

Parshat Naso 5779

“And if the person has no redeemer to return the money to, the money that should be returned to Hashem goes to the Cohen.” (Bamidbar 5:5)

The Torah teaches in our parasha the law of a thief who swears falsely that he didn't steal, and then subsequently decides to admit his crime. He must bring an *asham* sacrifice and return the stolen money together with an additional fifth as recompense. In fact, the Torah has already taught this law in parashat Vayikra and Rashi tells us that it is repeated here to teach two new things: the need to make a verbal confession (*vidui*), and the particular case of *gezel ha-ger*.

What is *gezel ha-ger*? If the victim dies before the money is returned, then normally the thief should return the stolen money to their heirs. However, if the victim has no heir (called a “redeemer” here in the Torah) then the money should be returned to Hashem; but in His stead it is given to the Cohen.

But how can a person have no heirs? As Rashi says here quoting the Gemara in Bava Kamma “Can there be any Jew who has no heirs? A son, or a daughter, or a relative on his father's side somewhere all the way back to Yaakov? So it must be talking about a convert who did not have any children”. That is, everyone has a relative, however distant that may be. But when a ger converts, they lose all familial relationships, and so the only relatives they could possibly have are their children. If they never had any children then they are completely heir-less. And as the Sforno then explains, if there is no owner to return the money to, then it belongs to the ultimate owner – Hashem. It is then given to the Cohanim as His representatives.

R David Silverberg explains that this teaches us a strong moral lesson – even when it appears that we have no “relatives”, that we have nobody close to us, we in fact have, at very least, the Almighty, who is “close to all who call to Him, to all call to Him honestly” (Tehillim 145:18). We are really never alone; we can always turn to Hashem in our times of need and fear, and He is always ready to assume the place of a close friend or loving family member.

He goes on to say that if a convert died without leaving any children, then, most likely, they converted when they were older and no longer able to have children. So the case of *gezel ha-ger* involves theft from an older person who does not have to support a family, and who probably never managed to work their way into the fabric of the

community. Someone who steals from such an individual, even if they subsequently regret the crime, may not experience serious pangs of conscience, or feel a need to correct their misdeed, as the consequences of the theft seem minimal. The Torah, however, teaches that even a person without any family or close friends is still a beloved servant of Hashem. Causing harm to anybody constitutes a direct affront to Hashem, who loves and cherishes all His servants, and so even if the victim is no longer alive and leaves behind no family members, the perpetrator must make amends, as it were, to Hashem.

He compares this to the story of Miriam's punishment for speaking disparagingly of her brother, Moshe. After telling of Miriam's inappropriate remarks, the Torah says that Moshe was very humble, and several commentators explain that this emphasizes that Moshe experienced no harm as a result of Miriam's comments. In his humility, he was not bothered at all by people's insults. Nevertheless, Miriam was severely punished, because, as Hashem said to her and Aharon, “*Why were you not afraid to speak against My servant, Moshe?*”. Even if they were confident that their offensive remarks would cause no harm to Moshe, such speech was nevertheless forbidden, as he was G-d's servant. Disrespecting Moshe is like disrespecting G-d, and thus Miriam and Aharon were reprimanded despite the fact that the words they spoke had no effect on Moshe.

The law of *gezel ha-ger* teaches us that this is true not only of Moshe Rabbeinu, but of every member of the nation, including those in the outermost social circles. Every Jew deserves respect if for no other reason than their status as the Almighty's beloved servant. Even if the person suffers no harm, or even if the victim has passed on and nobody is left who suffers the consequence of the theft, nevertheless, we must seek atonement from the ultimate Master, to whose cherished servant we have caused harm.

This is also one of the main lessons of Megillat Rut, where Boaz, the leader of the generation, showed such kindness and compassion to the destitute Moabite Rut who had taken the decision to leave her father and mother, and her homeland to join a people that she didn't know, just as Avraham Avinu had done so many hundreds of years earlier. And as the megilla shows, Boaz's tremendous show of *chesed* ultimately led to the birth of David, and will ultimately lead to the Moshiach.

Please join us in celebrating the Barmitzvah of our Boaz this Shabbat.