



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## DEVARIM > Ki Teitzei

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August 17, 2013

Ki Teitzei

**Lost Souls**



# Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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## ABSTRACT

What responsibility do we have to lost souls? The answer is given to us in this week's Torah portion, where we read about one of the kindest acts a person can do: the mitzvah of *hashovat aveidah*, returning a lost object to its rightful owner. While this is certainly a noble act, is there any deeper significance to this obligation?

Moreover, why does the Torah first cite four examples of lost items – three animals and a garment – when the mitzvah is, as the verse concludes, “so shall you do with every lost thing of your brother”?!

In answering this we discover fascinating facets of our personalities: Which animal do you most resemble? Are you most like the ox? Or a donkey? Or a sheep? All of the above?

The truth is that most of us do have some traits in common with all these animals. And right in this week's Torah reading – in the discussion about returning “lost objects” – we learn how this is so.

Like the ox, a volatile beast, some of us tend to lash out when anything disturbs the tranquility of our mastication or at anything that challenges our stated opinions. Like the donkey, which digs in its heels and coldly disregards all commands, some of us are just as stubborn and just as indifferent to holiness and truth. Like the sheep, which is meek and docile, some of us know the truth and care about the truth, but are too timid to act upon it.

This sermon examines the traits of each of the “lost objects” enumerated in this Torah reading, explains why the Talmud considers the lost sheep the worst of the lot. It then goes on to show how the negative traits of each can be turned around not just to positive ends, but to hasten the coming of the Final Redemption.

## LOST SOULS: THE SIN OF INDIFFERENCE

### 1. Which Animal Do You Resemble? (Humor)

This is a multiple choice question: Which animal do you most resemble? Now, don't laugh. Are you most like the ox? Or the donkey? Or the sheep? Or all of the above?

(The wise guy over there says: None of the above.)

The truth is that most of us do have traits in common with all these animals. Indeed, the Midrash tells us<sup>1</sup> that a human being is a universe in microcosm. In the words of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): the world He put into their hearts.<sup>2</sup> And the mystics teach us how everything in existence can be found within us, and how every element of nature, every creature on land, sea or air, teaches us powerful life lessons.

Right in this week's Torah reading – in a discussion about returning lost objects – we find the clues.

### 2. Lost Objects

This week we read:

You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep go astray and ignore them. You shall return them to your brother ... So shall you do with his donkey, so shall you do with his garment, and so shall you do with every lost thing of your brother. You must not remain indifferent.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 3. Avot d'Rav Noson 31:3.

<sup>2</sup> Kohelet 3:11.

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 22:1-3.

Obviously, the duty to return a lost object to its owner is not limited to oxen, sheep, donkeys and garments, but applies – as the verse states – to “every lost thing of your brother.”

The Talmud explains that the Torah cites these examples because each of them teaches us a different set of laws regarding lost objects. However, while the Talmud deciphers the laws to be derived from “ox,” “donkey” and “garment,” it does not succeed in the case of “sheep.” Indeed, the Talmud itself concludes, “the lost sheep is a difficulty.”<sup>4</sup> The Talmud seems not to know what to make of it.

As we well know the Torah does not waste words. So, the reference to the “sheep” must be significant. But, if the Talmud can’t figure it out, how can we?

Now, the *Zohar* – the chief work of the Kabbalah – tells us that the Torah has both a body and a soul.<sup>5</sup> The “body” of the Torah is its “physical” part – that is, the historical events it recounts and the laws it legislates. But implicit in this body is a “soul,” a mystic dimension in which every story has a sublime analogy and every legal nuance has a spiritual counterpart.

Accordingly, the command to return lost object applies not only to the physical property of one’s brother or sister but to their *spiritual* possessions as well. If you encounter a life gone astray – a confused mind, a dysfunctional heart, a soul that has lost its moral compass or spiritual sensitivity – return it to its owner. You may not remain indifferent to the spiritual plight of a brother or sister any more than you may ignore their lost wallet or purse.

Ah, the curse of indifference. Who has not felt the brunt of complacency? How many problems would be solved or even pre-empted if we only cared and showed true concern – and acted on it?

You know the one where a fellow asks his friend: “What is worse ignorance or apathy?” To which he replies: “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

<sup>4</sup> Talmud, Bava Metzia 27a.

<sup>5</sup> Zohar III 142a.

Indifference is perhaps the greatest sin of all, especially in face of a crime. The Torah therefore responds to this with an emphatic: “You must not remain indifferent.” When you see something lost do not ignore it. *Hashovut aveidah*, returning a lost object, is the ultimate expression of sensitivity to another’s welfare and state of being – both physically and spiritually.

