

POSSESSIONS BELONG TO PEOPLE

by Rabbi Dovid Green

The Torah, in this week's parsha, teaches us about many civil obligations. Among them is the commandment to return lost articles to our fellow. Under most circumstances one may not turn away from the obligation to take in and return something one's fellow lost. There are many rules regarding when one may keep a lost article, and when one must advertise that he found it. Even then when one must advertise, there is a time limit.

One of the procedures one must follow is that the object must be returned in a way that it will not end up as an expense to the fellow the object was returned to. For instance, if it is an animal that needs to be fed, the finder will end up presenting the owner with a bill for the food. The owner may end up paying the animal's worth to the finder, and not really gain anything in its having been returned.

Our Rabbis in the oral law explain to us that under such circumstances one must do as follows. If the animal can work, such as an ox, than it must "pay its way" by working. If it gives milk, it can pay its way by giving milk to the finder who will in turn feed it. Something which doesn't produce in any way should be sold, and the money should be held for the owner until he tracks down the whereabouts of the finder.

The following story is recorded about Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa, a very pious sage who lived in the Mishnaic period approximately 2000 years ago. He once found chickens which had been tied at the legs and forgotten. He took them home, but they multiplied and became a great burden, and nuisance. He decided to sell them and buy goats which require less hands on, but also multiplied to abundance. When the man who lost the chickens finally tracked them down and identified them, he was surprised to find a herd of goats in their place. "This must be a mistake. I didn't lose goats, I lost chickens." "You are right, replied Rabbi Chanina, but these are the goats that I purchased with your chickens which I sold. You may take your goats."

Imagine a world where people demonstrate such regard for each other communally, on a large scale. This would create a major revolution, because this idea is the basis for an important conclusion. If one must demonstrate this level of concern for a fellow's possessions, how much more so toward one's fellow himself. The Torah is the key to elevated behavior, and as a result, a more elevated society in general.

Good Shabbos!

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