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Of Freedom And Fences

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1.

PURPOSE OF THE GUARDRAIL

Regarding the *mitzvah* of {installing} a guardrail, the Torah says:¹ “If you build a new house, you shall make a guardrail for your roof.” It is unclear why the Torah says, “a **new** house,” when the law also requires a guardrail when a person doesn’t **build** a **new** house, but rather purchases an (**old**) house (which did not previously have a guardrail), etc.

Sifri says:² “From when it is new, make a guardrail,” meaning, the obligation to build a guardrail goes into effect (not at the time of moving into the house, like {the *mitzvah* of} *mezuzah*, but) as soon as the house is built — “From when it is new.”

But the wording of the verse is still unclear:

a) Since *Sifri*’s innovation is that the obligation to build a guardrail goes into effect immediately upon acquiring ownership of the house (even before moving in) —

Why does the Torah allude to this law by saying “build a **new** house” — implying that the obligation to install a guardrail applies only to a “new house” — rather than use wording that stresses that the {owner’s} obligation to build a guardrail applies (for **any** house) as soon as the house becomes his possession ?

b) Further in the verse, the Torah provides a reason for building a guardrail — “if a fallen one falls from it.” This is unclear: The Torah cautions us to install a guardrail in order to prevent a person from falling (**in advance**); so why does it describe the person as “a fallen one ({who} falls)”?³

¹ *Devarim* 22:8.

² Ad loc.

³ {Implying that he is already a “faller,” prior to actually falling.}

The *Gemara* addresses this question:⁴ “This person was destined to fall from the Six Days of Creation.... Nevertheless, merit is brought about through the agency of the meritorious, and guilt, through the agency of the guilty.” Rashi cites this answer in his Torah commentary, but according to the *pshat*,⁵ seemingly, this does not suffice: “a fallen one” implies (not that he is “destined to fall,” but) falling in the present, and is a description — an actual “fallen one.”

2.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer says⁶ that when Hashem created the world, He left the northern side {of the world} unfinished [as {Rabbi Eliezer} would say,⁷ “The world is similar to a veranda: {it is enclosed from three sides but} the northern side is not enclosed”] so that if someone comes along and says, “I am a deity,” we can tell him, “go ahead and complete this corner I left unfinished....”

Meaning, in order for created beings to not err by presuming that they have no need for the world’s Creator and conductor, or that which is greater than themselves, Hashem created them with a **deficiency** in their own existence that they cannot correct on their own. As a result, they feel the need for a supernal power.

The same applies to “intelligence”: In order for a person — an intelligent being — to know that he cannot understand everything with his own intellect, Hashem instilled within people a reliance on the meta-rational. [For example, in order to understand an idea, we must first grasp the axioms and the principles of reasoning, which accordingly lead a person to logical conclusions — but these

⁴ *Shabbos* 32a.

⁵ {I.e., the plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Scripture.” Though there are many levels and depths of interpretation on the Torah, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

⁶ Ch. 3.

⁷ *Bava Basra* 25a-b.

principles themselves are not compelled by logic.] In other words, intellect itself recognizes its own limitations and its dependency on the meta-rational.

Similarly, *lehavdil*, regarding Torah: The revealed part of Torah descended and became invested in human intellect {accessible} even to gentiles. However, in order for us to remember that Torah — including the revealed part of Torah — is **Divine** intellect, Hashem fashioned certain aspects of the revealed Torah in a way that cannot be fully comprehended without learning these concepts as they are illuminated by the inner dimension of Torah, which is **clearly** Divine wisdom. As a result, we recognize that Torah is merely **enclothed** in human intellect, but in essence, is Divine intellect which is beyond His creations.

One illustration of the above concept is found in the verse on the *mitzvah* of a guardrail: Understanding the deeper meaning of the guardrail *mitzvah* will help clarify how the wording, a “**new** house” is central to the mystical idea behind of the *mitzvah*, and how this obligation specifically relates to a “**new** house.”

This will also clarify the wording “a fallen one falls” — that even prior to falling (from “your roof”) he is already “fallen.”

3.

