

RETURNING LOST OBJECTS PART 2

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Last week we began discussion of the Mitzva (commandment) to return lost items to their rightful owner .[2] The source of this Mitzva is found in the Parsha of Ki Seitsei in the book of Devarim (Deuteronomy). The Torah states: "You shall not see the ox of your brother or his sheep or goat cast off, and hide yourself from them; you shall surely return them to your brother. "[3] The Rabbis teach us that two separate Mitzvos are included in this verse; the first is that when a person encounters a lost item he must pick it up and try to return it and the second is that he may not hide his eyes from it. If he does indeed pick it up then he is considered to have performed both these Mitzvos, and if he ignores it then he transgresses them both. If he picks up the object with intention to keep it for himself (when this is not allowed) then he transgresses a third Mitzvo, not to steal .[4]

The Rabbis teach further that this Mitzva is not limited to returning lost objects. It also obligates each person to prevent or minimize damage to others' property. For example, if one notices a leak causing damage to someone else's building he must try to prevent further loss in whatever fashion possible.

The Mitzva further applies to saving another person from losing money [5]. For example, if one sees someone's electricity needlessly being wasted he should turn it off if he assesses that would the owner be there he would turn it off himself.

Some Rabbis write that the Mitzva also includes taking the time to help one's neighbors protest zoning issues that will cause a negative impact on the value of neighborhood homes of quality of life.

However, there is a limit to these obligations: If the owner himself knows about the problem and refrains from doing anything to fix it, then the passer-by has no obligation to invest his time and effort to fix it. This is part of a basic principle in Judaism that a person should take responsibility for his own problems. He should not ignore them with the expectation that kind onlookers will spare him of any effort! Whilst Judaism greatly stresses kindness, it equally emphasizes the need for self-sufficiency where possible. A person that does not want to help himself cannot expect others to do so.

1. Many of the laws in this discussion are taken from the book, "Halachos of Other People's Money" by Rabbi Pinchas Bodner.

2. As we will discuss, there are many situations in which one is not required to return the object, and in some circumstances he can even keep it for himself.
3. Ki Seitsei, 22:1-3.
4. Vayikra, Ch. 19.
5. In previous weeks we saw that the one can also fulfill the Mitzva of "Do not stand over your brother's blood" by helping others

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