The Daily Portion
- Sivan Rahav Meir

Safety first, last, and always

Translation by Yehoshua Siskin

A few days ago, attorney Nurit Mamalia, who specializes in real estate law, was deeply moved by words from this week's Torah portion that she saw hanging in the offices of a contractor from the Shomron. In each office, a sign in full view was displayed with the following words:

"When you build a new house, you shall make a guard rail for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it" (D'varim 22:8).

By extension, such a warning is also applicable, of course, to those who construct the house or building itself; they should be provided with every safety measure necessary to prevent accidents.

Why don't we get excited when we put safety bars over our apartment windows? Why don't we feel holiness when we put a guard rail around our roof? In this week's Torah portion, this mitzva -- which is not sufficiently known or appreciated -- appears. How simple, yet how often it is overlooked. Someone who builds or moves into a new house must first put a guard rail around the roof in order that no one should fall off.

Our commentators explain that such a cautionary measure pertains not only to a roof, but to any potential risk to which we are exposed or for which we are responsible. We regard affixing a mezuzah outside as the climactic moment upon entering a new house or office, and justifiably so. But concerning ourselves with the physical safety of those inside is a mitzva of equal importance. When it comes to our cars, we observe such safety mitzvot when we wear our seat belts, or when we check engine oil and water levels and tire pressure. In a similar vein, those with a swimming pool are cautioned to put a fence around it for the sake of children who could accidentally fall in.

When it comes to our personal safety, it is clear that the Torah does not settle for half measures that are "good enough". Instead, the Torah admonishes us with these words: V'NISHMARTEM M'OD L'NAFSHOSTEICHEM" - Be VERY careful about your lives. Personal safety, represented by a guard rail on the roof - MAAKEH, is not only a mitzva, but one involving pikuach nefesh (saving life), and is thus of primary importance.

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