

Good Shabbos, everyone.

I want to thank Fred Minsk for sponsoring today's drasha in honor of his wife, Paula's, special birthday. Wishing Paula many more happy and healthy birthdays, much continued blessing and celebration!

As we are all aware, there is a lot of chaos and confusion and unrest in the world. It is scary to see pictures of the University of Delaware Chabad burning this week in a suspected arson attack. It is scary to see riots and looting in many American cities, most recently Kenosha, Wisconsin. And meanwhile, the Covid19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc throughout the world. When there are existential threats, turmoil, and madness, we tend to focus inward and protect ourselves, but our *parsha* teaches a profound lesson about dealing with times of crisis.

Parshas Ki Setzei begins with *mitzvos* related to war, a time of chaos and crisis.

כי תצא למלחמה על אויבך...

and then it abruptly transitions to *hashavas aveida*--the obligation to return a lost object.

(א) לא תראה את שור אחיך או את שיו נדחים והתעלמת מהם השב תשיבם לאחריך:

Why is the *mitzvah* of *hashavas aveida* mentioned specifically in context of war?

The **Ibn Ezra**, in a rare example of *drush* in his commentary, suggests that returning a lost object must be analyzed specifically in the context of the opening of this week's *sidra*, which describes the Jewish army going out to war. The Ibn Ezra maintains that this subtle association informs us that the obligation to return a lost object applies **even** during wartime.

אבן עזרא דברים פרק כב פסוק א

(א) לא תראה את שור - אפילו אתה יוצא למלחמה, וזה דרך דרש.

Why?

I believe there is a very powerful lesson to be learned from the Ibn Ezra's observation.

The **Sefer Hachinuch** explains the reason for *hashavas aveida* as follows:

ספר החינוך מצוה תקלח ד"ה שורש מצוה

שורש מצוה זו ידוע, כי יש בזה תועלת הכל וישוב המדינה. שהשכחה בכל היא מצויה, גם בהמתם וכל חייתם בורחים תמיד הנה והנה, ועם המצוה הזאת שהיא בעמנו יהיו נשמרות הבהמות והכלים בכל מקום שיהיו בארצנו הקדושה כאילו הן תחת יד הבעלים, וכל פקודי ה' ישרים משמחי לב.

The Torah envisions building a society where each person feels like the entire land is their home, where every citizen is like a member of an extended family. In such a situation, everyone's belongings are safe wherever they may end up. Everyone knows that their property is under the watchful control and protection of someone who cares. If you leave your wallet in your brother or sister's house, you fully expect to get it back with all of its contents intact.

This *mitzva* offers a perspective on communal responsibility—where people are so invested in each other that “your loss is my loss—your challenge is my challenge.” Returning a lost object, helping others in need, is the far reaching extension of the Torah's golden rule “do unto others as you would want done to yourself.”

Traditionally, the first *perek* of *Mishna* taught in school is *Perek Elu Metzios*--the halachos of lost objects. I once heard that when many American Rabbis wanted to change to a topic that was

more relatable, like Brachos, **Rav Moshe Feinstein** insisted that the minhag be continued. He said that there is a reason that our *mesorah* chose this *Perek*.

I would like to suggest a possible reason; that one of the lessons in starting with *Elu Metzios*, is to make sure children know and appreciate, from the beginning, that they are part of a larger community. And being part of a community comes with the responsibility of looking out for others and the benefit of knowing that someone is looking out for you.

Similarly, the **Ramchal** in his introduction to *Mesilas Yesharim* explains that the ideal character is expressed by *midos* which bring about two desired effects--strengthening of Torah values and unifying of the community.

ספר מסילת ישרים הקדמה
ההליכה בדרכיו כולל כל ענין יושר המדות ותקונם... כל ההולך אל תכלית הטובה האמיתית, דהיינו, שתולדתה חזוק התורה ותקון אחוות המדינות.

Let me interrupt the drasha at this point to make a pitch for our new *Mesilas Yesharim* podcast. Each weekday, I record a short podcast (about 5 minutes). A link to the podcast is included in each weekday's shul announcements and there is also a WhatsApp group. I encourage everyone to join!

So, getting back to the Ibn Ezra, what is the connection between *hashavas aveida* and war?

During wartime, people understandably focus on their personal survival—on staying alive. The Torah is reminding us that we must always remember that our lives are not just about personal survival, but also about our place in the larger community. We must always bind our personal fate to the community's fate. When we are fighting for survival in the here and now, we may lose sight of the deeper, more lasting, reason for our lives. Ultimately, what we are living for, and what we are fighting for, is the continuity of the Jewish people.

In our daily lives and daily routines, there is so much we need to do and think about to survive and thrive that we may lose sight of the rest of the community. This is especially true with everything going on now, in the country and the world. And this is even more true during *Chodesh Elul*, leading towards the *Yamim Noraim*. In the month of Elul, we tend to become even more focused than usual on ourselves. We are literally at war; consumed with questions of our fate, fighting for survival, dealing with existential questions:

מי יחיה ומי ימות

Who will live and who will die?

Who will have good health?

Who will have parnassah?

One well-known acronym usually associated with Elul is very much focused on oneself and one's relationship with Hashem.

אלול—אני לדודי ודודי לי

But a **second** acronym associated with Elul is איש לרעהו ומתנות לאביונים

This *pasuk* from *Megilas Esther* serves as the basis for the Rabbinic commandment to celebrate our salvation on Purim by reaching out to others in two ways. *Shalach manos* are intended to

foster and strengthen friendships, and *matanos l'evyonim* are intended to make sure that even the least fortunate among us can properly celebrate the holiday.

