



Cultivating Kindness • Parshat Ki Teitzei

In *Parshat Ki Teitzei*, Moses positively overwhelms the Israelites with laws. Out of Maimonides' count of 613 precepts, 72 appear in this week's portion. Justifying the need for so many commandments in general, Sefer HaChinuch explains that sacred deeds function to inculcate character through repetitive action.

Rabbi Moses Alshich creatively reads this positive habit formation into the obligation to return lost property. The first verse identifies this obligation as pertaining to ox and sheep (Deut. 22:1). The subsequent verses extend it to donkeys and garments, culminating with the expansive "so too shall you do with anything that your fellow Israelite loses, and you find" (Deut. 22:3). The closing three words of that verse – *lo tukhal lehitalem* – are difficult to translate. Most understand the phrase as a demand not to neglect moral responsibility: "you must not remain indifferent." Alshich understands it not as a command but as an aspirational reality.

If one follows the behavioral progression in the verses by returning pure animals (ox and sheep), impure animals (donkeys), and then even inanimate objects (garments), the virtue of altruism and kindness will be integrated into one's character. He will be so transformed by fulfilling the different aspects of the commandment that he will quite literally "be unable to remain indifferent." His pristine personality will compel him to help.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski similarly reads

"*lo tukhal lehitalem*" as a psychological reality underlying character development. Instead of emphasizing habits like Alshich, he highlights the value of our moral sentiments. The Torah is "stating a fact: you are unable to hide from a wrongful act." Even if there are no social consequences if one does not return the lost object, "your conscience will not give you any peace of mind." Our unethical and immoral behaviors leave lasting impressions that are difficult to evade. The only way to escape the pangs of conscience is to choose kindness.

An illustrative *midrashic* method when analyzing successive commandments is to glean insights from juxtapositions. Ibn Ezra notes that the chapter immediately preceding ours details conduct during wartime. This suggestive pairing teaches that the obligation to return a lost object is operative even while engaging in battle.

Rabbi Henschel Leibowitz in his *Hidushei HaLev* elaborates on Ibn Ezra's gloss. Returning a lost object requires attentiveness to the needs of others. A soldier during war is justifiably preoccupied, intent and focused, maybe even anxious or fearful. Perhaps he should be excused from these social favors. Yet, compassion and kindness are necessary even during war. Perhaps even more so, it is during trying and challenging times that the Torah emphasizes empathy and benevolence.

In a pioneering experiment in the early 1970's, John Darley and Daniel Batson explored the factors that influence 'helping' behaviors. Are

religious people more likely to help a sick person on the road? Would it make a difference if that religious person was first primed with a story about charitable behavior? It turned out that the primary factor in the decision was time: if the person was in a rush, he was less likely to assist. Religious people, even those motivated with an inspiring story of helping, passed by the individual if they were late to a meeting.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks references this famed study in his discussion of the commandment to help a friend's fallen animal. This law appears immediately after the need to return a lost object and utilizes a similar formulation: "Do not see your

kinsman's donkey or his ox fallen on the road and ignore it (*vehitalamta*). Help him lift it up" (Deut. 22:4). "Essentially," writes Rabbi Sacks, the verse "is telling us to slow down when you see someone in need. Whatever the time pressure, don't walk on by" ("Social Capital & Fallen Donkeys," *Covenant & Conversation*).

In a world that seems to demand constant hustling just to stay afloat, we are in danger of being too busy to notice the needs of others. The commandments are meant to recalibrate our priorities. They motivate and enable us to cultivate the habits, virtues, and values that kindle a disposition of kindness.

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman is an assistant professor at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, Director of Leadership Scholars at the Sacks-Herenstein Center, the associate rabbi at Kingsway Jewish Center, and the author of Psyched for Torah: Cultivating Character and Well-Being through the Weekly Parsha.

Character Challenge: Intentionally attend to others while walking in the hallway or on the streets. What kind word or act can you share?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "Think of a moment when you needed help and a friend or stranger came to your assistance. Can you remember such occasions? Of course. They linger in the mind forever, and whenever you think of them, you feel a warm glow, as if to say, the world is not such a bad place after all. That is the life-changing idea: Never be in too much of a rush to stop and come to the aid of someone in need of help. Rarely if ever will you better invest your time. It may take a moment but its effect may last a lifetime" ("Social Capital & Fallen Donkeys," *Covenant & Conversation*).