

A Jew is never truly lost (Parshat Ki Tetze)

This Shabbat we read *Parshat Ki Tetze* which includes the mitzvah of *hashavat aveidah* – the returning of lost property (see Devarim 22:1-3). But even though this is a biblical commandment, it is noteworthy that no bracha is recited prior to returning a lost item. The question that I would like to consider is: **why?**

Admittedly, a range of suggestions have been offered in answer to this question (see *Sefer Likutei Shoshanim* pp. 499-506). However, I am particularly struck by one answer which Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank suggests (see *Har Tzvi* commentary to Devarim 22:1), which is that no bracha is recited prior to fulfilling the mitzvah of returning a lost item given the possibility that the person who lost the item has already given up hope of finding it again.

And why is this relevant to the mitzvah of *hashavat aveidah*? It is because once someone gives up hope of finding an object (nb. the word for giving up hope is *y'iusb*), the object is then rendered ownerless, and it may be kept by someone who finds it (see *Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat* 262:5). As a result, once *y'iusb* occurs, there is no obligation of *hashavat aveidah* because the object is no longer considered to be the possession of the one who lost it.

Thinking this through, what this means is that while the mitzvah of returning a lost object is rooted in the premise that, at the moment when one finds something, the owner still maintains some hope (*tikvah*) that they will be reunited with whatever they have lost, we must also accept the possibility at that moment that the owner might have already given up hope (*y'iusb*) of being reunited with the object. And precisely given this possibility this is why, at least according to Rabbi Frank, no bracha is recited.

I believe that there is a huge lesson which we can learn from here about many different areas of life that we need to act with a sense of urgency that hope (*tikvah*) still exists while, at the same time, we must also accommodate the possibility that the very people whom we are trying to assist might have transitioned into a state of hopelessness (*y'iusb*).

Of course, there are many realms where this principle can be applied, but I would like to reference just one as explored by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, otherwise known as the Chafetz Chaim.

According to the Chafetz Chaim, the duty to help Jews who are ebbing away from tradition or who have assimilated find their way back to Jewish belief or worship stems from the mitzvah of *hashavat aveidah*. On this basis, this would mean that all those who are involved in outreach should act with a sense of urgency to assist those Jews who still hope (*tikvah*) to return to Jewish belief or worship, while they must also be honest and accommodate the possibility that some Jews have transitioned into a state of hopelessness (*y'iusb*) in terms of their Jewish belief and worship.

However, the above interpretation is flawed, and this is because there is a huge difference between the physical mitzvah of *hashavat aveidah* (i.e. returning lost objects) and the spiritual application of *hashavat aveidah* (i.e. helping disconnected Jews reconnect to their heritage). And though we believe that people experience *y'iusb* (hopelessness) when it comes to reuniting with a lost object, we believe that no Jew truly experiences *y'iusb* when it comes to their Jewish identity.

Clearly, this point is fundamental in terms of its application to Jewish outreach to others. However, it is equally relevant when it comes to Jewish outreach to ourselves because, as Rav Kook beautifully explains, teshuvah is itself a form of returning our spiritual identity to ourselves. As he writes, **“the primary teshuva, which immediately provides illumination to those grappling**

in the darkness, is when a person returns to themselves, to the root of their soul. At that moment, they immediately return to God, to the soul of all souls” (Orot HaTeshuvah 15:10). Accordingly, unlike the returning of a physical object where there is a concern for *y’iush*, Jewish teachings emphasise the perpetual possibility of teshuvah, and thus, the perpetual possibility of *tikvah*.

In conclusion, while some people give up hope of being reunited with a lost object, a Jew never gives up hope of being reunited with their spiritual self. And given this possibility, we must always act with a sense of *tikvah* both when it comes to outreach to others, and outreach to ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom!