

Parashat Ki Teitzei

Question: What do we owe a problem simply because we've noticed it?

Torah Text: Deuteronomy 22:1-3

לֹא-תִרְאֶה אֶת-שׁוֹר אֲחִיךָ אוֹ אֶת-שֵׂיוֹ נִדְחִים וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ מֵהֶם הֲשִׁיב תְּשִׁיבָם לְאֲחִיךָ:

If you see your fellow Israelite's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your peer.

וְאִם-לֹא קָרֹב אֲחִיךָ אֵלֶיךָ וְלֹא יָדַעְתָּ וְנִסַּפְתּוֹ אֶל-תּוֹךְ בֵּיתְךָ וְהָיָה עִמָּךְ עַד דִּרְשׁ אֲחִיךָ אֹתוֹ וְהֵשַׁבְתּוֹ לּוֹ:

If your fellow Israelite does not live near you or you do not know who [the owner] is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your peer claims it; then you shall give it back.

וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְחֻמְרוֹ וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְשִׂמְלָתוֹ וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל-אֲבִדַת אֲחִיךָ אֲשֶׁר-תִּאֱבָד מִמֶּנּוּ וּמֵאֲתָתָה לֹא תִוָּכַל לְהִתְעַלֵּם:

You shall do the same with their donkey; you shall do the same with their garment; and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow Israelite loses and you find: **you must not remain indifferent.**

Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"

[1817-1862, United States]

It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders.

Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* III:40

[1138-1204, Spain/Egypt]

The object of the law of restoring lost property to its owner is obvious. In the first instance, it is in itself a good feature in man's character. Secondly, its benefit is mutual; for if a person does not return the lost property of his fellow-man, nobody will restore to him what he may lose.

Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"

[Contemporary, Australia/United States]

If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. Physical distance and the presence of other potential helpers don't fundamentally diminish the obligation. Rather, modern knowledge itself becomes demanding: once we know that suffering exists and possess the means to reduce it, geographical remoteness offers little moral protection.

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 32a

[500 CE, Babylonia]

Two people were walking on a journey, and one of them had a jug of water. If both drink, they will both die; but if one of them drinks, he will reach civilization. Ben Petura taught: It is preferable that both of them drink and die, and let neither one of them see the death of the other. Until Rabbi Akiva came and taught: “And your brother shall live with you”... your life takes precedence over the life of the other.

Rabbi Shlomo Katz, *How do I know that I’ve grown?* (2021)

[Contemporary, Israel]

One need not turn another person’s suffering into an obligation to absorb that person’s burden or neglect one’s own needs. The first step is simply to open your eyes. All you need to do is see.

Rabbi Josh Feigelson, *What Do We Choose to Ignore* (2023)

[Contemporary, United States]

Our ignoring, our ignorance, isn’t necessarily passive. Often it’s a willful choice. Sometimes we’re not consciously deciding to avert our eyes. Things can hover just below our conscious awareness until something causes us finally to recognize what has been in front of us all along. In that spirit, the Torah requires us not merely to refrain from deliberate blindness but to actively become more aware. Noticing isn’t merely the event that creates responsibility; developing the capacity to notice is itself part of the responsibility.

Paul Bloom, “Against Empathy”

[Contemporary, Canada/United States]

Empathy is biased; we are more prone to feel empathy for attractive people and for those who look like us or share our ethnic or national background. And empathy is narrow; it connects us to particular individuals, real or imagined, but is insensitive to numerical differences and statistical data.

Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, *Ethical Existence is in the Details* (2025)

[Contemporary, United States/Israel]

Communal cohesion depends upon ethical co-responsibility. The command to return the wandering animal demonstrates that the neighbor’s property must be guarded with the seriousness with which one guards one’s own. These apparently small acts aren’t merely individual good deeds; they are part of what prevents communal life from descending into ethical chaos.

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 30a

[500 CE, Babylonia]

There are occasions in which you may disregard a lost item, and there are occasions in which you may not disregard it.

Rebecca Solnit, “Hope in the Dark”

[Contemporary, United States]

Well, I use hope. And by hope I mean a kind of positive engagement with uncertainty. Optimism thinks everything will be fine no matter what we do and gets us off the hook. Just as pessimism says it's all going to hell no matter what we do, which equally gets us off the hook. And I want to leave us on the hook where we have some responsibility, because we have some power, because we don't know what's going to happen, so let's see if we can shape it.

Kohelet 11:4-6

Whoever watches the wind will not sow, and whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. Just as you do not know the path of the wind, or how the bones form in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. Sow your seed in the morning, and in the evening do not let your hand rest, for you do not know which will succeed, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

Pirkei Avot 2:16

[1st-2nd Century, Israel]

It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it. If you have studied much Torah, they give you much reward; and faithful is your Employer to pay you the reward of your labor. And know that the reward of the righteous is in the time to come.