



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Ki Tetze 5771

By Shira Fischer

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We often say that there are 613 commandments in the Torah. One can certainly list that many, but no one person can do them all: not for lack of will, but because many *mitzvot* only apply to certain people or in specific situations. For example, some *mitzvot* are only applicable in the Land of Israel; others are relevant just for the *kohein gadol*—the sole high priest; and others depend on specific situations, like that of a man whose married, childless brother has just died. Some *mitzvot* are only relevant at certain stages of life, like betrothal or the period just after marriage. Outside of those specific situations, these commandments cannot be fulfilled.

Parshat Ki Tetze is full of *mitzvot*—74, to be exact (the most in any *parshah* in the Torah)—and it has many that are relevant only in special circumstances. For example, if you come upon a bird's nest and want the eggs or baby birds, you must send the mother away first.¹ We can all derive lessons from this law about compassion and wonder why this is one of only two *mitzvot* that is rewarded with long life, as the rabbis do,² but ultimately, most of us will never have the opportunity to perform this commandment. Similarly, if you build a new house, you must build a railing around the roof.³ While we can all learn the importance of protecting the safety of others, those of us who will never build a new house ourselves have no obligation to do so in order to fulfill the commandment to build a protective railing. Thus, the number of *mitzvot* available to an individual is, to a large extent, a product of chance.

As our lives unfold, certain openings present themselves, while others do not. When I applied for this Dvar Tzedek fellowship, I was visiting Israel as a newlywed. Now, as I write my last *d'var Torah*, I am at home with my baby sleeping soundly in her crib. The challenges I now face are so different from those of just a few years ago, and the opportunities are new as well.

As I consider these amazing changes, I remember what the Talmud says about our agency: "Life, children and food are matters that depend not on merit, but on luck."⁴ I was lucky enough to have good medical care to protect my health and my baby's, and my daughter has enough to eat because of where and when she was born. I shudder when I compare the gifts she was born into with those of a child born in Niger or Mali, who is twenty times as likely to die in his or her first year of life as a child born in the United States or Europe.⁵ Our tradition reminds us not to attribute these differences to our own good deeds, but to forces beyond our control—lest we come to believe that "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me."⁶

Rather than viewing the biggest blessings in life—health, wealth, family and education—as rewards for merit or hard work, I believe that they should be viewed as gifts given to us that obligate us to help others. Like the many *mitzvot*

¹ Deuteronomy 22:6-7.

² Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 142a.

³ Deuteronomy 22:8.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 28a.

⁵ *The World Factbook*, CIA, 2011. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/rankorderguide.html>

⁶ Deuteronomy 8:17.

in our *parshah* that cannot be done just anytime or by anyone, so too do other obligations kick in only given the right opportunity. We who have enough food should not think we deserve what we have; instead, we must realize that we have been given the opportunity to do the *mitzvah* of feeding those who face hunger.

Many of us in the United States today have been given such opportunities that beget responsibility. Blessed with abundant material wealth, we have the responsibility to give *tzedakah* and support those seeking to improve their lives and communities. As voters in a democratic world power, we have political power that we must use to advocate for laws and policies that secure the human rights of people around the world. And as beneficiaries of much education, we have the responsibility to continue to learn about the world around us and to teach and inspire others to take action as well.

Rabbinic literature understands the abundance of *mitzvot* to be a blessing and a gift⁷ and those who are obligated in more commandments are considered fortunate.⁸ May we too consider ourselves fortunate to have so many opportunities to share the blessings of our lives with others.



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⁷ Mishnah, Makkot 3:16.

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 87a.

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