

GOOD INTENTIONS

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

Reuven took a walk during the wheat harvest and found dudaim in the field, and he brought them to his mother Leah. (Bereshith 29:25)

When strolling in private or even public gardens, it is forbidden to cut flowers or to pick from the trees. It is understood that permission was only given to walk in the gardens and not to take anything from them.¹ Reuven was well aware of this, and made sure to take wildflowers which were ownerless.² It is not necessary for the Torah to tell us that Reuven was not a thief, for all of Yaakov's children were exceedingly righteous. The Torah is instructing us about the subtleties of honesty. After her fourth child, Leah had not given birth to any more offspring. The dudaim had medicinal properties as a fertility drug and Reuven's motivation in picking them was for the honor and well-being of his mother Leah. Inspired by such deep feelings, he could have easily justified taking these plants from a private domain; an act which is considered theft. His single-minded desire to act truthfully enabled him to overcome this rationalization, and to act with complete honesty.

No matter how good one's intentions are, one must always consider the ramifications of his actions on the belongings of others. Although nearly every other mitzvah in the Torah can be set aside for the sake of saving a life, the offense of theft is so serious that even to save a life you are only permitted to take someone else's property on condition that you pay for it later.³ One is not allowed to steal - i.e., to take without paying - even to save a life! When other, less urgent mitzvot are concerned, it is totally forbidden to take possession of someone else's belongings.⁴ If, in the process of performing a mitzvah, a person damages the property of others, he is fully responsible to pay for everything he damaged, his noble intentions notwithstanding.⁵

How was Reuven rewarded for refraining from theft? His descendants, who were shepherds, were given a portion of land with abundant lush grassland and meadows. Although shepherds are generally infamous for grazing their sheep in the pastures of others, since God had granted them a portion of land which had plenty of pasture, Reuven's offspring were spared from transgressing the prohibition of theft.⁶

1. *Kaf HaChaim, Orach Chaim 549, quoting Responsa Yafe L'Lev 3:1.*

2. *Bereshith Rabbah 72:2; Sanhedrin 99b.*

3. *Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 359:4.*

4. At times it may be permitted to temporarily borrow someone else's belongings in order to fulfill a mitzvah if one is absolutely sure that the owner will not need them during that time, and that the owner would not mind that you borrowed them. See Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 14:4. However, many halachic authorities disagree with this. See Kaf HaChaim and Aruch HaShulchan, ibid.
5. Responsa Chovoth Yair 207; Pithchei Tshuva Choshen Mishpat 378:4.
6. Commentary of the Yafe To'ar Bereshith Rabbah 72:1.

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