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When “Minor” is “Major”

We know that there are Mitzvot between Man and God and between Man and Man. In essence, of course, all Mitzvot fall into the first group, for by observing the Mitzvot that bind us together and strengthen society, we are, in effect, fulfilling the word of God.

Moreover, created in the image of God, we are to emulate Hashem’s attributes: For example, as Hashem is merciful, so we should be merciful. Further, when we consider that within our breast is a beating Neshamah, we begin to appreciate that consideration for the other is more than a humanitarian gesture. Every act of kindness is a stepping stone to the perfection of the world.

Some posit that the basic building blocks of Torah observance are the “major” Mitzvot like Shabbat and Kashrut. But what of the “minor” Mitzvot in our Parsha, such as returning a lost object, relieving beasts of burden, or desisting from using sources of a person’s living as loan collateral?

Perhaps our humanistic tendencies might have induced us to arrive at these laws. But we should always bear in mind, for instance, what the National Socialist Workers’ (NAZI) Party was capable of perpetrating in the name of “the common good.”

Of interest, the laws of lost property, relief of beasts of burden, and mutual help were previously recorded in Parshat Mishpatim (e.g., Sh’mot 23:5). Notably, they referred to assisting “your enemy” or “the one you hate,” such that, according to Yehudah Muriel, the laws would help people overcome their egoistic tendencies to desist from helping.

However, in our Parshah, we are urged to assist “*Achicha*” – ‘your brother’ – no less than six times within four *pesukim* (Devarim 22:1-4). Following the Ohr Hachayim, “*Achicha*” is the highest form of connotation accorded to individuals, such that those we help should be held in the highest esteem, regardless of their actual status.

Following the Sefer Hachinuch, the seemingly “minor” Mitzvah of returning lost property is a binding force in society. For knowing that our property rights are the concern of every citizen – and that individuals make a sincere effort to return lost items as if they were their own – raises the collective to the highest ethical and moral heights.

No wonder, then, that Rabbi said: “Be heedful of a light precept as of a grave one for you do not know the grant of reward for each precept (Pirkei Avot 2:1). ■

Shabbat Shalom!

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