

KI SEITZEI (DEUTERONOMY 21:10-25:18)

Far-Away Neighbors and Next-Door Strangers

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

We have to take care of each other. If our fellow Jew suffers a loss, we are required to help out. (Helping your fellow Jew is not a contradiction to helping your fellow man even if he is not Jewish. It is certainly appropriate to help the poor, regardless of their race, color, or ethnic background. But we do pay special additional attention to our own. We should all participate in relief efforts for all hurricane victims. But keep in mind that neither FEMA nor the Red Cross is going to help Rabbi Schiff replace his six water-logged Torah scrolls. You and I are going to have to take care of those ourselves.) In Torah Law, finders are not necessarily keepers. If you find something that belongs to someone else, you must return it as soon as possible. If it can't be returned right away, you hold onto it until you can return it: *If you see your brother's ox or sheep going astray, you must not ignore them. You must return them to your brother. If your brother is not near you, and you don't know who he is, you must bring it (the animal) into your home, and keep it with you until your brother claims it. You must do the same with his donkey . . . , with his coat . . . with anything your brother loses. . . You may not ignore it.* (Deuteronomy, 22:1-3) *If your brother is not near you, and you don't know who he is. . .* Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin is bothered by the extra words in the verse. All it had to say was "*if you don't know who he is*". Rabbi Sorotzkin explains that the Torah is teaching us an ethical lesson. "*If your brother is not near you,*" says the Torah, that is a justification for not knowing who he is. But if he lives near you, you **MUST** know him. You need to know his ox, his sheep, etc. You need to know the needs of your fellow man. The Torah is teaching us that the only justification for not knowing your brother is if he lives far away. If he doesn't live near you, you have an excuse. But you are not allowed to walk around in a vacuum, ignoring those around you. ----- Monsey, New York is a unique community. Monsey has a highly concentrated population of orthodox Jews. There are kosher restaurants and bakeries and butchers. Several grocery stores sell only strictly Kosher food. There are Jewish book stores where you can have your Mezuzahs checked while you wait. The local Pathmark superstore has aisles and aisles of Kosher products. There are men's clothing stores that sell nothing but long Chassidic robes and women's clothing stores where all of their merchandise have appropriate sleeve lengths and hemlines. Even the local Getty station has a strictly Kosher product line, including hot cholent and potato kugel on Thursday nights! Some people look forward to visiting Monsey so they can stock up on Kosher products and Kosher lifestyle. Some people who live there can't imagine living anywhere else. The then-rabbi of a small synagogue in Kingston, New York, I used to go to Monsey to shop for Glatt Kosher meat and other amenities. But I considered myself an out-of-towner. I couldn't see myself living there. (Famous last words!) One

evening I found myself sitting at a wedding in Monsey. I was sitting next to a doctor who thoroughly enjoyed living in Monsey. In fact, he was astounded that any Jew could possibly live in a place of cultural desolation like Kingston New, York. I wanted him to understand the sense of community one develops living out of town. Everyone is much closer; there are fewer of us, I explained. Therefore we stay together and ignore our differences. I illustrated my point with an example. Shortly after I got married, I lived in a large apartment building in Kew Gardens, in Queens, New York. I was studying at a Yeshiva nearby, and Kew Gardens, similar to Monsey, is a neighborhood with a large orthodox population. After Kew Gardens, we moved out west to my first job, in Tucson, Arizona. "In Kew Gardens," I explained, "I only really associated with people who were just like me. There were probably twenty or so religious families in my building. Half of the husbands were professionals, and half were Yeshiva students. Of the ten or so Yeshiva students, half were from my Yeshiva, and half were from another Yeshiva. I have no idea how many non-religious families lived in my building. Not only did I never make a point to meet the religious professionals in my building. I didn't even know the fellows from the other Yeshiva! "Now, compare that to life in Tucson," I continued. "There were people with non-Kosher homes who drove on Shabbos who used to come to Bible classes in my home. They were members of the Young Israel of Tucson, and were considered by their peers to be "orthodox" due to that affiliation. They were among our closest friends! "Do you now see the beauty of living out of town?" I asked the doctor. "We all stick together. We need each other!" The doctor from Monsey was apparently impressed. He liked the idea of the unity of out of town life. But he had some questions. "When you lived in Kew Gardens," he asked, "what was your address?" I told him. "When did you live there?" I told him. "Guess what," said this "in-town" orthodox professional. "You know those non-Yeshiva students that you ignored because you were so caught up in your own circle of friends? "I was one of them!" Oops! :-) Hi, neighbor!

Have a great Shabbos.

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