

# Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Ki Seitzei

“YOU SHOULD NOT SEE THE OX OF YOUR BROTHER OR HIS LAMB LOST, AND HIDE FROM THEM, SURELY YOU SHALL RETURN THEM TO YOUR BROTHER.” (DEVARIM 2:1)

**Imagine the tumult and confusion as soldiers leave their families**

THE TORAH COMMANDS US to return a lost ox or lamb, upon sighting them, to their owner, and warns us not to act as if we never saw the animal and continue on our way. The Ibn Ezra (ibid.) points out that this obligation applies even when one is going to war. Imagine the tumult and confusion as soldiers leave their families and rush, dressed in battle gear, to the front. How could one be expected to notice that a lost lamb is grazing by the side of the road? Shouldn't the Torah excuse someone acting under such pressured and hectic circumstances from the performance of this mitzvah?

By obligating us with this commandment, even when we are on the way to battle, the Torah is testifying that we have the capability to notice the needs of our friend and his property, even in the most trying of times. Our minds may be preoccupied with our own survival; nevertheless we can, and must, be conscious of our neighbor's needs at all times. An example of this constant awareness can easily be found: The mother of a large family spends the day cooking, cleaning, shopping and perhaps even holding down a job. As her last child is put to bed and her final chore is finished, she falls, exhausted, into a deep sleep. Not a noise in the world could rouse her – except for the sound of her baby crying softly in a distant bedroom. This level of continuous sensitivity to the needs of others must be our goal.

**He begins by studying the laws of torts**

When a child starts learning Gemara, he begins by studying the laws of torts, property and contracts. Instead of spending hours discussing the unlikely case of two people simultaneously finding and grabbing a *talis* or the case of one person's ox goring another's, why not teach them the seemingly more relevant laws of Shabbos or Pesach? The Vilna Gaon answers this question: When the budding talmudist sees page after page discussing every intricacy of every possible case that deals with another person and his property, he realizes the concern the Torah wants us to have for others. By beginning with these topics we are trying to transmit those feelings of caring and concern to every *cheder* child.

**He would have become more aware of the people around him, not less aware**

Reb Yisroel Salanter founded a campaign to stress the learning of *mussar* after a specific incident: One day, before Yom Kippur, Reb Yisroel passed a very pious and learned man who was deep in thought contemplating the seriousness of the moment. Reb Yisroel asked the man for the time but the man continued walking, totally oblivious to Reb Yisroel and his inquiry. Reb Yisroel felt the man was unjustified in his neglect of a *chesed* – kindness. Had this man been involved in reflecting on *teshuva* – repentance – and self-betterment properly, he would have become more aware of the people around him who needed his help, not less aware.

With Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur almost upon us, we must learn the lesson Reb Yisroel Salanter spent the rest of his life teaching. The manner in which we act toward others is the ultimate manifestation of our religiosity and our love of Hashem. Upgrading our level of *chesed* must be the first step on our road to Yom Kippur and *teshuva*.