Ki Teitzei

This week’s parsha contains 74 mitzvot. In it, Moses shares the rules governing behavior in relation to slavery, gender identification, divorce, adultery, child- rearing and perjury, among other subjects

I am going to discuss a few of the mitzvot as being representative of a concept of responsibility to the community in the broadest sense of the word and to the earth. I’ll focus on the mitzvot in relation to the environment, employer-employee relations and responsibility in relation to the world at large.

Deut 22:6 requires the Israelites to only take young birds in a nest and let the mother bird live. This verse has been referred to as the least substantial mitzvah.

My understanding is that Rashi thought that this is a test of faith as there was no discernable reason for this obligation. Maimonides initially agreed with this view but then modified his position to see the provision as an example of God’s mercy and as having the intention of teaching and requiring compassion. Compassion seems to be a pre-condition for any form of social responsibility. RabbiObadiah Sforno, pointed out that if one were to swipe both a mother bird and

her offspring, one would have effectively destroyed that family line. A 21st century interpretation would be, the Torah is raising our awareness of environmental conservation. In other words, the verse suggests that we must consider sustainability in our approach to the natural world.

The parsha states that performing this mitvah will allow an Israelite to fare well and have a long life. This reward, a long life, is the same benefit that one receives for respecting parents. How can the 2 mitzvot have the same consequence?

Perhaps the Torah is teaching that there is no such thing as an inconsequential act and that all our actions have consequences whether intended or not. By extension, does the spirit of this law teach us to be mindful that we are in symbiotic relationship with the environment?

I would like to turn to the second verse that I will discuss. It relates to how we deal with others, especially those who are not in positions of power. Verses 24:14-15 state: You shall not abuse a needy and destitute labourer , whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in one of the communities in your land. You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends on it: else he will cry out to the Lord against you and you will incur guilt.

The Talmud commented, and I quote:

Why does he climb a ladder or hang from a tree or risk death? Is it not for his wages? Another interpretation–‘His life depends on them’ indicates that anyone who denies a hired labourer his wages, it is as though he takes his life from him. (b. [Bava Metzia 112a](https://www.sefaria.org/Bava_Metzia.112a?lang=he-en" \t "_blank))

This made me wonder wondered how Agriprocessors, managed to retain its kosher certification prior to 2008 while it basically enslaved illegal immigrants. But the same year as the immigration raid on Agrprocessor, the Committee on Jewish Laws and Standards issued a responsum.

It concluded that Conservative Jews and Conservative Jewish institutions should:

* + Treat workers with dignity and respect.
  + Pay employees a living wage,
  + Not knowingly put their employees at risk of injury or death.
  + Allow employees the space to make their own decisions about unionization, without threats or other interference on the part of the employer.
  + Hire unionized employees when possible.

What is our responsibility to the working poor? Are we fulfilling our obligations?

The parsha tells us that those in a position of power must not abuse their power, but must consider the needs of others.

Can one extrapolate that one is to be paid decent wages? Does the verse help us think about the effect of not having a decent wage on health, education and costs to society?

Finally, verse 22:8 reads as follows: When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring blood-guilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.  This building code requirement has been broadly interpreted.

The Babylonian Talmud, [*K’tubot* 41b](https://www.sefaria.org/Ketubot.41b?lang=bi) extends the application of the verse further by stating: It is prohibited to leave a potentially dangerous object in one’s house, and one who refuses to remove it is to be excommunicated.

Maimonides extends the application of the obligation further and noted that we are responsible not only for our own property, but “any other object of potential danger.” He stated “Both the roof and any other object of potential danger, by which it is likely that a person could be fatally injured, require that the owner take action… just as the Torah commands us to make a fence on the roof… and so, too, regarding any obstacle which could cause mortal danger, one, not just the owner, has a positive commandment to remove it… if one does not remove it but leaves those obstacles constituting potential danger, one transgresses a positive commandment and negates a negative commandment ‘Thou shall not spill blood’”(Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Murderer and Protecting Life, 11:4).

The parapet requirement provides a practical application of the more abstract concept- You shall not stand idly by or profit from the blood of your neighbour, which is found in Vayikra.(19:16).  According to the interpretations, the verse not only deals with sins of commission against one another, but prohibits a sin of omission. It’s not enough for us simply to refrain from pushing someone off of a roof, we must anticipate and proactively protect against that danger.

If we take Maimonides words to heart we would be responsible for and have the duty to prevent all the scourges of our times –war, famine, global warming, poverty

Being responsible for all of the world’s dangers is an overwhelming responsibility and an impossible task. How are we to respond to such an onerous requirement?

The tradition offers a solution to this dilemma. The Talmud states:

“Whoever can prevent his household from committing a sin but does not, is responsible for the sins of his household; if he can prevent his fellow citizens, he is responsible for the sins of his fellow citizens; if the whole world, he is responsible for the sins of the whole world.”

The key word here is “can” If one *can* intervene only in one’s household, that is the purview in which one is responsible. However if , one can intervene globally, one’s responsibility extends that far. In other words, we have the obligation to do all that is in our power to do. As the Torah and the commentaries suggest our social responsibility extends beyond our immediate community to the environment, those less fortunate and to global issues.