

Parashat Ki Tetze

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On Leadership, Responsibility and Neglect

Parashat Ki Tetze is flush with positive commandments, one of which is the mitzvah to return lost property: “You shall not see your brother's ox or sheep straying, and ignore them. [Rather,] you shall return them to your brother ... So shall you do with his donkey, and so shall you do with his garment, and so shall you do with any lost article of your brother which he has lost and you have found. You shall not ignore [it].”

Rabbeinu Bahya emphasizes that the commandment “you shall not ignore it” relates to all of the mitzvot and not only to the mitzvah to return lost property: “The same is true with regard to all other matters and benefits that a person has the opportunity to return to his fellow or to remove and suspend any damage from him, for he is obligated to do all of these.”

This explanation is meant to justify the difficulty in the words “you shall not ignore it,” which at first glance would appear redundant. Since the Torah nevertheless chooses to emphasize this phrase, we must try and understand whether it is meant as a command to act or simply as a moral call for awareness.

Rashi explained the verse in its simple form, i.e. that “ignore” means to “cover your eyes, pretending not to see it.” On the other hand, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that “you are not authorized to remove the yoke of this commandment from yourself, and you shall not be able to exempt yourself from it at will,” or, in other words, this phrase is meant as a moral call for awareness.

Sefat Emet takes a different approach and states that this verse voices a recommendation that man should train himself not to ignore his fellow or his fellow's property or needs: “we must explain that when a person trains himself not to ignore his fellow's loss, both physical and spiritual, he shall have the strength and power to assist and restore said fellow.”

In this sense, it would appear that the Sefat Emet combines both elements, the command and the moral directive. In this way, a person expresses solidarity and commitment while heading off neglect and human indifference. A person who ignores his fellow or his fellow's needs cannot see beyond his own personal horizon. It is for this reason that we are charged with developing a sensitivity that will not allow for the neglect of others.

The end of the parasha, the commandment to wipe out the memory of Amalek, is tied to the same concept. Amalek was able to take advantage of the “weak and the stragglers” only because of the indifference of those who were walking ahead. There were two events that took place at that time at Rephidim. The first was: “The entire community of the children of Israel journeyed from the desert of Sin to their travels by the mandate of Hashem. They encamped in Rephidim and there was no water for the people to drink.” The second was: “Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim.” Rashi *ad loc* explains the juxtaposition of the two events by relating that when the

people were thirsting for water and haranguing Moshe as a result, Hashem said to Moshe: “Pass before the people ... Behold, I shall stand there before you on the rock in Horev, and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, and the people will drink; Moshe did so before the eyes of the elders of Israel.”

How did the waters from the rock reach the Israelites, who at that time were camped at Rephidim? According to Ramban (Nahmanides), the Israelites sent their children and cattle to Horev to draw from the water and bring it back to the thirsty people. Ramban, however, continues and states that there was a stream that connected the rock at Horev and the camp at Rephidim and the water from the rock flowed down that stream until it reached Rephidim. When the Israelites realized that there was water in the stream, they began to run toward the water. Naturally, the younger generation, which was healthier and more robust than the elder generation, was the first to reach the water. The elderly, crippled, women and children were left behind. The fast and healthy thought only of their own thirst and did not stop to consider the weak and the sick that fell behind. They neglected the commandment that “you shall not ignore.” Amalek, which was encamped at Rephidim as well, noticed the schism that was created within the nation as a result of the behavior of the youth at the stream and took advantage: “and cut off all the stragglers at your rear.”

If only the younger generation had demonstrated basic solidarity and not ignored its elders, women and children, Amalek would not have had the wherewithal to do battle with Israel. It follows then that when it comes to leadership, responsibility goes hand in hand with strength and fortitude. When there is no care for the sick and the weak, there is no solidarity, which leads to schism.

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