

Parshas Ki Seitzei – The Foundations of a New Home – Keith Goldstein

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כי תבנה בית חדש ועשית מעקה לגגך ולא תשים דמים בביתך כי יפל הנפל ממנו

The Torah teaches us in the above verse that when building a new house one must put a restraint on the roof (the word מעקה is unique but from the sense of the verse one can understand what is intended) so that a person going onto the roof will be prevented from falling off and being killed and otherwise, were that to occur, the house would be a house of blood.

What is puzzling however, is why the Torah applies this law to building a new house when, in fact, the mitzvah applies even if one acquires an old house. The puzzlement is all the greater when this mitzvah is given to the Israelites when they are on the verge of entering the land of Canaan about which it is said that they will find great cities which they have not built and houses full of good things already in place and of course the mitzvah would apply to these houses.

I would like to suggest that while, of course, the plain meaning of the verse prevails, from the way it was framed the Israelites were being alerted to a spiritual danger apart from the physical danger specified. The building of a new house is referred to in the Torah as something which can lead a person to forget Hashem as it says in parshas Ekev that the Israelites must be careful not to forget Hashem and one of the example cited is the possibility of building and then living in new houses and becoming haughty which can lead to that result.

In Tehilim the cause of such haughtiness is spelled-out about people who trust in their possessions and praise themselves with their considerable wealth and they have in mind to build houses which will last for ever and perpetuate their name and the psalmist berates them for their stupidity in not realising that when they die they will lose it all.

The traditional blessing given to a bride and groom is that they should merit to build בישראל בית נאמן which would translate literally as a faithful house in Israel. The words first appear in the book of שמואל when the sons of Eli sinned by showing disrespect to the sacrifices and grabbing their portions even before the sacrifice of the parts to be offered up on the altar.

Hashem informs Eli that his entire male line will be wiped out as a punishment and tells him that He will set up for Himself כהן נאמן כאשר בלבבי יעשה ובניתי לו בית נאמן – the way this verse is explained by the Targum is that He will set up a faithful priest who will do what Hashem intends and that Hashem will build for him a lasting house. We see from this connection between being faithful to Hashem and an ability to last long. The faithfulness of the Cohen is to take the material of the sacrifices, meat, and by eating the meat to elevate the spirituality of the person bringing the sacrifice as our Rabbis say that the Cohen eats and the owner of the sacrifice receives atonement. This is in contrast to the behaviour of the sons of Eli. The intended high priest referred to by Hashem is צדוק הכהן who, by fulfilling his task faithfully will merit to have his line continue.

The dedication of something new is to be treated with more care and importance than normal. The question is asked why the Hasmoneans had to find pure oil to light the Menorah as we have a principle that when most of the people or most of the priests are impure, the prohibition against impurities in the Temple is relaxed. One of the answers given is that the rule applied generally speaking but not on this occasion because this was a rededication of the Temple and as the root has a great effect upon what stems from it, purity was required.

If we return to the verse quoted at the beginning, I would like to suggest that it could be interpreted in this way, as well of course as the simple meaning. When you are building a new house you must put a restraint on how you build it that such should be for the sake of Hashem (the word לגגך has the same numerical value, gematria, as does לה using the full name of Hashem i.e. 56) and you should not put money into your house (the word דמים in Hebrew means money as well as blood) namely the building of a house should not be just a financial and material exercise as, if you do the house is bound to fall i.e. it will not last but if it is done for the sake of Hashem it will last. This is in line with the verse

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