

Ki Teitzei 2025 / פרשת כִּי־תִצֵּא
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Parashat Ki Teitzei is the 49th weekly Torah portion in the annual cycle of Torah reading. It begins with this phrase:

כִּי־תִצֵּא לַמִּלְחָמָה עַל־אֹיְבֶיךָ וַנִּתְּנֹוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְיָדְךָ וְשָׁבִיתָ שְׂבִיו: / Ki teitzei la-milchamah al oyvecha, u'netano Adonai Elohecha b'yadecha, v'shavita shivyo. *When you [an Israelite warrior] take the field against your enemies, and your God, יהוה, delivers them into your power ...*

I didn't realize this when I signed up for the drash on this date, but it turns out that this is the third time I've given a d'rash on Ki Teitzei. Hopefully, you don't remember what I said before, because I'm going to revisit a few themes and then take us somewhere new.

Ki Teitzei is one of the richest portions in the Torah. It's packed with mitzvot—74 in total, the most of any parasha. Moses lays out laws touching nearly every aspect of life: justice, family responsibilities, work, relationships, even obscure scenarios we might never face. Some of these laws feel painfully misogynistic when read through a modern lens. Others are surprisingly progressive, even visionary.

Take the law about finding a bird's nest. If you want the eggs or the young birds, you must first send the mother bird away. (Devarim 22:6–7) On the surface, it seems almost trivial. But there's a deeper message: a society that spares two generations at once is a society that will preserve the future. The

mother bird is spared and can lay a new nest. This is a teaching about restraint, about protecting the next generation. In today's language, it's an environmental ethic: don't let greed destroy sustainability.

Another example is the commandment to build a railing on the roof of a new house. In ancient times, roofs were flat and used like patios. The Torah says:

“When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone falls from it.”

This is more than an architectural note—it's about anticipating danger and taking responsibility to protect others. It is possibly the earliest building code in human history. Over time, it even became the basis for broader Jewish approaches to public safety—think of it as inspiring Israel's version of OSHA, or the ruling by the Orthodox Union to limit exposure to secondhand smoke.

Today, I also want to focus on the very beginning of the parasha—and the time of year when we always read it.

We are in Elul, the month before the High Holidays, when we begin the process of *teshuvah*—turning, returning, repenting, reflecting. So how does a parasha that begins with going to war fit into this season of soul-searching?

Let's read the verse again:

כִּי־תֵצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל־אִיְבֹיךָ וַנִּתְּנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְיָדְךָ וְשָׁבִיתָ שְׂבִי' / Ki teitzei la-milchamah al oyvecha, u'netano Adonai Elohecha b'yadecha, v'shavita

shivyo. *When you go out to battle against your enemies, and God delivers them into your power...*

Of course, this speaks about physical war. But our Elul tradition also allows us to read it on a deeper, inner level. Each of us faces battles—not only with external enemies, but with internal enemies within such as loneliness, despair, and habits that harm us --the *yetzer hara*, the negative impulse that drags us down.

Teshuvah is a kind of spiritual battle. It is designed to take us out of the hole, away from the darkness to a new beginning. This takes self-reflection. It takes courage to admit where we've fallen short. It takes hope—hope that we can reconnect with God, with others, and with the best version of ourselves.

And now, here's the best news. This parasha also tell us how to begin this process. It begins with us. Specifically, it says: *Ki teitzei*—**when you go out**. When you go out; when you take the first step, God will meet you there. You are not helpless. You are not alone. It says, **YOU HAVE TO TAKE THE FIRST STEP**. But when you do that, when you take the first step, then (and only then) God will meet you there.

As I contemplated this d'rash, I couldn't help but think of Lao Tze's famous quote: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." It is a parallel teaching: Even the most ambitious goals can be achieved, but this requires our starting with a small, initial action.

The Midrash Rabbah (Song of Songs 5:2) offers a similar teaching: God says to the Jewish people, “*Make for Me an opening the size of a needle’s eye, and I will open for you gateways through which entire caravans can pass.*” In other words, even the smallest act of turning—one small move toward light—can open up vast possibilities for change. You need to take the initiative, but once you do, God will grant you the power to go forward and overcome your internal enemies or fears. A little bit of courage goes a long way.

Life can be so overwhelming, especially these days. But the Parasha tells us what to do: Take the initiative: Go out and then God – your higher, deeper Power -- will help you. Step out of your funk and be with others. Identify your passion and engage in the world: build friendships, take action, contribute to *tikkun olam*, even in small ways. You don’t have to do it all. But neither can you desist from trying, according to the famous adage by Rabbi Tarfon. The added benefit is that, when you help others, you also help yourself.

Ki teitzei—**go out!** Take that first step, however small, and trust that God will meet you there, with gateways wide enough for caravans to pass through.

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I want to invite you to reflect together on this message. Let’s share—either with the person next to you, or in the comments if you’re joining online. Two core questions:

1. **What’s one recent time you stretched beyond your comfort zone to face your own inner “enemies,” like loneliness, fear, or despair?**

2. What inner strength did you draw on to take that first step—to go out, to connect with others, or to begin your *teshuvah* out of a dark place? And afterwards, how did you feel? What shifted for you?

If time allows, we'll hear from a few of you.