Sensitivity: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tetsei

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Thoughts on Parashat Ki Tetsei

by Max Nussbaum

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Throughout the Torah, there are numerous mitzvot that don't appear to have a clear reason. The commandment of Shatnez (not mixing wool and linen), for example, seems very random. However, there are also many mitzvot that make perfect sense such as the commandment to respect our parents. To an ethical person, respecting our parents is the least we can do for them because they bring us into the world and give us everything we need.

In this week's Parasha, Ki Teitzei, there are 74 mitzvot listed. I'd like to focus on the commandment that one may not plow with an ox and a donkey together (Deuteronomy 22:10). At first glance, this looks puzzling. What's the reason one can't use these two particular animals while plowing a field?

The Sefer HaChinuch points out that the reason for this commandment is to prevent these two animals from mating. There is a concept of forbidden mixtures (Kilayim) and cross-breeding falls under that category. Nonetheless, we still have the same problem as before. Forbidden mixtures, such as Shatnez, are still unclear to us as to why they were forbidden.

Earlier this week, I was listening to a shiur by R' Aryeh Leibowitz in which he quoted an article about sensitivity written by R' Benjamin Yudin. R' Leibowitz

pointed out in the shiur that a person's view on Torah is often correlated with his or her personality. R’ Yudin, being a sensitive person, has an incredible insight to further understand the mitzvah that one may not plow with an ox and a donkey together.

The owner of these animals would make sure that these animals are well fed before doing this work. Oxen chew their cud, which would indicate to the donkey that the ox has more food than it has, which would make the donkey upset. Another reason is that an ox is a much stronger animal than a donkey, therefore a donkey wouldn’t be able to keep up with the workload of an ox, which would make the donkey tired and weak.

From both of these reasons, we now have a distinguishable way of looking at this commandment. What presents itself to be an easy mitzvah from Hashem, is really teaching us about sensitivity. Not only to people, but to animals as well.