

STEALING: NOT FOR THE TAKING

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah: All forms of robbery are forbidden as the unlawful taking of another's possession is prohibited (Exodus 21:37; Leviticus 19:11,13).

The crime of stealing is important enough to be included as one of the Seven Noachide Commandments (Sanhedrin 56b). In fact, the decree of annihilation imposed upon the Generation of the Flood was only sealed because of the sin of stealing (Sanhedrin 108a).

However this is a sin where most people falter to varying degrees (Bava Basra 164b). Cheating others, embezzlement, scam insurance claims, tax fraud etc also fall within the category of stealing. In fact, the misappropriating of another's belongings in any shape of form is included within this commandment.

In our essay Hashovas Aveidah: All is not Lost (Mishpatim 5766) we quoted Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Horeb p.243) who describes man's relationship and his assets as follows:

"Property is nothing but the artificially extended body, and body and property together are the realm and sphere of action of the soul."

Every one of man's possessions, like the body, is the medium to reveal the spiritual essence of the person (his soul) into this world. Accordingly, each physical object is an instrument to serve G-d. And to personally use it he must.

In the wider scheme of things, stealing is likened to the thief taking the soul of his victim (Bava Kamma 119a). This is because, in truth, what the bandit is doing is to prevent the rightful owner from using his objects as an extension of his body as the projection of his soul. The thief is murdering that relationship between owner and his asset.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, founder of the Musar Movement, decried the tendency to place greater emphasis upon the laws between man and his Creator and to trample upon the importance of the interpersonal laws. Such thinking is erroneous on man's part. It is related that the Chazon Ish once disbanded a group of Jews waiting to pray in a quorum because it would mean that one of the prayers would be late for an important business meeting.

Quite the contrary; any infraction on the commandments between man and his neighbor negatively impacts upon his subsequent relationship with G-d.

Indeed, thievery smacks of heresy. "No man touches what is set aside for his fellow...even to a hair's

breadth" (Yoma 38b). It is an affront to true belief in an Omnipotent G-d should man think he will not get something - if he is destined to receive it from on High - but only through illegitimate means.

More than that: G-d does not want man to use stolen goods as a means of serving him. Thus it is prohibited to make use of stolen money to acquire a religious artifice such as an estrog or lulav (Mishnah Succah 3:1). It cannot portray the dynamics of a mitzvah - which bring a person close to his Creator.

What stealing does is to destabilize the continual interaction of creatures within the universe. This was the seal for the complete destruction of the Generation of the Flood. It had no remnants and was washed away. What occurs where stealing is rife is that there no respect is accorded for the property of another - and there is a lack of faith that man's assets are precious instrument of potential holiness - that their exclusive purpose is to be used by the owner in the service of G-d.

What each one of us must realize is to use our existing property to its fullest and that another's belongings are "not for the taking". Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and **Torah.org**.