

You shall surely return them to your brother... you shall not hide yourself. (22:1,3)

We wonder why certain *mitzvos* are included in the Torah. Any decent person knows that if he finds an object belonging to someone else, he should proceed to return it to the rightful owner. People, however, are lazy and greedy. We are not often inclined to go out of our way to search for the owner. This is especially true when we find an object of great value, whose owner is not readily identifiable. Thus, between the time involved and the value of the item, the finder rationalizes that he does not have to return the item. A *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*, and convenience does not enter the equation. If one discovers an item belonging to someone, he must return it – regardless of its value and regardless of the trouble involved. The following stories are inspirational, illustrating the value of the *mitzvah* both from an economic and spiritual perspective. There is one other aspect of *hashovas aveidah* which must be underscored, but I will leave that for the conclusion.

A woman went shopping on Rechov Rabbi Akiva in Bnei Brak. As she was about to enter one of the stores, she looked in her purse and almost passed out. An envelope containing five thousand *shekalim* was missing. When she had left the house, she had taken the money along to pay for her shopping expedition. She immediately retraced her steps, visiting every store that she had earlier entered. Nothing, absolutely nothing, had been found. She was devastated, but life goes on. She resigned herself to her loss. Let it be a *kaparah*, atonement, for something bad that could have happened.

One month later, she went shopping again. She looked down at her purse; the clasp was open. When she looked inside her purse to confirm that everything was there, she saw that her wallet was missing! Now what? She returned to the first store that she had visited and approached the manager, "Something is very wrong," she began. "This is the second time that I have gone shopping in this area, and both times I lost a substantial sum of money."

"Giveret," the manager said, "do you have any idea how I have searched for you? Two days after you shopped in this store, I found an envelope with thousands of *shekalim* in the back of the store. Regrettably, the envelope had only a name on the front, no address, no phone number. I have tried to match the name to various phone numbers, with no success. *Baruch Hashem*, you are here, and I am now able to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *hashovas aveidah*, returning a lost object." It just so happened that this occurred on *Erev Yom Kippur*.

The woman opened up the envelope and counted the *shekalim*. Every last *shekel* was there. She attempted to show her appreciation with a reward. The manager flatly refused. This was his *mitzvah*. He was not exchanging it for a few *shekalim*.

Incidentally, let us think about how fortunate the woman was that she had lost her wallet, a loss that made her retrace her steps one month later. By the way, she found her wallet in another one of

the stores.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates the next story. One Friday morning, an individual who for years had *davened* in one of the *shteiblach*, small *shuls*, in Bnei Brak, was in need of a significant sum of money – for a day or two. He had spoken to a number of sources with whom he had done “business” in the past. This time he was not as fortunate. While he was in *shul*, he noticed another *mispallel*, worshipper, with whom he *davened* every day. Veritably, the two had never spoken more than the friendly, “Good morning.” He did not even know the man’s name. When one is up against the wall and a deadline is looming too close for comfort, however, one takes a chance. After all, the worst that could happen is that the man would say “No.”

The individual approached the man following *davening* and asked, “Could you possibly lend me six thousand *shekel* until Sunday morning?” The man looked at him and started thinking. It was obvious that this was not a sum the individual could go to the bank and withdraw. He probably had a steady fixed income from which he lived. If, for some reason, he would not be reimbursed on Sunday, he would be in serious trouble. A few moments went by and he said, “Yes.”

The borrower wrote out an IOU and affixed his name to the promissory note to be paid back on Sunday morning. The borrower was unsure of the lender’s name, so he simply did not fill it in. Sunday morning, the borrower promptly paid back the loan, to the apparent joy of the lender. When the borrower asked why he was so joyful, the lender replied that on Friday he had lost his wallet. Inside was some small cash and a few credit cards. Had he not lent him the six thousand *shekel*, he might have lost that too! This is why he was so happy. Performing a *mitzvah* of lending a fellow Jew money had saved him from losing six thousand *shekel*.

Sounds like the end of the story? No, there is more. That Sunday afternoon the lender received a phone call from an individual who was simply an honest, fine Jew. Apparently, he discovered a wallet on Friday while riding the bus, but there was no identification in the wallet. It had in it a few hundred *shekel* and some credit cards. No phone number or address, not a full name. There was something, however, in the wallet – a promissory note signed by the borrower with his name, address and phone number! As a result of the lender’s *mitzvah*, not only did he not lose his six thousand *shekel*, he was able to retrieve his wallet. We think that by performing an act of *chesed*, kindness, we are helping the beneficiary. We do not realize that it is us – the benefactor – whom we are really helping!

Since we are addressing the *mitzvah* of returning lost objects, perhaps this would be the proper venue for discussing the return of a most critical lost object: Jewish souls. When we meet a Jew estranged from Jewish observance, is he or she any different than coming across a lost object? In a way, he or she is worse off. The lost object at least has an owner who is searching for it and awaiting its return. Can we say the same emotion applies to the lost Jewish soul? How can a person search for something that he is unaware he has lost?

The Torah exhorts us, *Lo suchal l'hisaleim*, "You shall not hide yourself." This *pasuk* addresses the one who sees a lost article, but does not want to get involved in returning it to its rightful owner, because it is a pain. It will take up his time and energy, and he simply has more important things to do with his life. The Torah's response is: You do not have anything more important to do than helping out your fellow Jew. Is it any different with the many alienated Jews whom we come across in the course of our daily endeavor? What about the many boys and girls who used to be *frum*, observant, Jews, and today are no longer? Perhaps it is difficult for some to get involved, but how many are willing to help those who do get involved? One last question: There are those who are not personally up to reaching out. There are those who find it difficult to help others who are doing a fine job of sacrificing themselves to reach out to those who need it. What excuse is there for those who not only refuse to do anything themselves, but stand in the way of those who do; who make light of their efforts and disdain their meager successes? *Hasheiv teshiveim l'achecha*, "You shall surely return them to your brother." Is their lost object any different?