

## **This Week in Torah *Kei Titsei***

Preparing for the High Holidays requires a lot of spiritual and emotional work. The rabbis and Biblical commentators knew that as they read the weekly *parshiyot* leading up to them with that special lens. Take for example a line from our *sedra*, Deuteronomy 22:1 states: “You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep go astray, and withhold your help from them; you shall take them back to your brother.” Simple proclamation or a decree—you see it, you return it. In fact the verb to return is heightened by its root being used as an adverb—*hashev tashivem*, you will CERTAINLY return it. But not so when you read it with a lens toward your *teshuvah*, repentance.

18<sup>th</sup> century Chasidic sage Rabbi Ya’akov Yosef saw the repeating of the verb as a signal for acknowledgement. The first time the verb is used as an adverb, he believed that it called for a person to do some personal *teshuvah*/repenting. He believed [and accurately so, I might add] that when a person stumbles on someone’s lost property, they might try to ignore it. Maybe they didn’t want to get involved. Maybe they didn’t want to take the time to find/return the lost property. Indirectly or overtly, they shied away from performing a *mitzvah*. You will want to have nothing to do with these lonely, broken, wayward souls, says the Rebbe. They will make you feel uncomfortable. They will make you feel threatened. You will want to distance yourself and look away. He added the second one was an act of humility—returning with words of “I’m sorry” shows empathy for their pain.

R. Ya’akov Yosef noted that taking account of others who are adrift is a practice. One must “habituate oneself” [in Hebrew, it is *hashavat aveidah* --that is his phrase; I love it!] to this, averse as we naturally are to seeing what we would rather not see, whether it be physical infirmity or spiritual deficiency. Also, it is hard to be keenly conscious of absence, of who or what is missing. We need to actively cultivate an ability to truly see other people, with all of their holes, and to see who/what is missing from the whole. Then, says Rabbi Ya’akov Yosef, we might be able to truly see ourselves. When we are willing to notice and compassionately join in other people’s fallibility, we will learn to recognize all that is amiss within. The apex of *hashavat aveidah*, then, the cultivated practice of returning that which has gone astray, is when we can stop ignoring that

which has come undone within ourselves and begin to repair it. "*Hashev tshivem*," says the verse. Return to yourself.

During this Elul season of teshuva, the charge to return all that has been lost resounds loudly. To all the people who have become "*nidachim*"—remote or rejected or just unmoored: It is time to come home. We take responsibility for your wanderings and want you back. And to all that is broken, lost, awry within us: Let us make space to heal, to re-center, to return, and to be found.