

Me First!--Thoughts on Parashat Ki Tetsei

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By

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tetsei

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Americans spend about 37 billion hours a year waiting in lines and few of us enjoy the experience. What really irks us, though, is when we experience someone trying to cut into line. These “cutters” offend us with their bad manners, their lack of fairness, and their apparent feeling that their time is more valuable than ours.

“Cutters” are despicable to us because they show disdain for us and everyone else on line. They think only of themselves, without casting a thought as to how the rest of us feel. We are not irritated with them only because they cost us a few more seconds in line; we are agitated because they depreciate and insult us by their arrogant selfishness in thinking themselves more important than the rest of us who are patiently waiting our turn.

This week’s Torah portion includes various commandments that aim at increasing our sensitivity to the feelings of others. We need to think not only about what is best for ourselves, but also about how our actions impact on others. If we find a lost object, we are supposed to try to return it to its owner even if this takes time and energy on our part. We need to think about the feelings of the person who has lost this possession. Workers in vineyards are allowed to eat grapes as they work, so that their feelings are respected and their natural hunger is satisfied. When coming to collect a loan, one must wait outside the home of the borrower and wait courteously for him/her to make payment.

The Torah insists that workers be paid on time. To delay payment is considered “oppression” of the worker. “In the same day you shall pay the wages, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it: lest he cry against you unto the Lord and it be counted a sin against you.” (Devarim 24:15) Delay in paying one’s worker is not simply an act of financial negligence, but a bitter affront to the laborer who depends on his daily income. Delaying payment is a sin against the worker’s dignity and self-respect.

Postponing payment reflects an attitude of disregard and disdain toward the one who has provided service and who is entitled to receive pay. It was said of Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, the great kabbalist of 16th century Safed, that he would not allow himself to pray Minhah (the afternoon prayer) until he first paid his debts to his workers. He reasoned: how can I stand in prayer before God when I have not fulfilled my basic obligation to my workers?

We might extend Rabbi Luria's reasoning to those who cut in line, who take shortcuts at the expense of others, who think themselves more important and more entitled than the rest of us. How can these self-centered and disrespectful people come before God in prayer, when they have shown callousness to their fellow human beings?

The Talmud (Berakhot 6b) states that if one does not respond to the greeting of another, it is considered as though he/she were a thief! By ignoring the greeting of another person, it is as though one is indicating: You are not important enough to merit a simple word of response from me; you simply do not matter to me! The non-responder is considered a "thief" because he/she has robbed another person's dignity and feeling of self-worth.

The greatest people are precisely those who are most generous and sensitive to the feelings of others. They conduct themselves with good manners and thoughtfulness. They are humble, natural, and kind. They do not cut in lines; they pay their debts on time; they demand no extra honors or privileges.

Rabbi Bahya Ibn Pekuda, in his classic "Hovot haLevavot," teaches: "No moral quality can possibly exist in anyone whose heart is devoid of humility before God or has in it anything of pride, haughtiness or conceit."

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