THE PITFALLS OF A NEW LIFE

Our Sages say,⁸ “*his house*” — this term refers to his wife.”¹⁰ And Rabbi Yosi goes as far as to say,¹¹ “In all my days, I did not call my wife, my wife... rather, {I called} my wife, ‘my home.’” This is the deeper meaning of, “if you build a new house”: It refers to the beginning of a person’s married life, when he becomes

⁸ *Mishnah, Yoma* 1:1.

⁹ *Vayikra* 16:6.

¹⁰ {Referring to the Kohen Gadol atoning for himself and his “house” on Yom Kippur.}

¹¹ *Shabbos* 118b.

burdened with a “millstone around his neck”¹² — involved in earning a physical living — *a person plows, a person sows*.¹³

Torah cautions, “If you build a new house, you shall make a guardrail...”: Since this is a “**new** house” — a new and unfamiliar lifestyle and *avodah* — you must build a “guardrail”: The precautions associated with your previous *avodah* are no longer sufficient; you must make new fences and take new precautions — you must initiate new curbs on your thought, speech, and actions.

The reason the precautions of a “guardrail” are necessary specifically for this new *avodah* is (as the verse continues), “if **a fallen one** falls from it.”

Since this *avodah* is associated with a person’s descent and fall relative to his earlier state [since engagement in worldly, material matters is analogous to the soul’s descent into this world], the world’s materialism is liable to pull the person down from his {initial higher, spiritual} level. So if a person builds a new house without exercising **exceeding** caution, then not only will he fail to elevate the material and make it spiritual, the opposite will occur — the material will exacerbate his descent and fall — “**a fallen one falls.**”

4.

A NOVEL CONCEPT

“House” can also sometimes refer to a human body, and concerning a person’s *avodah*, it refers to the general *avodah* of “refining” — refining the body and a person’s portion of the world. This *avodah* is called a “new house” because: a) before the soul descended, it had no concept of this sort of *avodah* at all, and, b) **this** *avodah* produces a true “novelty.”

¹² See *Hilchos Talmud Torah*, by the Alter Rebbe, ch. 3, par. 1, at the end, et passim.

¹³ {Paraphrased from} *Berachos* 35b. This teaching continues, “What will become of Torah?”

As discussed¹⁴ regarding the **creation** of this physical world, it is true that several levels found within *seder hishtalshelus*¹⁵ emerged from its source as a {completely} new entity.

[{For example,} the general light that followed *tzimtzum* was a new entity; {the supernal level of} *Adam Kadmon* is called “**Man of Creation**” ({implying that it was} created *ex nihilo*); the “vessels” of the world of *Atzilus*¹⁶ were {also} created *ex nihilo*; and how much more so the world of *Beriah* was created *ex nihilo*.¹⁷]

Nevertheless, the true {expression of creating a} new entity found expression specifically with the creation of this physical world. As the famous saying goes,¹⁸ there is no greater {creation of} something from nothing as the creation of the physical from the spiritual.

The same applies to a person’s **avodah** with materialism: Since the physical has no value relative to the spiritual, the *avodah* of refining the physicality of the world to make it spiritual is a completely **new** accomplishment.

Accordingly, **this** *avodah* is alluded to by the phrase, “when you build a **new** house”: The *avodah* is to implement a “novelty” within the “house” — the body — utilizing it to then build a “house” and dwelling place for Hashem.

¹⁴ *Shores Mitzvas Hatefillah*, ch. 25.

¹⁵ {The chainlike order of spiritual worlds, descending from one level to another until the creation of this world. Each spiritual world denotes a complete realm of existence, resulting from its general proximity to or distance from Divine revelation.}

¹⁶ {*Atzilus* is the highest and most exalted of the four spiritual “worlds” emanated by Hashem. Each world is composed of ten *sefiros* or Divine attributes, which are phases in the manifestation of Divinity.}

¹⁷ {The second of the four spiritual “worlds.”}

¹⁸ *Ikkarim, maamar* 1 ch. 23.

5.

