

RETURNING LOST OBJECTS PART 18

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

In the past few months we have discussed the laws of returning lost objects in considerable detail. Before we move on to the next topic, it is worthwhile to review some of the ideas that we derive from this Mitzvo (commandment). The most obvious lesson is that a person cannot live in a bubble ignoring the needs of those around him. He has to take a degree of responsibility for the property of others. We have said in the past that the Torah's outlook is that not helping others is not neutral, rather it is considered a negative form of behavior. Therefore, a person must develop an awareness of the world around him and how he can help improve that world.

The Mitzvo (commandment) of returning lost objects teaches us that even when we walk along the street we should be aware of the possibility that there is a lost item on the floor. Further, we should be prepared to expend the effort to fulfill our obligation to return the item to its proper owner. By doing such an act one can do a great kindness to the loser of the object. Many people feel great pain when they lose valuable items and returning them constitutes a great Mitzvo.

There is a remarkable story told which demonstrates the deeper significance of the Mitzvo to return lost objects. A non-observant Jewish young woman once happened upon an Orthodox Torah class whilst she was vacationing in Jerusalem. This class was about the Mitzvo to return lost objects. The woman was not particularly moved by the class and carried on her life as usual. Some time later, she spent some time in the Far East, delving into the Eastern religions. She adopted a guru as her spiritual mentor - she saw him as the personification of spirituality. On one occasion they were walking together and the guru noticed a wallet on the floor. He picked it up and put it in his pocket. She asked him if he would try to return it to its owner and he replied that it was now his to keep. At this point she was reminded of the class she was taught about this very subject. The guru's indifference to the property of others stood in stark contrast to the attitude of the Torah. She decided to return to Jerusalem to enquire more into the religion of her ancestors.

One of the striking aspects of this story is how the guru did not connect 'spirituality' with taking responsibility for other's property. Spirituality was reserved for areas such as prayer and meditation, but it played little part in one's daily life. Judaism stresses that spirituality is not limited to one's relationship with G-d, rather one can connect to spirituality by following the Torah in the most seemingly mundane areas such as returning someone else's item. By studying the laws of the Mitzvos that involve our daily lives we can elevate commonplace occurrences into opportunities to connect to G-d by doing His Will.

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