### 3. Four Maladies

Indeed, we can easily discern that the four examples of “lost objects” enumerated by Torah correspond to four prototypical maladies of the human soul. Let us consider them one by one:

The ox is a powerful and volatile beast. When provoked, it is virtually unstoppable. One moment it is grazing quietly; the next, it is a thousand pounds of charging muscle, crashing through everything in its path. And we all know its spiritual cousin in human form – the contrary, opinionated brute who lashes out at anything that disturbs the tranquility of his mastication or at anything that challenges her stated opinions.

The donkey is quite different from the ox. When the donkey rebels against its owner, it doesn’t rage and gore, it digs in its heels and coldly disregards all commands, pleas, and even the blows raining down on its back. Spiritually, the obstinate donkey is worse than the goring ox. The ox at least responds. The fact that it is provoked means that it has been challenged. On the other hand, the donkey’s coldness and indifference signify a greater distance from holiness and truth.<sup>6</sup> And we all know who we are talking about here.

The garment represents an even more noxious spiritual malady. The Hebrew word for garment, *beget*, shares its root with the word *begidah*, meaning “treachery.” The antagonistic ox and the indifferent donkey might resist or ignore their owner, but they do not hide behind a

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<sup>6</sup>Talmud, Shabbat 53a: “A donkey is cold even in the height of summer.”

contrived identity. However, those clad in a garment – in costume and mask – mislead others. Worse yet, they mislead *themselves* as to where their loyalty lies, making it far more difficult for them to own up to their misdeeds and rectify them.

And then there is the sheep – a creature known for its meekness and docility.

#### 4. The Meek (Joke)

And speaking of the meek, let me tell you what happened to poor Mr. Weissenblat, a very meek and mild Jew.

Mr. Weissenblat was on a plane for Israel, in a window seat. Just before take-off, this HUGE redneck sat down beside him. A few minutes later, the plane took off.

All was well. For a while. But then, Mr. Weissenblat realizes that he has to go to the washroom. That wouldn't be a problem, except when he started to get up, he noticed that the redneck was sound asleep.

Mr. Weissenblat, being such a meek man, was afraid to disturb him. So he figured he would hold it in until the large fellow woke up.

But as luck would have it, the guy just kept snoring away, and Mr. Weissenblat was feeling increasingly more uncomfortable. After a while, he started to feel nauseous as well, what from holding it in, combined with the mild turbulence.

He tried and tried to get a grip on, but then "AAARRGGHH!!" he threw up in the redneck's lap. Mercifully the man continued to snore.

Mr. Weissenblat was shaking in his shoes. All he could think of was, "When he wakes up, he is going to kill me!"

Finally, the redneck woke up and looked at the vomit in his lap.

Then he looked over at Mr. Weissenblat who asked with a smile, "Feel better now?"

## 5. The Meek Sheep

As I said ... and then there is the sheep – a creature known for its meekness and docility.

While this might seem a less difficult character trait than the previous three, it is actually the toughest. Those who fight, ignore, or even betray God can come to recognize the truth and rectify their behavior. But you cannot convince sheep of the error of their ways – they *fully agree* with you. You cannot fan the flames of their heart – they are *already fired* with inspiration. They know the truth, they care about the truth, they desire to do what is right – but they are too timid to act. They won't do anything about it.

This is the deeper significance of the Talmud's words, "The lost sheep is a difficulty."

Regarding the "ox," the "donkey" or the "garment," there are ways of dealing with a soul's loss. But what is to be done with the "sheep"? Here the Talmud has no formula, no logistic solution.

Nevertheless, the Torah commands: "Return them to your brother!"

## 6. Recoverable Loss

Every spiritual loss is recoverable, every deficiency can be transformed into a positive force. Consider how it can be so:

An ox run amok is a destructive force, but when properly harnessed and channeled, its passion can be diverted to holy ends, as says King Solomon in the Book of Proverbs, "The might of the ox produces much grain."

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<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 14:4.

The obstinacy of the donkey, properly sublimated, translates into perseverance, tenacity, endurance. Anyone with this quality has the necessary determination to remain true to his or her mission and stay loyal to God in the face of trial and difficulty. As we might recall, on his death bed, Jacob blessed his son Issachar with the endurance of a donkey.

Masks and costumes have their positive uses too. As we are well aware, physicality is itself an act of subterfuge on the part of the soul, who assumes a physical body and identity only to exploit them in order to serve its spiritual goals.

And the meekness of the sheep, no matter how difficult a problem it poses, can also be reclaimed as a virtue. Meekness can be recast as deference to God. Deference to God does not spawn passivity and resignation of the lost sheep but the resolute and uncompromising (even if quiet) activism. This requires that one surrender his or her ego and its encumbrances to do the necessary work as God's partner in repairing the world.

So no matter which animal you most resemble – be it an ox, a donkey or a sheep – there are positive qualities you can bring to repair the world and bring us all that much closer to the Final Redemption. May it come speedily, in our days, Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 49:14.