KI TETSE: Walking, with your eyes wide open

By Rabbanit Coty Bittón

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When our oldest son was five, we were fortunate to live in the Jewish quarter in Yerushalayim, the Old City. We used to spend our afternoons together with his three siblings in the park. I remember one time when we were planning to leave the house, and I realized that we had forgotten his tricycle in the park the previous day. My son was obviously very upset. And so was I since we had just bought it for his birthday. We went back to look for it in the park but it wasn't there, and we considered it lost. It was very disappointing!
A couple of days later my husband came home and told my son that they were going for a short trip to town. Although I did not like the idea since our child was already in his pajamas and ready to sleep, I trusted my husband; he told me they would be back soon. Indeed, half an hour later the "three of them were back home: my husband, my son and his tricycle. There are no words to describe my son's happy face!

It happened to be that on his way home my husband read on one of the neighborhood's boards (luach modaot) a note saying that a tricycle was found and that whoever lost it could recover it, by giving a matching description. We took the opportunity to explain to our children about the Mitzva that appears on this week's Perasha, Ki Tetse. It is called "hashabat abeda" , returning a lost object. We all appreciated how wonderful it is when you belong to a society where you know that everybody cares about everybody else!

In any other culture or civilization, you transgress the law

when you steal or damage your fellow's property. And, as long as you don't cause any harm, you are a model citizen. Our Tora demands much more from us. It is not enough to abstain from damaging others. I have to CARE about someone else's property as if it were my own.

If for example, I find a lost object I must take care of it and "find" the owner. In a Jewish society when you find something lost that can be identified (a 10 dollars bill, for example, cannot be "identified"; but a wallet, can), you can not keep it. You have to bother and pick it up, take it home, write the note, post it on the neighborhood's board and be willing to welcome all those who would come and claim for their lost object until someone can identify it (simanim) beyond a reasonable doubt.

In Moreh Nevukhim, Maimonides explains that the primary purpose of this Mitzva is to positively affect the character of the individuals of the Jewish people. The Tora trains us and helps us to develop a degree of sensitivity towards others, which will make us walk with our eyes open to detect the needs of others. Is there anyone here who needs my help? We respect the privacy of others, but we must be careful that this does not lead us to a level of indifference. "It's not my business" should be applied to many privacy issues in the lives of my friends and acquaintances, but not in situations where my assistance is needed. As in the case of hashabat abeda, I have to be willing to offer help, even when it has not been requested.

When we teach our children about this Mitzvah, we train them to be sensitive. "Is your friend sad? Is he going through a difficult time? Ask if you can help." "A new student came to school. Open your eyes, 'see' her. She might be scared or embarrassed. She does not know the teachers or other students. Try to approach her and be her friend."

To fulfill the Mitzvah of *hashabat abeda* you cannot close your eyes and ignore what happens around you. You must develop a special sensitivity to identify the needs of others and be willing to invest your time and effort to help and assist.

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SHABBAT SHALOM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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