NOVELTY IN HEAVEN

Just as this *avodah* is a novelty, the same applies to **the person** doing the *avodah*:

The ascent attained through other forms of *avodah* is a relative one. But by refining the world's physicality, the person himself becomes elevated in a novel manner — **beyond measure**.

Moreover, this *avodah* also accomplishes something new Above, so to speak (as our Sages say,¹⁹ “Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven.” This is akin to the teaching of our Sages,²⁰ “{By the Jewish people fulfilling Hashem’s will,} they increase strength in the Supernal Power”²¹). Through a person’s *avodah* in “making a dwelling place for Hashem in the lower realms,” the world becomes a “beautiful abode” that “expands a man’s consciousness”²² — the consciousness of “Supernal Man” so to speak.

From the perspective of *seder hishtalshehus*, there is a “limitation” On High, so to speak, regarding the drawing of Divine light into the world: There is a Divine light that can be drawn into the world, and there is a light that is beyond the worlds,²³ and then there is an even greater light that does not relate to worlds at all. —

But a Jew’s *avodah* produces an “expansion” and a “novel change,” enabling the *light*²⁴ that does not relate to the worlds at all [including the *light*

¹⁹ *Berachos* 33b.

²⁰ *Eicha Rabbah*, ch. 1, par. 33.

²¹ {In the Hebrew original, “*gevurah shel maaleh*”; lit., “the strength of Above.”}

²² *Brachos* 57b. {In the Hebrew original, “*marchivim daato shel adom*.”}

²³ {Probably a reference to the four major emanated spiritual realms of *Atzilus*, *Briah*, *Yetzirah*, *Assiyah*.}

²⁴ {In kabbalistic terminology, “light” generally refers to G-dly revelation.}

that even surpasses the *light* that had filled the cavity prior to *tzimtzum*]²⁵ to be drawn below.

6.

BITTUL LEADS TO INNOVATION

The “vessel” that is required to accomplish something completely new is “*bittul*.”²⁶ As known²⁷ regarding spiritual ascents, when an ascent is to a level incomparable to the previous level, prior to this ascent, *bittul* is required, which makes one into a “vessel” capable of achieving this ascent (similar to the “pillar” and the “fiery river” that must be crossed in order to transition from *Gan Eden HaTachton* to *Gan Eden HaElyon*).²⁸

This is also the deeper meaning of a “guardrail”: Within the safeguards and precautions — “guardrails” — that a Jew establishes in his *avodah*, an expression of *bittul* and *kabbalah ol*²⁹ is evoked, fashioning him into a suitable vessel for the “**new** house.”

This will also clarify the deeper meaning of the fact that the verse’s conclusion, “so that you shall not cause blood to be spilled in your house (if a fallen one falls from it)” is interpreted by *halachah* as not (only) a **rationale** for the *mitzvah* to build a guardrail, but also as a separate commandment. [As *Sifrei* says,³⁰ “‘You shall make a guardrail for your roof’ is a positive *mitzvah*, and, ‘you shall not cause blood to be spilled in your house’ constitutes a negative *mitzvah*.”]

²⁵ {Prior to Creation, there was only the infinite *Or Ein Sof* filling all existence. When it arose in G-d's Will to create worlds and emanate the emanated... He contracted Himself (in Hebrew, "*tzimtzum*") in the point at the center, in the very center of His light. He restricted that light, distancing it to the sides surrounding the central point, so that there remained a void, a hollow empty space, away from the central point... After this *tzimtzum*... He drew down from the *Or Ein Sof* a single straight line [of light] from His light surrounding [the void] from above to below [into the void], and it chained down descending into that void.... In the space of that void He emanated, created, formed and made all the worlds. (*Eitz Chaim, Heichal A"K, anaf 2*)}

²⁶ {Self-nullification.}

²⁷ *Torah Ohr*, p. 7c; *Hemshech 5666* p. 12 ff.

²⁸ *Torah Ohr*, p. 7c; *Hemshech 5666*, p. 15, **et al.**

²⁹ {Accepting the yoke of Heaven.}

³⁰ *Sifri*, *ibid.*

Because a guardrail is not only a safeguard and a precaution to prevent a person from **falling** (“if a fallen one falls”), but it is also a prerequisite to effect a “**new** house” — the breakthrough and ascent beyond comparison {to previous assents} of man (and On High, so to speak).

