separation of the pure from the impure. An ox is a kosher animal, while the donkey is non-kosher; the pure should not mix with the impure.

This principle also applies to human relationships. Righteous people, or those striving to be righteous, should not assimilate with wicked people unless they are certain they can influence them without being influenced themselves.

Another reason we avoid plowing with an ox and donkey together is out of sensitivity. The ox, being a kosher animal, chews its cud, while the donkey, a non-kosher animal, does not. When the donkey sees the ox chewing, it may mistakenly think that the ox has just been fed while the donkey has not, causing distress to the donkey. This is considered insensitive and cruel.

If G-d is so concerned about the feelings of an animal, imagine how



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careful we must be with the feelings of our fellow human beings.

Stranger vs. Brother

Regarding the prohibition of *ribbit*—not charging interest on a loan—I was privileged to hear a beautiful interpretation from my father, Rabbi Sholom B. Gordon, of blessed memory. The verse states:

“You shall not give interest to your *brother*, whether it be interest on money, interest on food or interest on any other item for which interest is normally taken. You may, however, give interest to a *stranger* [gentile], but to your *brother* you shall not give interest.” (*Deuteronomy 23:20-21*)

Why does the Torah say that a Jew may, and perhaps even should, charge and pay interest in dealings with non-Jews, but should not charge and pay interest to fellow Jews? At first glance, this does not seem very kosher.

My father explained that the correct approach to understanding this is highlighted by the language in the verse: “stranger” vs. “brother.”

If you work with your hands—whether as a doctor, dentist, or musician—your hands and body generate income. By contrast, if you are an investor, a banker, or businessman, then your money makes money.

The natural order of things is that a person’s money is expected to generate more money. Your money should make money.

When someone asks for a loan, you are taking some of your money, which should be generating more money for you, and lending it to them.

When the borrower is a *stranger* (i.e., a non-Jew), you should charge interest, so that your money continues doing what it is meant to do—make you more money. But when the borrower is a *brother* (i.e., a fellow Jew), you do not charge interest. Why? Because he is your flesh and blood, and it’s not correct to charge interest to your own brother. However, it is perfectly normal to charge interest to everyone else.

With this context, the law becomes easier to understand and reminds us of the importance of viewing every fellow Jew as what they are—our brothers and sisters!

Happy Wife, Happy Life

Another mitzvah in this parshah is the commandment for a groom to remain with, and not apart from, his bride during the first year of their marriage. As such, he is exempt from military service during this time.

Our sages taught that a groom is considered a king and a bride a queen. On a lighter note, the question is asked: How long is a groom considered a king? The answer is as long as he treats his wife like a queen!

“When a man takes a new wife, he

shall not go out in the army, nor shall he be subjected to anything associated with it. He shall remain free for his home for one year and delight his wife, whom he has taken.” (*Deuteronomy 24:5*)

What is the newlywed husband to do during this first year of marriage, when he is not supposed to leave his house?

“*Vesimach et ishto.*”

The word “*et*” can either introduce the direct object, namely, “his wife,” or it can mean “with.”

There are two ways to interpret the verse: One is that he shall rejoice *with* his wife; they should have a year of partying. But that’s not the correct interpretation.

“*Vesimach et ishto*” means that he must make his wife happy. A husband is not meant to focus on his own happiness; that is not his obligation. The primary obligation of a Jewish husband is to ensure that his wife is happy.

If his wife is happy, his children are happy, and his family is happy, chances are he’ll be happy as well. But his happiness is not his job; it is the by-product of doing his job well!

Appropriately Balanced

Another mitzvah in this Torah portion is be honest with weights and measures:



How long is a groom considered a king? As long as he treats his wife like a queen!



“You shall not keep in your house two different *ephah* measures, one large and one small. Rather, you shall have a full and honest weight, and a full and honest *ephah* measure, in order that your days will be prolonged on the land which the L-rd, your G-d, gives you.” (*Deuteronomy 25:14-15*)

This mitzvah is directly followed by the commandment to never forget what Amalek did to the Jewish People:

“Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how they surprised you on the road and cut off all the weak people at your rear, when you were parched and weary from the journey, and they did not fear G-d.” (*Deuteronomy 25:17*)

The Rebbe’s explanation of the connection between these two mitzvahs is both instructive and eye-opening.

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains the juxtaposition, saying that if you use fraudulent weights and measures, you should be worried about provocation from the enemy. He cites the verse from Proverbs, “Deceitful scales are an abomination of the L-rd; when willful wickedness comes, then comes disgrace.” (*Proverbs 11:1-2*) This means that after you intentionally sin by using deceitful scales, the enemy will provoke you into war, leading to disgrace.

This may seem harsh; the punishment does not appear to fit the crime. While cheating with weights and measures is wrong,

does it warrant a lethal attack by our enemies?

The answer lies in understanding the essence of Amalek. In Chasidic teachings, Amalek represents apathy—a cold, uncaring approach to Torah and mitzvahs. When the verse says that Amalek “encountered you on the way,” the Hebrew word used for “encountered” is *karcha*, which also means, “cooled you off.” (*Deuteronomy 25:18*) Amalek is the voice that denies Divine Providence, suggesting that everything

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is mere coincidence. He chills your excitement for Judaism. When you become excited about prayer, Torah study, or giving charity, Amalek says, “Relax. Chill.”

How does Amalek’s attitude infiltrate our lives? It starts with dishonesty in weights and measures, and, on a deeper level, with a lack of proper balance in education and child-raising.

Parents and educators must teach

children that there is a balance between worldly and Torah values. Torah, mitzvahs, and Judaism should be at least as important as our secular pursuits, if not more.

For example, when a child comes home from school with straight As and the parents make a big deal about it—perhaps with a special reward or outing—but when the same child comes home from Hebrew School with straight Alephs, the parents merely say, “Nice,” the child receives the message that Torah studies are less important than secular studies.

Another example the Rebbe offers is when children see their parents spending money freely on this, that, or the other, but they are less generous when it comes to giving charity or buying items needed for mitzvahs. The child concludes that worldly things are important, and Judaism is not.

For this child, the physical and spiritual aspects of life become unbalanced—the weights and measures are off. This imbalance can, G-d forbid, lead to apathy. A child must be taught that Torah, Judaism, and G-dly values are as important, if not more so, than secular or non-Jewish values.

Each mitzvah brings another mitzvah in its wake. May we merit to perform the mitzvah that will finally tip the scales and usher in the Ultimate Redemption with the coming of our righteous Moshich—for good things are brought about through good people—may it be speedily in our days. Amen.

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