Returning to *hashavas aveida*, this mitzvah reminds us that—even when we are in a war, fighting for our survival—we must always remember that we are part of something much larger than ourselves—the larger Jewish community. Our responsibility is to focus on the needs of others, especially at this time of “war.”

I once heard from someone who posed a question to **Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel**, the late Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva, “what should we be thinking about during our tefillos? His answer was two simple words “**someone else.**”

But this raises the question: We may be able to do this in normal, tranquil times, but how can we be expected to think like this during war?

One phrase in the *parsha* of *hashavas aveida* helps answer that question.

דברים פרק כב

(ג) וְכִן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְחַמְרֹךְ וְכִן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְשִׁמְלֹתֶיךָ וְכִן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל-אֲבֵנֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר-תִּאֱבָד מִמֶּנּוּ וּמִצְאָתָהּ לֹא תִוָּכַל לְהִתְעַלֵּם: ס
לא תוכל להתעלם... you cannot ignore...

The *pasuk* could have conveyed this thought by saying לא תתעלם, or אסור להתעלם--do not ignore, or it is prohibited to ignore...

Instead, it says “לא תוכל”—you **cannot** ignore...

שפת אמת דברים פרשת כי תצא

לא תוכל להתעלם שצריך להיות שלא יוכל לסבול ולהתעלם...

The **Sefas Emes** writes that our connection to each other must be so deeply ingrained in us that we cannot ignore it. That when we see someone else’s object, our natural instinct will be to watch it. That when we see someone in need, our natural instinct will be to help.

There is a beautiful story about **Rav Avrohom Pam**, the former Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vadaas. A young child found a \$5 bill and asked whether she could keep it. Rabbi Pam told the child to wait a day before considering it hers. He asked her, “How can we enjoy something special when there is someone out there who is broken-hearted about losing that \$5 bill?”

Thus, the *mitzvah* of *hashavas aveida* becomes a mandate to make sure that we think about others—always! That we accept responsibility for others. That we see it as our sacred duty as members of the community. It is about including others in our sense of self; to expand our identity to include others.

People often approach me with ideas or suggestions to improve the community---as if the community is separate from them. They’ll say “the community” needs to do this or that. I gently remind them that they are “the community.” And if they want to see change, they must commit to be a part of the change. They must take responsibility for building their community.

This is something the Torah highlights in the end of last week’s *parsha*, in the section of the *egla arufa*. The Torah teaches that if a corpse is found lying in open country, and the murderer is unknown, the elders of the town nearest the body take a young calf down to the nearest river and break its neck there. All the elders of that town declare:

(ז) וענו ואמרו ידינו לא שפכו את הדם הזה ועינינו לא ראו:

"Our hands did not shed this blood, nor were we witnesses to it.

Isn't this a strange requirement? After learning of an unsolved murder near their city, with no suspects, the elders must declare their own innocence?! Would we have thought that these respected leaders committed a murder? Are they really on the list of suspects?

The Talmud Yerushalmi and Talmud Bavli offer fascinating—but contrasting—explanations for this declaration. In the **Yerushalmi** (Sota 9:6), the Rabbis explain that the elders are denying any culpability in terms of the **murderer**. They are declaring: the perpetrator did not come into our hands and we mistakenly freed him. We did not see him committing a crime and fail to bring him to justice. In essence, they are declaring that a weakness in their justice system did not cause this murder; **the justice system is functioning properly in our city.**

The Talmud Bavli takes a different approach, shifting the focus from the **justice system** and the **murderer** to the city's **social services** and the **victim**.

The **Bavli Sotah** (38b) explains:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה דף לח עמוד ב
אין עגלה ערופה באה אלא בשביל צרי העין, שנאמר: +דברים כא+ וענו ואמרו ידינו לא שפכו את הדם הזה, וכי על לבנו עלתה שזקני ב"ד שופכי דמים הם? אלא, לא בא לידינו ופטרנוהו ולא ראינוהו והנחנוהו, לא בא לידנו ופטרנוהו בלא מזונות, לא ראינוהו והנחנוהו בלא לוייה.

R. Yehoshua' ben Levi says: the *eglah arufah* comes only on account of unfriendliness, as it says: "they shall declare: 'Our hands did not shed this blood...' " Would we have thought that the elders of the court are murderers [that they need to declare their innocence]? *Rather, [what they are saying is]: "He did not come to us that we left him without food, he did not come to us for us to leave him without escort."*

The mitzvah of *egla arufa* conveys an important message---that we must see ourselves as part of a community---with responsibilities. That when something happens, we must turn inward and ask the difficult question—did we do enough to prevent this?

The leaders are expected to care about everyone in their community. They are expected to model the principle of לא תוכל להתעלם, to be people who **cannot** look away when others are suffering, to be people who feel a sense of responsibility to everything that happens in their sphere of influence. Everyone must take responsibility for their own community.

We all must ask ourselves: Am I doing enough for others? Is there more I can do?

In this month of Elul, we must think of all those who have been experiencing painful loneliness for so long, people who cannot be in shul, people who have been home bound for so long, and reach out and see if we can help. May we spend the rest of this month strengthening our connection to one another, and may we see the day when the entire Jewish community will stand together as an אגודה אחת, serving Hashem in a rebuilt *Beis Hamikdash*, *bimhera viyamenu*, amen.