This week’s parashah, Ki Teitze, is really difficult to get a handle on. It begins with war; as in the opening phrase: “When you go out to war. . .” and yet is ranges to laws of marriage and divorce, just treatment of workers, the purity of bloodlines, and finishes with the commandment to remember Amalek, who attacked the weak and weary stragglers among us when we left Egypt, and to blot out his name.

The ethics and rituals of war recur throughout the parashah, and there is one mitzvah in particular that I love, from Deuteronomy 23, verses 13-15:

“Further, there shall be an area for you outside the camp, where you may relieve yourself. With your gear you shall have a spike, and when you have squatted you shall dig a hole with it and cover up your excrement. Since the Hashem your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you, let your camp be holy; let Them not find anything unseemly among you and turn away from you.”

I have been aware of these verses for years. More than a decade ago, when I worked as a Jewish environmental educator on the east coast, I kept these verse laminated in what I called my “poop kit” – a bag with toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and yes – a 6 inch spade for digging exactly the kind of hole described in these verses. I read these verses as part of every orientation to students about how to rough it in the woods. I appreciated that they remain a pragmatic instruction for leave no trace camping. Plus, I liked getting to make a terrible pun about these verses coming from “Doo-doo-ronomy.”

Beyond that, I just loved the Torah went so much into the minutia and mess about how to take care of our literal crap in the woods.

I’m realizing, though, this year that these verses are good for more than just a cheap laugh. These verses are not talking about any kind of vacation camping. It is clear from their context that they are about how to set up a camp in wartime, specifically. And so they are window into one of Torah’s preoccupations throughout this particular parashah: the question of how we keep ourselves pure – physically and metaphysically – when we are fighting a war..

From the instruction at the beginning of the parashah around curbing the lust that could too easily lead to rape in the aftermath of battle (a phenomenon unfortunately known across time and space) to the reminder blot out all Amalek-like predations on the weak and weary, Torah is deeply concerned with the problem of retaining humanity during wartime.

Professor Alan Cooper has contributed an article to TheTorah.com, reflecting on these verses in comparison to historic hygiene practices during wartime – which were typically quite limited, from ancient times to modernity, owing variously to the danger of leaving the encampment and exposing oneself potentially to enemy fire, as well as to the cramped quarters in more modern trench warfare. Throughout history, soldiers have tended to camp right in their own excrement, so these verses in Torah buck the trend.

To demand of an army that they leave their encampment to do their business, and to bury and cover it when they are finished is to demand that military campaign actually treat the places through which they pass like home – not a place to be trashed and left, but a space to treat carefully, a space that could and should sustain life over the long term.

It also demands that soldiers value that principle over their own lives – given the danger of venturing out of the safety of camp. By putting that demand in terms of the presence of Hashem traveling with the people, it suggests that there can be no legitimate win to a battle if we have left our excrement lying out along the way. We must take care of our own bodies and the places through which we are traveling, not just in spite of the exigencies of wartime, but the commentator Ramban says, precisely because the exigencies of wartime tend to bring out our cruder natures.

As someone who has never fought in a literal war, and at this point in my life (pu pu pu) does not expect to – I wonder about the allegorical implications of all this. Rabbi Shefa Gold puts it nicely, when she writes “With these words, “When you go out to battle against your enemies,” Ki Tetze begins by acknowledging the struggle. It’s much easier to be a decent human being when you are at peace… but there is a battle to be waged and that battle will try our decency, challenge our integrity and put every good intention to the test.”

In this moment, particularly, when we are all striving to deal with a COVID resurgence, with the constant fear of wildfires and smoke, with heatwaves, I relate to the idea that there is a struggle – and that it is more difficult to maintain decency in times of struggle. Poop is literally that which we expel from our bodies after digesting. There is a reason that the word “shit” is used not only to describe actual excrement but also emotional process, as in “I don’t feel like I have my shit together right now.”

And I see, in my interactions with colleagues, friends and family, that in these times of struggle, it is most difficult and most necessary to carefully take care of our “shit.” Because it is particularly when we are stressed out that we are perhaps most inclined to let it fly, to let our unprocessed stress, anxiety, blame, etc out – without being careful where it lands or how to bury it – so that others wind up slipping in it or being hurt by it.

In a way, these verses in Ki Tetze remind us not just to take care of the health and hygiene of our bodies – an important enough message as it is! – but also, particularly in times of struggle, to give ourselves space to unload our – I’ll say “Stuff”, now, understanding that as we do so, we make even the process of unloading one of mindfulness and holy consciousness.