

A Few Thoughts on Parashah Ki Teitzei Deuteronomy 21:10 – 25:19; Isaiah 54:1-10 August 28, 2020

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The book of Deuteronomy is primarily concerned with defining tenets for ethical behavior as one of the primary means of establishing and maintaining our identity as a people. With more laws than any other parashah, Ki Teitzei is a veritable smorgasbord of rules and regulations, some of them logical, others puzzling.

Returning found items to their rightful owner (remaining honest even in the face of great temptation), putting a safety railing on a roof (respecting life by preventing accidents), treating an unloved wife and her offspring with respect (ensuring against false accusations, and avoiding favoritism in inheritance), guaranteeing refuge to escaped slaves, leaving some gleanings in field and vineyard for the less fortunate, and not withholding wages or demanding undue security for loans (generosity toward all for the common good), quarantining those who are ill, and burying excrement in a designated place (ensuring the health of the community): These laws governing interpersonal behavior are designed to help maintain peace and harmony among the people as their numbers grow and life becomes more complex. Other laws ensure ethical behavior toward animals and the earth: Harvesting eggs or chicks, but letting the mother bird go, not harnessing oxen and donkeys to plow together, helping fallen animals, not muzzling an ox when threshing, not mixing seeds when planting. As part of our covenant with the One Who creates all, we have a responsibility toward the land and toward all its creatures.

Our parashah also contains a few *chukum* – those seemingly arbitrary laws that have no rational explanation. Let's look at two of the most puzzling: *Shatnez* (the prohibited mixture of linen and wool) is particularly confusing. In Parashah Tetzaveh we read that the garments of the Kohanim were made of precisely this combination. There are many explanations for this, but the main point is that wool and flax are polar opposites. Wool is an animal product; it is flame resistant, rough, highly elastic, bulky, and shrinks easily when heated. Linen is a plant product; it is highly flammable, smooth, brittle, lightweight, and resistant to shrinkage. Their differing properties complement each other, and they also share other properties: Durability, strength, absorbency, noise and static resistance, and both may be used for common things as well as for objects of great luxury. How very appropriate that the kohanim, who represent the people in all their diversity, should wear this combination within the confines of the sanctuary as they perform their holy work. From this we learn that balancing our individual strengths and weaknesses in collaboration is a major contribution to maintaining peace and harmony. In addition, we are given a living example not only of the division of labor that structures our society, but also of the separation and interplay of the sacred and the worldly aspects of our lives.

The other *chok* we will examine contains a different message for us today. “A man's things (often translated as attire) shall not be on a woman, nor may a man wear a woman's outer garment ...” The word used here is כְּלִי, which means vessel, instrument, sack, tool, thing – and sometimes attire. And the word for man is גִּבּוֹר (rather than the more common אִישׁ) implies warrior or ruler – a man with a specific occupation. Obviously, this is not an injunction against crossdressing; it has to do with delineation of duties – another important societal building block. As we know, until quite recently the roles of men and women were strictly divided. I can remember a time when women doctors, lawyers, scientists, orchestra musicians, and conductors were the rare, often ridiculed and rejected exception. And female rabbis and cantors came on the scene even later and are still not accepted in the Orthodox world. Read literally, it means men do men's things, and women do women's things. However, one of the most intrinsically Jewish characteristics is our propensity for finding new relevance in old texts. Turning this one over and over again, in the spirit of Ben Bag Bag (Pirke Avot 5:22) we can derive a timeless lesson: Make the best of your own abilities rather than trying to be someone you are not. In other words, develop and cherish your own identity in order that you may make a worthy contribution to society.

During the month of Elul, when we prepare for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we look deep into our lives during the past year, confronting our innermost self in honesty and respect. Can we still identify with all of our actions, or are there things we need to change? Teshuvah – stopping, acknowledging, and changing course, is the means by which we may overhaul our identity by weeding out the deficits in our dealings with ourselves, with our fellow humans, with nature, and with HaShem. Establishing and maintaining an identity is an ongoing process for individuals and for societies. I wish us all the courage to explore our hidden places and do our inner housekeeping so that we can bring our best selves into the new year.

Shabbat shalom!