

Last week, in Parashat Shoftim, we learned about our obligations to the anonymous stranger passing through our domain.

This week our Torah portion, Ki Teitze, introduces us to our obligations to those who are closer to home:

Deuteronomy 22:1-4 teaches: If you see your fellow Israelite's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your peer. If your fellow Israelite does not live near you or you do not know who [the owner] is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your peer claims it; then you shall give it back. You shall do the same with that person's ass; you shall do the same with that person's garment; and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow Israelite loses and you find: you must not remain indifferent. If you see your fellow Israelite's ass or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it; you must raise it together.

In short, return things that aren't where they should be to where and to whom they belong. This principle, like many important mitzvot, is describing Jewish tradition using a single phrase: *Hashavat Aveida*, literally the returning of lost objects, as in "Oh dear, someone left their coat. Now I get to do the mitzvah of *Hashavat Aveida!*"

If we pay close attention to the Torah's text about it, we can see that the mitzvah is not just about doing, but about a particular emotional orientation towards doing: "Do not ignore it," the text says, three times in four verses.

As Rabbi Dr. Erin Lieb Smokler writes, "The human instinct is to avoid (להתעלם)—to not see what is before us, to not view other people's stuff as having a claim on us. So three times over the Torah warns against this indifference and prescribes active involvement."

As we discussed in Torah study yesterday, it can be a serious burden to get involved, and sometimes the burden of keeping a lost creature until it can be restored home is untenable. The rabbis in the Talmud in Bava Metzia 28, acknowledge that, teaching, “Whatever works and requires food (as, for instance, oxen, etc., the cost of whose food is set off by the value of its labour) should work and eat; whatever does not work but requires feeding (as, for instance, sheep) should be sold and the money restored to the man who lost it (Bava Metzia 28b).

The rabbis of the Talmud seek to offset the potential inconvenience of having to care for a living creature until it can be restored home. But note that even their fix is not without burden – to find an appropriate buyer who will give a fair price, to safeguard the money – and this, of course, only after making an effort to find the owner!

Lest you be concerned that there is no such thing as “finders’ keepers” in Judaism, the rabbis clarify that there are certain objects that are considered *hefker* – ownerless, as soon as they are lost, particularly objects of very limited value that are so standardized as to not be identifiable – a pencil or pen being a good example today (unless, of course, we’re talking about an embossed gift pen). A dollar bill, or even a five dollar bill could be considered *hefker*, but not if it is found in a wallet that could be identified by its owner.

I love that Torah commands us to look out for each other’s stuff, but I’m actually more interested in the animals than in the stuff. Animals have agency, they can wander. And so it might be particularly easy for us to ignore them. Or to not really wonder if an animal is where it should be. Paying attention to whether an animal has strayed assumes that we are aware of where our neighbors’ animals belong in the first place.

And it's very easy to extrapolate this as not about animals. Rabbi Smokler points out that to several Chasidic masters, "wandering ox and sheep are metaphors for people who have lost their way."

Noam Elimelech, commenting on this verse, for example, writes "if you have the ability to save with counsel or with effort, but you show yourself [as if] you do not have the strength, your strength will be reduced - measure for measure."

Essentially, this set of mitzvot is pushing us to be the kind of community where we look out for each other, where we speak up when we see someone going astray, literally or figuratively, where we take care of each other.

Now, this can have risks and be uncomfortable. For example, when one of my daughters was two and half years old, my family was spending a shabbat in Berkeley, and after leaving shul, my daughter ran back around the corner as we were starting to walk home. We had been playing a kind of walking peek-a-boo, so I gave her a few minutes to "pop-out" at me, and when she didn't, I, like many mothers, started calling her name and demanding that she show herself. Then I went looking. By the time I found her, she had passed the shul, rounded another corner, and was walking calmly with a tall man in a yarmulke who I recognized from the synagogue.

"I figured someone would come for this little one," he told me, "but that I'd better accompany her until then. She seemed perfectly ready to come to my house for lunch!" No doubt, had I not shown up in a few minutes, this man who lived right near the synagogue, would have fed my daughter.

And I love that. I want to be in a community where people look out for each other's children and aren't afraid to offer accompaniment.

I also acknowledge that this man took a risk. I could have gotten very upset with him and accused him of kidnapping my daughter, I could have told him that he should mind his own business. Trying to take care of each other carries not only inconveniences, but risks. Our good intentions can be misread, and in this hyper-individualistic society, we may well live in fear of being seen as nosy, or meddling. But I'd rather live in a community where we check in with each other – and sometimes get it wrong – than in one in which we ignore the signals that something might be going astray.

So as we approach Rosh Hashanah, especially for those of us who have been thinking about our own work of *cheshbon hanefesh* – soul accounting, realigning ourselves with who we want to be – I think Torah is urging us also to remember to help each other find our way back. Sometimes a little nosy is what we all need. May we all find our way back, and may we all have people who help us and our stuff get where we need to go.