

Last week as we were slogging through the more than 50 different commandments that make up Parashat Mishpatim, I joked about how the theme song for Jewish ethics, would not be “ All You Need Is Love,” though love is very important in Jewish ethics, but something more like the song from Rent, “Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes”. Jewish law does not just tell you to do the good and the right. Instead it probes what that might mean in all the different circumstances of everyday life. This leads to an expansion, from the Ten Commandments at Mt Sinai, to the 613 commandments in the Torah, to the 19 folio volumes of the Talmud and the thousands of pages of Codes.

This week once again we have a lot of details, instructions about what materials should be used in the construction of the portable tabernacle and about exactly how it should be built. Though artists and artisans were recruited, they were not given carte blanche. Moses was shown a vision of a model, and everything they built had to conform to that design.

It reminded me of how my middle child approached lego's. He would open up the new box, find the 124 step instruction booklet and build the space station, or whatever, step by step.

Not everyone approaches lego's that way. My youngest who inherited all these sets of lego's had a very different approach. She mixed them all up in a big plastic container and then built whatever she wanted.

Recognizing that we are more of a do it yourself, design it yourself generation, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, asks, why does the Torah give us so much detail for the construction of the Tabernacle.

After all the tabernacle was not meant to be a permanent fixture of Jewish life. It was intended only for the period when the Israelites were wandering in the desert and until they were fully settled in the land. From the start, it was clear that the Mishkan would be replaced by the more permanent Temple described in our Haftarah reading this morning. Why does the Torah have so many chapters describing how to build it and then go on to review all of this again, to tell us that it was indeed built according to these specifications, enumerated once again in similar detail.

Rabbi Sacks writes that he once had the opportunity to meet Sir Martin Rees, a very famous British Astronomer, president of the Royal Society, the oldest and most famous scientific body in the world, and winner of the 2011 Templeton Prize.

Baron Rees shared with him a book which explained that our physical world depends on six mathematical constraints, which if they had varied, even by a very small amount, would have meant that the universe would not be able to sustain life.

In our lives there are many opportunities for creativity and for winging it, and we enjoy these chances to express ourselves in varied ways. But there are some things we want to be exactly correct, whether that is the sequence of checks before an airplane takes off, or procedures for insuring protection from infection in an operating room. Similarly in construction, if that bridge or roadway or building is going to stay up, whoever was responsible for the plans needs to have been very careful. If you saw the movie “Hidden Figures”, you might remember how the astronaut wouldn’t allow lift off to go forward, until he had confidence that the calculations for re-entry were correct.

Sure, sometimes when we deviate from a recipe we discover some great combination that no one ever thought of before, but sometimes when we put that new green from our Community Sustained Agriculture box in the soup, it becomes so bitter as to be inedible. General statements can be helpful, but so often there is a lot of importance in the exact details and Judaism teaches that these matter as well.

Leah and Jason, you saw this in your preparations and the attention we gave to reading the exact words in the Torah and not some others that looked similar or sounded almost the same. For ourselves as individuals, for our own work in the world, and for the officials in our government- let us learn from our Torah portion- details matter.