7.

DON'T AVOID IT, BUT DON'T GET TOO INVOLVED

The practical lesson from all of the above:

We must know that shutting ourselves out of the world is prohibited; rather, we must build a “house,” creating a dwelling place for Hashem in the **lower realms**. In fact, the “descent” in how we do our *avodah* {the need to deal with mundane things} will lead to a genuine “ascent,” a completely new accomplishment below, and an innovation Above, as discussed.

On the other hand, we must also be aware that in order to transform the material into a receptacle for the spiritual, we must first make a “guardrail,” meaning, we must remain apart from the world’s materialism. True, we are engaged in worldly matters, but these matters are not of any intrinsic importance to us (thus allowing us to remain “separate” from them) because we know (and feel) that our entire engagement in worldly affairs is only intended to achieve the Divine goal of making a dwelling place for Hashem in the lower realms.

8.

PROTECTED FROM THE PAST TOO

This leads us to a specific lesson for those preparing themselves to “build a new house” in the context of married life (as discussed above in section 3):

There is great value in married life. Every Jew's marriage has a general impact, not only on **himself**, on his personal life, but also from Hashem's perspective, so to speak. Since a person's *avodah* of making a dwelling place for **Hashem** in the lower realms begins (primarily) when he gets married, marriage "expands a man's mind" of the One Above, so to speak, drawing down a new light, as discussed.

On the other hand, we must also be aware that building a "new house" must entail building a "guardrail" — instituting new safeguards and precautions.

However, it would seem that since all of a groom's sins are forgiven,³¹ safeguards and precautions may not be (so) necessary, because all of his previous negative elements have been wiped clean.

Nevertheless, he must be told that the **opposite** is true: Not only must **precautions** be taken for the **future**, since his lack of familiarity with *avodah* in this world can G-d forbid lead to "a fallen one" falling (as discussed in section 3); but even more so — there must also be a "guardrail" {safeguarding a person} from the negative elements in his **past** (that can interfere with establishing his "new house"). Since he has to ascend in a way that is incomparable {to before}, his previous *teshuvah* is insufficient. He requires a higher level of *teshuvah*, commensurate with his "new house."

9.

CONSECRATED

The same idea holds true regarding the general meaning of the {*mitzvah* to build a} guardrail, based on what we discussed above — separating oneself from worldly matters:

³¹ *Jerusalem Talmud, Bikkurim 3:3.*

A person may argue: Since he now has a “millstone around his neck,” an obligation {to earn a living} **according to the Torah**, how can he be expected to remain separate from worldly matters?

He must know that the opposite is true: The purpose of marriage between a man and a woman in this world is so that they should “be meritorious (and {consequently}) the Divine Presence will rest among them.” This will then lead to {the construction of} a “new house,” the marriage between man and woman in the spiritual realm — between the Jewish people and Hashem.

This marriage in the spiritual realm contains two components: a) The betrothal³² between the Jews and Hashem, by which the Jews become unified with G-dliness, and, b) the consequence {of this betrothal}, “rendering her forbidden to everyone like *hekdesh*”³³ — we become consecrated and separated from worldly matters. For as mentioned above, all of our interactions in worldly matters are solely “to store away for {the benefit of} the owner”³⁴ — to fulfill the Divine goal of creating a dwelling place for Hashem in the lower realms.

– Based on a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Ki Seitzei*, 13th of Elul, 5714 (1954)

³² {*Kiddushin*; lit., “consecration.”}

³³ {*Hekdesh* refers to items consecrated to the Temple treasury or as sacrifices.} *Kiddushin* 2b.

³⁴ See *Devarim Rabbah*, ch. 1, par. 6. {This quote seems to be a paraphrase of the *midrash* that compares the benefit that the Jewish people confer to Hashem, by performing Torah and *mitzvos*, to the benefit that bees confer to their owner by storing their honey in the hive. See commentators, ad loc.}