

Beware of Dog

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“When you build a new house, erect a fence around your roof. Do not place any blood in your house, for the fallen will fall” (Deuteronomy 22:8).

“Rabbi Natan says: From which verse do we learn that it is forbidden for a person to raise a vicious dog in his home and to have a shaky ladder in his home? From the verse ‘Do not place any blood in your house’” (Bava Kama 15b).

The Giving of the Torah and Creation (which we celebrate on Rosh HaShanah) are intimately connected. The former is the consummation of the latter. Let’s explore the parashah to see what it can teach us about them.

At the Giving of the Torah we proclaimed, “Na’aseh v’nishma—we will do and will listen)” (Exodus 24:7). We will do now whatever we’re capable of doing, and we will keep our ears

attuned to listen, to learn what we can yet build from our lives. Creation certainly was an exercise in building.

Both Torah and creation are our homes. Creation is our home – we live in it! The Torah is our home – it starts with the letter BaYT of Bereishit – which means BaYiT (house). Every day God renews Creation, and every day we have to renew our commitment to Torah. Every day we have to build a “new house” and make a new address for our minds. We have to climb and improve our Jewishness, whether from the outside – by adding to or enhancing our mitzvah performance – or from the inside – by adding to our understanding or feeling for the mitzvot.

Every house has at least two levels, the floor and the roof. When we build this “new house,” we need to “fence in” the roof. Why? Because the yetzer hara (evil inclination) attacks anyone who climbs up, and tries to make him fall. That’s why God commands us that there be “no blood in your house.” He wants to protect us from “shaky ladders and vicious dogs.

A strong ladder is an instrument of courage, boldness. One uses such a ladder in the face of a wall that s/he cannot scale. To take a strong ladder and climb shows focus and determination. But a shaky ladder is an invitation to the tragedy of downward spiral. The “shaky ladder” we must not keep in our “house” – our mindset – is the ladder of discouragement. We must be very careful not to dishearten or embarrass ourselves or others. (Embarrassment is so discouraging!)

Encouragement and determination are fundamental to Judaism. We need them to control body and ego, to say “no” to the latter’s demands for the unnecessary. We need encouragement and determination to overcome bad advice, offered sometimes by those uninterested in our welfare and sometimes by well-meaning friends.

Where do we get this encouragement? “Every day the evil

inclination has the power to overwhelm a person. If not for God's help, s/he would fall into his hand" (Sukkah 52b). "God's help" is the encouragement the tzaddikim provide us via their lessons and conversations. We can access this encouragement by studying their works, or by having a talk with a like-minded friend.

But "Beware of Dog!" Even though determination is necessary, there's no need to be brazen as a dog. Don't "raise one in your house." Don't use brazenness for any purpose that doesn't foster genuine spiritual growth

ever forget that "the fallen will fall." We all have spiritual ups and downs. But a spiritual descent is always sent to help us pay closer attention and to "hear" what we are still capable of. Make sure your ladder is not shaky and the dog isn't vicious. Make sure the "fence" is in place before the "fall." Then, at worst, you will stumble, but you will not fall.

(Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhoh Ma'akeh u'Shemirat HaNefesh 4:3)