

Ki Teitzei: Returning What is Lost

Rabbi Josh Feigelson

Do not see your fellow Israelite's ox or sheep straying and ignore it; rather, be sure to return it to its owner. If he does not live near you or if you do not know who owns it, take it home with you and keep it until he comes looking for it. Then give it back. Do the same if you find his donkey or his cloak or anything else he has lost. Do not ignore it. (Deut. 22:1-3)

The Talmud offers several important comments on this passage from Parshat Ki Tetzei, which elaborate the ethical issues involved in returning lost objects. While it seems simple on the surface, complexity lies just beneath. What happens, for instance, if the person who comes looking for the lost object is actually lying—he doesn't really own it? Thus the Talmud understands the phrase *ad drosh akhicha*, until he comes looking for it, to mean: do not return it until you examine him to ascertain whether he really is the owner of the object, or whether he is pretending.

And what happens if the process of returning the object will create serious problems: Does a *kohein*, who is prohibited from entering a cemetery, need to enter the cemetery so for the sake of returning a lost object? Does a dignified elder have to get sweaty and dirty and stoop below his station in order to return an object to its owner? (The Talmud answers no in both cases, based on the repetition of "Do not see" and "do not ignore" in the first clause.) And what if the owner keeps losing the object, and you keep returning it to him? How long does this pattern need to continue? The repetition of *hashev tshivem*, you shall surely return it, is understood to mean that if you return it, and he loses it, and you return it again and he loses it again, you are obligated to continue returning "even a hundred times." (All of this discussion takes place in Bava Metzia 30a-b.)

Returning lost objects happens on the level of *gashmiut*, the practical and physical realities of life. But it can also be understood on the level of *ruchniyut*, the psychological and spiritual realm, as well. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) offers a rich reading of this passage in this direction:

Know that one must travel to the *tzaddik* to seek that which one has lost.

For before a person comes into the world, they are taught and shown everything that they need to create and labor and achieve in this world. And once they are out in this world, it is all forgotten from them, as our Rabbis teach (Babylonian Talmud Niddah 30b). And this forgetting is the lost object, just as our Rabbis called the person who forgets "someone who has lost," as they say, "Quick to hear—quick to lose" (Pirkei Avot 5).

One must return and seek his or her lost object. The lost object is with the *tzaddik*, because the *tzaddik* searches for his own lost object until he finds it, and after he finds it, he returns and searches for the lost objects of others until he finds their losses, until he finds the lost objects of the entire world. Therefore, one must come to the wise person to seek, and to recognize, one's lost object, and to receive it again from him. But the *tzaddik* does not return the lost object to its owner until he examines whether or not they are a liar or deceiver, as it is written in the Talmud about the verse "until they come looking for it, then give it back" – "until you examine your brother to know that he is not cheating." (Likkutei Moharan I:188)

Rebbe Nachman uncovers another layer of meaning in these verses. When the Torah speaks of lost objects, it does not only mean the physical lost object—it can also mean things that

are missing from our souls. In this reading, the mitzvah of returning a lost object to a person is to be understood not only as returning their garment or their animal, but returning part of them to themselves—a part they lost when they were born. This is the function of the *tzaddik* for Rebbe Nachman: to help the person recover the part of themselves that they have lost. Like the custodian of the lost object in the plain sense of the verses, the *tzaddik* must inquire, investigate, and uncover whether the person is really the owner of the lost object—that is, he must help the one who has lost to know what it is he has lost, and whether what he seeks is really what he needs. He has to determine—and help the seeker to determine—what it is he truly seeks.

In reading the ethically-focused Talmud and the spiritually-focused Rebbe Nachman, we might be tempted to see them as separate teachings: one focuses on the physical, the other on the spiritual; one seems to be the plain meaning of the text, the other a creative reading. But the two are really deeply linked. Our relationship with things is a function of how we relate to the world—to ourselves, to others, to creation, to the Creator. Ownership, of course, is not real: it is a fiction we weave and enforce by the consensus of law. What we do when we return a lost object is really the same as when we help a friend find a lost part of their soul: repairing a tear in the fabric of the world.

As we move through Elul and approach Rosh Hashanah, this teaching reminds us that *teshuva*, returning, happens on all levels. As we return the parts of ourselves we have lost, we must also help one another find our lost objects and become whole again.