

## Returning and Restoring What Is Lost: Parshat Ki Teitzei, 2020

When life gets busy, with many distractions, I have a tendency to misplace objects: my keys, my cell phone, or a scribbled note with important information. During this time when so many routines have been disrupted, and so many activities have moved home, this has happened even more so.

Most of us have had the experience of losing an item whose absence brings the tasks of daily life to a halt. When that happens, a possession can take on an importance out of proportion to its true value. And even when we lose an object that is not especially essential, something feels awry. Missing objects can have a strange power, can make everything feel out of kilter, just not right. Conversely, when a lost object is located or returned, the relief can be huge, also out of proportion to the true importance of the object: order seems to be restored.

The mitzvah of *hashavat aveidah*, the mitzvah to return lost objects to their owner, is greatly stressed in the Torah and in later rabbinic tradition. Our Torah portion, Ki Teitzei, includes this mitzvah in its vast treasure trove of mitzvot. This parsha addresses numerous core values, including supporting the poor and the stranger, family and marital relations, safe housing, sanitation, ethical business practice, and proper conduct during wartime.

At first glance, *hashavat aveidah* seems somewhat trivial compared to those other, more global subjects. Yet we see that the Torah takes this mitzvah very seriously. “When you find items belonging to your neighbor,” (in this case animals) “*hasheiv teshivem* – you will *certainly* return them,” states the Torah (Deuteronomy 22: 1-3.) The language is doubled for emphasis. Instead of its usual terse style, the Torah spends three full verses on this mitzvah, taking the time and the words to describe the different circumstances that may apply to finding a lost object, such as if the owner lives far away, or if the owner is not known, the ‘finder’ still retains certain obligations. The Torah even makes a point of saying that not only are we obligated to return lost objects, but we are forbidden to just ignore a lost object. It states explicitly, we may not pretend that we don’t see it: *lo toochal l’hit’alem*, act oblivious, literally, we must not “disappear” from the situation.

What is so important about these lost objects? The mitzvah is not about the object, but about the behavior. Rashi and others note that the examples of lost objects listed here move from the specific to the general, and from the most valuable to less: from various animals, to a garment, and finally – to anything at all. It is not the nature or worth of the object that matters, rather it is the idea of restoring things to where they belong.

Like so many mitzvot, this one is in large part about character development. If we make it a practice to respect the property and well-being of others, if we are honest and proactive about making things right even in a small matter like returning a lost item, how much more so will we be honest and proactive in matters of great importance. Good behavior becomes a habit.

But the sages of the Talmud also viewed the return of lost objects more broadly, as a framework for restoring order and balance to people and to the world. For example, they use it as a source for the mandate to heal the sick. The Torah teaches that we must return lost possessions, they say, so healing is an act of *hashavat aveidah*. A person who is ill has lost his health and his wholeness, and it is a mitzvah to return those to him.

We might in fact see many mitzvot through the lens of returning something lost to its owner. For example, we may restore someone's lost livelihood by giving them job training. When we offer a homeless person shelter, we may return her lost dignity and self-respect, as well as her ability to be safe. We could even say that all acts of repairing the world are part of this mitzvah, of restoring balance and returning things to where they should be.

So it is with each of us, in this season of *teshuvah*, return. One spiritual task of this period is to reclaim parts of ourselves that we may have misplaced. In this time of introspection, we look deep inside ourselves for what is missing. We hope to return it, to ourselves, to our relationships with the people in our lives, and to our relationship with God. We look too at what is missing in the world around us, and commit ourselves to helping restore those lost pieces to their rightful places, bringing wholeness and healing to our broken world.

Shabbat Shalom

