

# OH, BROTHER...

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"You shall not see the ox of your brother, or his sheep or goat, having wandered off, and ignore them; you shall surely return them to your brother." [22:1]*

This verse is parallel to one we read in Parshas Mishpatim, Exodus 23:4: "When you come upon the ox of your enemy, or his donkey wandering, you shall surely return it to him."

The two verses are similar, but they are also very different. In Exodus we learn that there is an obligation to return lost animals and objects belonging to "your enemy," but here we learn to return property to "your brother." Why is it that when the Torah first mentions this Mitzvah, it refers to the ox of "your enemy," while here it speaks about the ox of "your brother?"

I saw the following answer said in the name of Rabbeinu Bechaya -- that the Torah is teaching us that it is not enough to simply return the ox of "your enemy." There is an additional objective, to remove the hatred from your heart, making him "your brother" instead. The Mitzvah must cause you to uproot the hatred, and arouse feelings of compassion and love in its place. You shall surely return them to your brother -- when you return his lost object to him, he will already be your brother.

We know that a person often behaves in a certain way because it reflects how he or she feels inside. But the Torah recognizes that the opposite is also true: if a person acts a certain way, then it can cause him or her to feel differently, in a way that is more consonant with the act. The Torah does not say that because you return to someone his lost property, he will love you -- although that is true. Rather, it points out that because you do this, you\_ will come to love him. You gave to him, so you love him. It is a natural thing, and the giving causes the love. The way you behave, the way you dress, the way you speak -- all of these are not merely reflections of how you already feel. They are also tools which can be used to arouse those feelings.

But Rabbeinu Bechaya goes further. We know that even if it is natural for giving to arouse feelings of love towards the person to whom you are giving, it is by no means guaranteed. It is quite possible for a person to say "good, I have a mitzvah -- so I'm giving him his cow. But I still want nothing to do with him!"

It is always possible for person to do a mitzvah as if it had neither meaning nor purpose, and say that he or she has done the mitzvah -- end of story. But one cannot ignore the deeper purpose of the Mitzvos, so many of which are focused upon increasing our concern for our fellow Jews and our fellow human beings. Mitzvos are designed to train a person, to make him or her into a better and

more loving person. The Mitzvah of returning an object is intended to result not merely in the fellow finding his goat! It is supposed to cause reconciliation and love even between two people who were enemies.

And, of course, it doesn't make sense to wait until your neighbor loses his sheep before attempting to resolve your differences. Other ways can be found. One doesn't need to find another Mitzvah to find the opportunity to reconcile -- and in so doing, the person demonstrates that he or she isn't simply trying to perform a ritual, but has focused upon what the Torah is trying to do, the type of person that the Torah is encouraging him or her to be.

We can always look more deeply. If we focus not only upon 613 distinct obligations, but the person the Torah is hoping to produce, then we can use every mitzvah as an opportunity to more closely approximate that ideal.