

ELUL – IT'S ALL RELATIVE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Do not see the ox or the sheep of your brother wandering - and avoid them - rather you must surely return them to your brother. And if your brother is not close by to you, or you don't know him, you shall gather it into your house, and it shall remain with you until your brother comes to claim it - then you shall return it to him. (22:1-2)

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 30a) notes the strange wording of the first verse above, "Do not see... and avoid..." The Torah could simply have said, "Do not avoid!" From this the Gemara derives that there are times when it is permissible for the finder of a lost object to avoid it, such as an old man for whom collecting the lost object would put him in an embarrassing or inappropriate situation, or a Kohein if gathering the object would require him to enter a cemetery and ritually defile himself. For such cases, the Torah alludes, and he [may] avoid them.

Once, the renowned tzaddik and Torah giant Rabbi Akiva Eiger zt"l, the rav of Pozen, travelled to Warsaw. While there, he made a point of looking up a distant cousin whom he hadn't seen or heard from in many years. This wasn't easy because the cousin was a bit of a recluse, and it took a while to even find him. Still, after persisting, R' Akiva Eiger managed to locate his relative and made arrangements to pay him a visit.

Though eccentric, the cousin was no fool and realized what an honor it was to have such a guest in his home. They spoke at length. Even when R' Akiva Eiger's gabbaim (attendants) motioned to him that there were other things to arrange he took no notice, and continued to sit with his cousin and chat as if there were nothing else on his mind. As a result, he ended up missing a number of pressing appointments.

His gabbaim were annoyed and a little perplexed. After all, the cousin was of little significance, and it was clear to all present that their conversation was not at all enlightening and rather unstimulating. R' Akiva Eiger picked up on their agitation, and preempted the question.

"You're wondering why I spent so much time talking to my cousin when there were many other important things to take care of... But in fact, you are wrong - there was nothing as important on my agenda as spending time with my cousin, my flesh and blood.

"The Gemara derives from the wording [of the above passage] "and avoid [Heb. ve-hisalamta, and hide yourself from] them" that in rare circumstances it is appropriate to avoid a lost item, notwithstanding the extreme importance the Torah attaches to returning lost objects. But regarding

one's relatives, the prophet Yeshaya says (58:7): 'And from your flesh, do not hide yourself!' Unlike in the above passage, there's no dispensation for the elderly or learned. So, you see, in the face of spending time with my family, there really is nothing more important."

Elul is a month during which, to the best of our ability, we are meant to spend time on introspection, thinking about the areas in our lives that need more attention and coming up with a game plan to address at least some of our shortcomings. Of course, from the above story it emerges that it would be foolish to become so immersed in self-scrutiny as to neglect paying attention to our families, particularly children who often need extra attention during what for them is notably the beginning of a new academic year.

But there's more. Chazal, our Sages, say (Sanhedrin 9b), "Adam karov etel atzmo/man is his own closest relative." If we're forbidden to neglect our familial relationships, even the more distant ones, how much more so must we be careful not neglect our closest relative of all - our neshama - and not allow it to pass through these precious weeks undernourished and lacking true care.

The word for relative, karov, is also the word the Torah uses when describing the process of teshuva/repentance (Devarim/Deuteronomy 30:14):

For this mitzvah (according to some commentaries this refers to the mitzvah of teshuva), which I command you today, isn't hidden from you, nor is it far away... For the matter is close (karov) to you, in your mouth and in your heart...

To succeed in teshuva, we have to treat it like R' Akiva Eiger treated his relative, with respect and with great attentiveness. At times, we may even become so focused on our relative (neshama) that we miss out on other important (and not so important) things (business, news, leisure activities). That's ok too - everything takes backstage for our own flesh and blood. Have a good Shabbos.

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