

New Structures Require New Mindsets
Rabbi Judah Kerbel ~ Parashat Ki Teitzei ~ Queens Jewish Center

It is often pointed out that the world tends to change at a fast pace in the contemporary era. The development of new technology results in new ways of life, and such developments take place at a rapid pace. However, as fast as we thought the world was changing before, it has changed most abruptly and dramatically the last (nearly) six months. While we hope that some of these changes are temporary, we have nonetheless needed to be agile and flexible to norms that will last indefinitely. How do we successfully adapt to such a different reality so quickly?

One of the 74 mitzvot in Parashat Ki Teitzei is that when one builds a new house, one must build a railing on the roof in order to prevent anyone from falling:

כִּי תִבְנֶה בַּיִת חָדָשׁ וַעֲשִׂיתָ מַעֲקֵה לְגַגְּךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂים דָּמַיִם בְּבֵיתְךָ כִּי־יִפֹּל הַגִּפֹּל מִמֶּנּוּ: (ס)

When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.

Sometimes, one builds a house because they never had one and never needed one beforehand. However, one may build a “new” house even though they already had one before. For whatever reason, their old one was no longer sufficient (whether due to a move, a need or desire for more space, or because the old one was, in fact, old). At that point, the individual initiating the new project is not merely building something from nothing, but they are reimagining their house. For that matter, even if someone is building a house for the first time, it is not the first time they are living in a house. Everyone comes with previous exposure. The occasion to build a new house, then, is an opportunity to think differently and to make changes from what previously existed. What did not work or what was not appealing before can work now and can be appealing now. It is the chance to unveil the “new and improved.” Sometimes, we renovate and fix that which exists. Other times call for conceiving anew and starting from a flat piece of land.

In Nesivos Shalom, the Slonimer Rebbe asks, why is the mitzvah to build a railing specifically on a new house? Would this not be true if there is a preexisting structure? And why specifically on a roof? One might need to build protection around a pit, or perhaps a balcony that is not on the roof.

He explains that when we make changes, when we try to do teshuva, it is often not about fixing one particular detail or aspect about ourselves. Instead, we need to think of the whole picture differently. There are times when we are totally on the wrong path, and one small shift in direction will not get us to where we need. A structure can be so out of shape that one call to the handyman for a minor fix will not solve all of the problems. Instead, we need to rebuild the whole structure. We attempt to rebuild the structure of our lives. If one is trying to change their diet, modifying one or two items

might not always be as effective as rethinking the entire way we eat. If one wants to get better sleep, it's not just about climbing into bed a few minutes earlier, but being cognizant all day about caffeine and screen intake. If one wants to focus on *tefillah* better, forcing oneself to focus for a moment may not transform the entire *tefillah*. Sometimes, we have to build that new house, that new structure for ourselves.

The requirement of a railing in this context reinforces this idea. We may think that we just built a new house, so nothing can go wrong. There are no unexpected bumps or cracks. And while obviously, one needs a "railing," proper defenses regardless of the age of the structure, metaphorically speaking we may think we need it least when we think everything is brand new and perfect. However, says the Slonimer Rebbe, that is the time when it specifically makes sense to be more on guard. In order to prevent any falls, you need the railing from the very first second. So too with changes in our lives – the protection we build in for good habits and observance of mitzvot is required not when we are struggling – why wait until then? But those good practices are reinforced with the proper protection from the very beginning.

How do we get there? That is why the Torah specifically requires the railing on the roof because the roof is like a person's head. Everything starts up there. We have to think differently in order to do differently. This is a foundation of Aaron Beck's cognitive behavioral therapy. Our cognitions lead to our behaviors. In this method of therapy, change begins by addressing irrational or inhibiting beliefs and perceptions as the starting point for making change. We have to reimagine ourselves and the world around us to make change.

The metaphor of the new house and the importance of its railing may help us understand the world of COVID-19. Most houses do not get built overnight or even in a couple of months, but that is more the less what we had to do. We did not just make one or two minor changes like relying on using hand sanitizer an extra few times a day. The preexisting structure of life was no longer viable as was, and therefore we had to change the entire structure of society and our personal lives. But adapting to this life, even at this moment, is not just about changing behavior. It is about the ability to rethink and reimagine. It forces each of us as individuals to recognize that trying to cling the previous normal with just a few modifications does not suffice. Instead, we have had to make the cognitive switch to adjust to what is now reality. As a shul, we have had to do that as well. Being able to hold minyanim, especially on Shabbat and chagim, necessitates embracing a different set of norms and procedures that allow us to operate safely – there are the proverbial railings we have needed to put on in order to prevent any harm. Yet, beyond the things we have had to resign to reluctantly, being able to move quickly to have shiurim on virtual platforms, learning Torah together outdoors, and our new kiddush system have brought out the potential creativity that comes from the opportunity to rethink. New mindsets have enabled us to make the best of a situation that involved radical change. Even when we are able to abandon some of the less welcomed changes, the ability to reenvision will Gd willing always be an asset to creating the new and improved.