

Minding your own business is good advice. We can get into conflict when we poke our noses into something that really isn't our concern. Our advice may not be welcome and our feelings can get hurt about something that really wasn't about us. We can even get so distracted worrying over what other people should or shouldn't be doing that we neglect to examine our own lives and take responsibility for those things which are on our own plate. For that reason our tradition has advised us to look after our own behavior, making sure what we are doing is the right thing, and to worry less about judging what others are about.

But in this week's Torah portion, among those many laws that Zachary referenced, there is a commandment that contradicts this general advice.

It comes up in the section concerning returning lost property:

"If you see your neighbor's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it. You must take it back to your neighbor.

If your neighbor doesn't live near you, or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it back to your home and it shall remain with you until it is claimed. Then you shall return it.

The same law applies to a donkey, or a garment, so too shall you do with anything that your neighbor loses and you find it, al tit alem, don't hide yourself."

Under the American "finders keepers, losers weepers" finding lost property is a boon, but under Jewish law, finding something that is lost is a responsibility. You have to seek out the owner, you have to be responsible in taking care of the lost animal or item. Even if it is much later when someone comes to claim it, you must return it.

We had an experience with lost property at Temple just a couple of weeks ago. On Saturday morning, before services started a set of keys was found. When it was clear that no one present had lost it, we realized that someone had gone home Friday night without their keys. But wouldn't they miss them? By Monday morning when no one contacted us about them, we realized we would have to do something more active to help reunite these keys with their owner. That Friday night we had celebrated an aufruf, a special blessing for a couple about to get married. We contacted the bride's mother and she contacted her guests. Sure enough the keys belonged to the groom's mother, who was visiting in the area and thus didn't need her keys to get home that night. She was very grateful as it was a set of multiple keys, and replacing them all would have been a lot of trouble.

In that instance we got the satisfaction of returning something lost, without much effort, but sometimes it can be a bother to really seek out the owner or to care for the lost animal in the meanwhile. For that reason the commandment ends with the unusual words- al titalem. Often it is translated, don't ignore it, don't remain indifferent. Literally, it is a reflexive verb, don't hide yourself from it. Rashi translates and instructs, "don't subdue your eyes, as if you saw nothing". It might be tempting to walk by without noticing, and who could accuse you of anything? It would be like someone being bullied in your presence, and your pretending you weren't listening, or didn't notice, you could just say, sorry, I didn't see it.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, goes so far as to recognize this behavior in the films he saw of his mother's home town Esslingen, near Stuttgart in Germany, where on the morning after Kristallnacht, ordinary people, well dressed and enjoying their morning stroll, walked by the heavily damaged synagogue without a trace of agitation or dismay.

In Yiddish, there is a saying, don't pose as unknowing.

In some ways this is like reverting to infantile behavior. Perhaps you have played peek a boo, with a baby or young child. There is a phase during which if they can't see you, then they believe you can't see them.

As adults we sometimes act as if, the social problems we don't see, aren't willing to look at, don't exist. But the Torah is telling us that we are still responsible. These laws are meant to inspire us to look and then to act. And interestingly, if we were to read further in our parshah, this kind of seeing extends not only to our neighbor and friends, but to our enemy, whose animal we also have to care for, and to those we don't even know, the widow, orphan and stranger, and even to the Egyptians, with whom we have had a history of conflict.

A Contemporary rabbi, talking about this portion wrote: "Unfortunately there is a toddler lurking in each of us. In today's society, it is very easy for us to build a life that blinds us to the problems of others. Those who are fortunate can surround themselves with safe neighborhoods, good schools and a clean environment...Thus God needed to repeat the command to help others...Obviously God understood we need a little prodding in order to extend ourselves."

It is easier to look the other way, whether that is about large social ills, or small kindnesses, like catching the eye of someone who we know wants a minute of our time. In this week's Torah portion the instruction not to hide ourselves is repeated three times, as if recognizing that we can always come up with a good excuse. During this month of Elul, we call ourselves to account for the times we didn't look, and failed to live up to this heritage of kindness passed down from generation to generation.