

Parshat Ki Tetze:
On Returning the Lost
Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler

Director of Spiritual Development, Maharat
Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2018

Parshat Ki Tetze is packed with laws—laws regarding war; laws regarding marriage, inheritance, and children, rebellious and otherwise; laws regarding fair treatment of animals and workers; and so much more. In fact, this Torah portion contains more laws than any other portion, 74 of the 613.

Embedded within the lengthy litany are laws pertaining to lost objects and animals.

1 If you see your fellow's ox or sheep going astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow. 2 If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your fellow claims it; then you shall give it back to him. 3 You shall do the same with his donkey; you shall do the same with his garment; and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow loses and you find: you must not remain indifferent. 4 If you see your fellow's donkey or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it; you must help him raise it. (Deuteronomy 22:1-4)

א לא־תִרְאֶה אֶת־שׁוֹר אַחִיךָ אוֹ אֶת־שֵׂי
 נִדְחִים וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ מֵהֶם הֲשִׁב תְּשִׁיבֵם לְאַחִיךָ;
 ב וְאִם־לֹא קָרוֹב אַחִיךָ אֵלֶיךָ וְלֹא יָדַעְתָּ
 וְאִסַּפְתָּו אֶל־תּוֹךְ בֵּיתְךָ וְהָיָה עִמָּךְ עַד דֶּרֶשׁ
 אַחִיךָ אֹתוֹ וְהִשְׁבֵּתוֹ לוֹ: ג וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְחֹמְרוֹ
 וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְשִׁמְלָתוֹ וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל־אֲבֹדֹת
 אַחִיךָ אֲשֶׁר־תֵּאבֹד מִמֶּנּוּ וּמִצֵּאתָהּ לֹא תוֹכֵל
 לְהִתְעַלֵּם: ד לֹא־תִרְאֶה אֶת־חֹמְרוֹ אַחִיךָ אוֹ
 שׁוֹרוֹ נִפְלִים בְּדַרְכֶּךָ וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ מֵהֶם הֲקִים
 תְּקִים עִמּוֹ: (דברים כב: א-ד)

These laws, known as *hashavat aveidah*, call on us to take responsibility for the possessions of other people. 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. Faced with a lost, wandering animal, return it to its rightful owner. "הֲשִׁב תְּשִׁיבֵם לְאַחִיךָ". Confronted by a faltering animal, return it to its feet. "הֲקִים תְּקִים עִמּוֹ". Other people's belongings belong in your consciousness and your sphere of concern.

To the Chasidic ear, though, there is so much more that is adrift and off-kilter in the world, so many more types of lost objects that need finding. Reflecting on our verses, R. Yaacov Yosef of Polnoye (1710-1784) argues that wandering ox and sheep are metaphors for people who have lost their way.

התעלמת מהם. ותרצה להתעלם מזה כאילו אין לך שייכות לכך.

"And you will want to ignore them," he says. You will want to have nothing to do with these lonely, broken, wayward souls. They will make you feel uncomfortable. They will make you feel threatened. But:

But return them you must. It was not for nothing that they came into your awareness (lit. that they were shown to you). You have a stake in the matter. "*Hashev*," do you own *teshuva* (repentance) first for wanting to avoid them. And then "*tishivem*," return them—in *teshuva*, back into the circle of your life and your community.

השב תשיבם. לא לחינם הראו לך
 זאת, יש לך שייכות לזה: "השב",
 תחילה תחזור אתה בתשובה ואחר
 כך "תשיבם", תוכל להחזירם
 בתשובה גם הם.

Welcome them. Root them. Give them a sense of belonging once again.

The gifts of this embrace are enormous, the rebbe continues:

The verse (Deut. 22:4) states, "you must help him raise it." But R. Yaacov Yosef reads this to mean, "you shall be raised along with it." When the great ones of Israel, the privileged ones, bind themselves to the rest of the generation, even the lowly ones, then they themselves are elevated. (*Toldot Yaacov Yosef, Ki Tetze*—English paraphrased and expanded)

וזה שנאמר הקם תקים עמו, כשהגדול בישראל כולל עצמו ומתאחד עם אנשי דורו אז יכול הוא להקיםם כן. (תולדות יעקב יוסף, כי תצא)

The community is only whole when it makes space for the broken. Individuals can only stand proud when they help others stand erect.

R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), the *Sefat Emet*, adds to this insight:

When a person habituates himself such that he cannot ignore his friend's loss [or his friend who is lost], whether it be a physical or a spiritual loss, then he can truly return to him that which was missing and elevate it. But there is one step more. Such an individual—so skilled at seeing what is lost—then becomes adept at seeing the losses within himself. Then he may truly be redeemed. (*Sefat Emet, Ki Tetze 1878*—English paraphrased and expanded)

בפסוק לא תראה כו' והתעלמת כו' השב תשיבם כו' הקם תקים. יש לפרש כשאדם מרגיל עצמו כך שלא יוכל להתעלם מהפסד של חברו. הן בגשמיות הן בתיקון הנפש. אז בכחו להשיב אליו אבדתו ולהקימו. ומכ"ש באדם עצמו שענין זה נוהג כשא"י לסבול את הפחיתות שבו אז הוא נושע: (שפת אמת, כי תצא תרל"ח)

The apex of *hashavat aveidah*, the cultivated practice of returning that which has gone astray, is when we can see and not ignore and repair that which has come undone within ourselves. "*Hashev tishivem*," says the verse. Return to yourself.

During this season of *teshuva*, the charge to return all that has been lost resounds loudly. To all the people who have become "נדחים"—remote or rejected or just unmoored: It is time to come home. We take responsibility for your wanderings and want you back. And to all that is broken, lost, amiss within us: Let us make space to heal, to re-center, to return, and to be found.



Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler is the Director of Spiritual Development at Yeshivat Maharat, where she teaches Chassidut and Pastoral Torah. She is also a faculty fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She earned her PhD and MA from the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and her BA from Harvard University. In 2018 she received semikha from Maharat's Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track.