

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ki Teitzei
August 2021 / Elul 5781

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Ki Teitzei – The secret of success

In this week's Parasha of Ki Tetze we learn the mitzva of hashavat aveida – returning a lost item. The Torah instructs us that if we come across a lost item that belongs to a fellow Jew¹, we must return it to the owner and prevent them from suffering a loss. The details involved in this mitzva are numerous and intricate and Rabbinic guidance should be sought.

The pasuk which introduces this mitzva states as follows:

*You shall not see your brother's ox or sheep straying **and ignore them**. Rather you shall return them to your brother. (Devarim 22:1)*

Rashi explains that it is very easy to ignore a lost item. One can cover their eyes and pretend not to see it. It can be a hassle to safeguard the item, publicise the loss and try to locate the owner. It might be tempting to avoid that hassle. After all, we might figure that no one who would know whether we saw the item.

However, there is One who will know the truth. When we do a hidden mitzva that no-one else knows about, we are acknowledging that Hashem knows, and He cares about what we do.

Let us examine an enigmatic story in the Gemara.² The story relates to Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion, one of the ten holy martyrs whom we read about during Musaf on Yom Kippur. Rabbi Chanina lived during a very difficult time in Jewish history. After the destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash, the Romans issued a decree forbidding Torah study. Anyone caught teaching Torah would be put to death. Rabbi Chanina ignored the edict and bravely taught Torah in public. When Rabbi Chanina's teacher, Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma, was ill, Rabbi Chanina went to visit him. Rabbi Chanina had an important question on his mind: “Am I destined for life in the World to Come?” In order to answer this question, Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma needed more information: “Did you ever do anything special?” Rabbi Chanina responded: “I once had some coins that I had set aside for my Purim feast and the coins got mixed up with some other coins that were set aside for tzedakah. I distributed the full amount to the poor and I absorbed the loss out of my own pocket”. Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma was suitably impressed: “If that is so then you are certainly destined to go to Olam Haba and may my portion in Olam Haba be as great as yours!”

This is an astounding story. Here we have the great Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion who regularly risked his life to teach Torah. Despite the risk, Rabbi Chanina would teach publicly, doing whatever he could to publicise Torah. Indeed, he was eventually executed by the Romans for this behaviour. And yet, when he was asked whether he did anything great, anything which would ensure life in the World to Come, he rather nominated a seemingly minor incident involving a few coins. When the coins got mixed up, he could have tried to guess how many coins belonged to him and how many coins

¹ Technically there is no mitzva to return a lost item to a non-Jew. However, if one finds such an item, they should return it with the intention to make a kiddush Hashem. The item certainly must be returned if failure to do so will result in a chillul Hashem.

² Avodah Zara 18a.

belonged to charity and divided the money accordingly. But he did not want to steal anything from the poor. Not even a small coin. So he decided to be safe and pay the entire amount to tzedakah.

Why was this act so great? One answer is that it was done in secret. No other person saw or knew what Rabbi Chanina did. He acted the way that he did purely because it was the right thing to do and because it would make Hashem proud, not because other people could see.

We have previously mentioned³ Rav Avigdor Miller's 'Ten Steps to Greatness'. These are 10 daily acts that Rabbi Miller recommends we practice regularly to help us achieve spiritual greatness. One of these steps is to do one act of kindness each day that no other person knows about. Since the act is in secret, there is no recognition and no public accolades when we perform such private good deeds. The only immediate reward is the internal satisfaction that we are serving Hashem and making Him proud.

Perhaps we can relate this idea to the difference between a ganav (thief) and a gazlan (robber). The thief tries to hide his action while the robber is more brazen – he steals in public or out in the open.⁴ The Torah punishes the thief much more strictly than a robber. A thief is required to pay back double (and in some cases four or five times) the value of what he sold. A robber is not required to pay this extra fine. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai explains the reason for this distinction⁵. The robber doesn't care what anybody thinks and therefore he is not afraid to rob in public. The thief tries to hide his actions from other people, but he does not care that Hashem sees what he is doing. He cares more about what other people think than what Hashem thinks. That is why extra penalties are imposed on the thief. When we perform hidden mitzvot that only Hashem can see, we are acting in the exact opposite manner to the thief. We are demonstrating that we care more about what Hashem thinks than what other people think. And that is one reason why these hidden mitzvot are so precious.

In this light, we can understand the final advice given by Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai to his students before he passed away⁶. His students said to him: "Our teacher, bless us". He said to them: "May it be His will that the fear of Heaven shall be upon you like the fear of flesh and blood". His students were puzzled and said: "To that point and not beyond? Shouldn't one fear God more?" Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai replied: "If only a person would achieve that level of fear. You should know that when one commits a transgression, he says to himself: I hope that no one will see me. If one is as concerned about avoiding shame before God as he is before people, he will never sin."

We see here the secret of success. To succeed... in secret.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the message of the law of returning lost objects. We cannot pretend not to see. Hashem knows whether we saw the lost object and we must perform our obligations.
2. Try to do a regular, kind deed in private. Make sure that no-one knows about it so that it's a previous, holy act. It should be just between you and Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe to Darchai Noam, please email darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'Subscribe' in the subject.

³ See Darchai Noam for Parashat Va'etchanan 5778.

⁴ There is a cute mnemonic to remember which is which. The ganav steals at night (i.e., when nobody is looking), while the gazlan steals in the light (i.e., out in the open). (I read this idea in an article written by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein - <https://ohr.edu/8744>).

⁵ Baba Kama 79b.

⁶ Brachot 28b.