God Spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab, by the Jordan, at Jericho, saying, “Command the children of Israel to give to the Levites from the heritage of their possession, cities for dwelling, and open space for the cities all around them shall you give to the Levites. The cities shall be for their dwelling, and their open space shall be for their animals, for their wealth, and for all their needs. The open spaces of the cities that you shall give to the Levites, from the wall of the city outward, will be a thousand cubits all around. You shall measure from outside the city on the eastern side two thousand cubits, on the southern side two thousand cubits, on the western side two thousand cubits, and on the northern side two thousand cubits, with the city in the middle. This shall be for them the open spaces of the cities.

Rashi on Num. 35:4
“A thousand cubits all around” Afterwards, however, He says, “two thousand cubits”. How was this done? He assigned two thousand [cubits] for them around [the city], of which the inner thousand was for open area and the outer [thousand] for fields and vineyards. (Cf. Mishnah Sota 5:1)

Sforno on Num. 35: 3
“For their animals” for chariots and conveyance [e.g., pack animals and wagons]; “and for their wealth” cattle and sheep; and for all their needs” such as beehives, dovecotes, and the like.

Baba Batra 24b
What is the reason [for maintaining an open area around a city]? Ulla said, “To beautify the city.”

Arachin 33b
One does not convert a field into a migrash, nor a migrash into a field, nor a migrash into a city, nor a city into a migrash.

Maimonides (Zeraim, Hilchos Shmittah V'Yovel 13:5)
Similarly, with all Jewish cities [in the land of Israel], do not change a field into a migrash or a migrash into a field, not a migrash into a city or a city into a migrash.

Lev. 25:34 and excerpt of commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch
“However, the fields of the open land surrounding their [the Levites’] cities may not be sold, for it is their eternal heritage.”
Clearly these laws place an obstacle to the growth of large cities at the expense of the surrounding country which otherwise is so very prevalent. Not even the open spaces of the city, or any part of it, may be used as building sites… …It is town-bred intelligence and culture combined with the natural and uncomplicated outlook of life fostered by living in close contact with nature, which is the effect which the great penetrating statute tends to produce as the predominant characteristics of the inhabitants of Israel.”
Action Items for Parshat Mas’ei

- Experience nature at least once a month. The Israelites with their green belts had constant access to natural areas where they could look out and see sign of human civilization. That was literally in their backyard. To the extent that we can connect to the natural world God created, we can recover some sense of the grandeur of God’s creation.

- Grow some of your own food. Backyard gardens can help us connect to the natural cycles of plant growth and reduce the use of fossil fuels to transport our food from farm to market.

- Support sustainable urban planning in your community by encouraging zoning laws that limit sprawl.

- Promote access to green spaces and parks in and near urban areas.