

BUILDING FENCES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The idea of the necessity of a fence on one's roof and exposed staircases and high landings is a very logical and realistic one. The Torah itself advances this simple reasoning by stating that otherwise one may fall from that exposed area with painful if not tragic consequences. However halacha and practicality indicate that not everyone is obligated in this mitzvah and that there are physical instances where such a fence is impossible to construct or is even unnecessary.

Nevertheless, the moral imperative that drives the mitzvah seems to be omnipresent and always operative. A house, a home, a family always needs to be protected, both physically and morally. Just as negligence in failing to erect a fence around one's exposed roof is a cause for monetary and even criminal liability, so too negligence in failing to construct the moral fence to protect our home and family from the ravages of a rather depraved society is seen to be a serious transgression.

In raising children, as well as in governing society generally, there can be no doubt that fences have to be fashioned and protected. The rub always is as to how many fences and where they are to be placed and how high the actual fence should be. When it comes to the issue of the physical fences around our rooftops, halacha answers all of these questions for us. But when the issue is regarding the moral fence that we must construct for our family and ourselves, there we find minimal guidance.

Just as every physical fence must be constructed to conform to the dimensions of the roof it protects - a circular fence will not completely protect a rectangular roof - so too there is no one-size-fits-all moral fence that is appropriate for every home and family. Tragically, in today's Jewish world, there are many homes that have no moral fence at all protecting the house and family.

Everyone is allowed, if not even encouraged, to live a life without limits, restraints or moral discipline. And at the other end of the spectrum of Jewish society there are homes where the fence has been constructed too high and is too constrictive as to impede and prevent healthy individual development and constructive discovery and innovation. It is therefore obvious that knowing where, when and how to create this moral fence that will safeguard the Jewish home is the main challenge of parenting and family dynamics.

The Torah in this week's parsha speaks of ben sorer u'moreh - a rebellious, undisciplined youth - who will grow to be a very destructive force in society. Such a child in most cases represents the failure in the family in erecting and enforcing the proper moral fence in the house. That negligence

of safeguarding the home spiritually, emotionally and morally will invariably come back to haunt that family and all society generally.

There are no magical ways to build these necessary fences. Every family and home is different and unique and there is only the common necessity for all families to erect the proper and fitting fences within their home and family. Patience, wisdom, restraint and prayer are key ingredients in accomplishing this vital task.

Shabat shalom,

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com