

Parshat Ki Teitzei: Fences, Lost Objects, and Teen Leaders: Torah's Vision for Community

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Parashat Ki Teitzei contains 74 mitzvot, more than any other parsha in the Torah. Each mitzvah comes quickly, sometimes in a single verse. At first they appear scattered—laws about returning lost objects, paying workers fairly, sending away the mother bird, building a fence around one's roof, remembering Amalek. Yet, when read together, they create a coherent vision of covenantal life. The Torah teaches us that holiness is not confined to the sanctuary or the prayer book, but is woven into the fabric of daily experience: in how we notice what is fragile, in how we respond when something is vulnerable, and in how we shoulder responsibility with care.

At The Bayit in Riverdale, where I serve as Director of Youth and Family Engagement, I see this vision come alive in our teens. When they guide younger children, make space for quieter voices, or practice patience in the midst of noise, they are learning that holiness is not abstract—it is built moment by moment, through the choices we make to notice and not turn away.

One verse captures this orientation with particular force: “If you see your fellow’s ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow” (Devarim 22:1). The Torah could have spoken simply—if you see, return it. Instead it presses further: *lo tuchal l’hitale*m—you may not turn away. This is more than a directive about lost property; it is a spiritual demand. A life lived through Torah is one in which our eyes remain open and our hearts remain willing. The Baal HaTurim notes that the word *l’hitale*m shares a root with *olam*—world. To look away, he suggests, is to shrink the world. To step forward in care is to enlarge it.

This call sits at the heart of how we raise the next generation of leaders. Teens often approach leadership tentatively, unsure whether they should intervene, assuming someone older will step in, or waiting for tension to resolve on its own. Growth comes when they discover that they themselves can be the steady ones: noticing the child who hovers at the edge of a game and drawing them back in, softening their voice when the room grows loud, choosing patience when frustration rises. These choices may appear small, but they are the daily practice of *lo tuchal l’hitale*m. They are Torah in action.

The rhythm of Ki Teitzei mirrors this gradual unfolding. Its mitzvot arrive in sequence—first a fence to safeguard a roof, then wages given on time so a worker may eat, compassion shown to a bird before taking its eggs, protection extended to those at risk. Each layer builds upon the last, shaping a life of attentiveness. Leadership unfolds in much the same way. A young person begins by watching and helping, then takes on small responsibilities, then centers themselves to guide others, and eventually mentors those just beginning. The process itself teaches patience and trust, reminding us that leadership matures slowly, step by step, through consistent practice.

Our sages read the mitzvah of *ma’akeh*—building a fence on the roof—as more than a safety measure. It is a metaphor for responsibility: to establish boundaries and structures that protect others from harm. Leaders, too, must build such fences, creating spaces where children feel secure, where words restore rather than diminish, where presence sets the tone for kindness. The mitzvah of *shiluach haken*—sending away the

mother bird before taking the eggs—offers a different but complementary image. Even when we have power to take what we wish, we are asked to pause, to act with gentleness, to let compassion guide us. These mitzvot teach that care and boundaries together create the conditions for community to flourish, and we hope our teens internalize both as they grow into leaders.

The Ramban teaches that mitzvot are not only external obligations but practices that shape the inner world. Returning a garment, releasing a burdened animal, paying a worker without delay—each act trains us to notice, to uphold dignity, to live with awareness. Through repetition, we are formed. In the same way, when we entrust teens with responsibility, we are giving them more than tasks. We are offering them practices that refine their character. They learn to regulate their own emotions so they can hold space for others, to see the clenched fist or the tear-filled eye and bring presence rather than control. These are skills of emotional wellness, and they are also sacred disciplines, the lived Torah of everyday moments.

In our youth leadership program at The Bayit, we often speak of three guiding qualities: calm, connection, and creativity. Calm steadies the group when energy unravels. Connection ensures that no one feels invisible or excluded. Creativity brings forth the unique gifts each person carries, enriching the whole. These qualities are not simply strategies for working with children; they are ways of embodying Torah. They reflect a covenant that calls us to notice, to act with compassion, and to remain present when others might turn away.

The mitzvot of Ki Teitzei returns us again and again to this truth: responsibility cannot be deferred. We do not walk past the animal in the road. We do not leave a roof unguarded. We do not delay wages for one who waits to eat. We do not ignore what is fragile or vulnerable. Instead we enlarge the world by noticing, by acting, by caring. When we guide our teens into this way of living, we teach them that their presence carries weight, their words shape community, their noticing draws holiness into the room.

Lo tuchal l'hitalel—this is the Torah of Ki Teitzei. It is the Torah we place in their hands, and it is the Torah they return to us as they grow into leaders who build fences of safety, act with compassion, create boundaries of care, and expand the world with their calm, their connection, and their creativity. May we continue, together, to place this Torah in their hands and receive it back from them, renewed, as they show us what it means to live with eyes that do not turn away.

Rabbi Yali Szulanski's journey to Maharat was shaped by her commitment to emotional wellness, spiritual growth, and community resilience. She founded The "I Am" Project/The Neshima Initiative, bringing trauma-informed wellness practices to classrooms and Jewish spaces. R' Yali is the Youth and Family Engagement Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and continues her work educating and tending to emotional wellness at SAR Academy and beyond.