

A GIANT STEP TOWARD HOLINESS

by Rabbi Label Lam

People of holiness shall you be to Me...(Shemos 22:30)

HASHEM has plenty of Holy Angels but what He desires is that people guard the Holiness in this otherwise material world. (The Kotzker Rebbe ztl.)

If a man shall uncover a pit, or if a man shall dig a pit and not cover it, and an ox or a donkey fall into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution. (Shemos 21:33)

I know what you're thinking. I used to think the same thing. Who's got an ox or a donkey nowadays? What does this have to do with us? The truth is material conditions of societies have been and are currently in constant flux and from here we learn one of the main principles of damage-"BOR"- pit. A BOR is defined not just as a pit but as a stationary form of damaging agent as opposed to others that move like some domesticated animal or fire. It becomes particularly problematic when placed in the public domain. What does all this talk of pits and holes have to do with being holy?

The Talmud tells the following incident: "We learned in a Baraisa; "A person should not throw stones from his property into public grounds. It happened that a person was throwing stones from his property into the public domain. A pious man passed by and said to him, "Foolish one, why are you throwing stones from property that does not belong to onto ground that does belong to you?" The man laughed at him. As time went by he had to sell his field and when he was walking on those public grounds, stumbled over his own stones. He then exclaimed, "That pious man was right when he said to me, "Why are you throwing stones from ground that does not belong to you onto ground that does belong to you?" (Bava Kama)

In contradistinction one of my Rebbeim told us in class that his wife had once stopped on the street to observe an amazing scene. She was not quite certain what she was witnessing though. Someone who was renowned as "The Tzadik of Monsey", Rabbi Mordechai Schwabb ztl. was in front of his house with a large pair of pruning shears. This seemed unbefitting or uncharacteristic for such a revered rabbi to be doing that kind labor intensive garden work. He was reaching for some high branches zealously and clipping away when he noticed that this woman was staring at him with bewilderment. He paused and beamed in her direction with his usual radiant countenance and told her, "It's a chessed! It's a chessed! (An act of kindness). She came home and asked her husband, "What kindness is there in trimming a tree?" She guessed, "Maybe there's some mystical dimension at play here and extra branches are somehow painful for the tree!" He thought for a moment and

laughed. He told her that he was probably removing those branches that hang low from his property onto the side walk and what he wanted was to simply make sure that his tree would not be the cause of somebody who would be strolling by having their hat knocked off their head or getting a poke in the eye. Maybe nothing deeper than that!

I suppose that's how the pious one thinks. He's concerned about his responsibility to the public domain in every possible way. There's a hidden ingredient of that story that may have slipped unnoticed below the radar screen and may best be highlighted by the next incident.

Once when I was a youngish Yeshiva student during the holy month of Elul which is the prelude to Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur I was wearing a rather dour and sullen look on my face. One of the Rabbis approached me and asked me what the problem was. I blithely uttered, "Elul Rabbi Elul!" thinking that would be enough of a justification for the extra serious face. He told me, "Elul is what's going on in your heart. That's the private domain. Your face though is the public domain." So the Mishne in Avos declares, "Greet every man with a pleasant and interested face!"

The Torah warns not just about carving a hole in the ground in a public area so that an ox should not dare stumble into it but also cautions regarding anything we may bring out from the private to the public domain. Respecting those boundaries and avoiding those kinds of pitfalls is **a giant step toward holiness!** DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).