Good Intentions?--Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tetzei

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Angel For Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tetzei

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The famed American Jewish novelist, Saul Bellow, coined a phrase: "warehouse of good intentions." People had intended to contact an old friend...but didn't get around to it. People had planned on supporting a particular charity...but didn't find time to write the check. People had wanted to express their appreciation and love to a special person or persons...but the opportunity seemed never to arise.

We all have a "warehouse of good intentions," things we wanted to do or say, things we had planned to do or say...but which stayed in the warehouse. They never materialized.

This week's Torah portion is filled with commandments that urge us to act in a prompt and righteous fashion. The great 19th century German-Jewish sage, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, drew a moral from the juxtaposition of two passages. Devarim 22: 6-7 speak of a mother bird hovering over her chicks in the nest. Devarim 22:8 instructs someone building a house to make a guard rail on the roof so that no one will fall down and possibly be killed. Rabbi Hirsch notes that a bird makes a nest for its own eggs and chicks, and has no further concern or obligation. But a human being, when building a house, must think not only of self and immediate family, but must install safety measures so that no guests or future owners will be hurt.

Rabbi Hirsch writes: "In building his house, he must be motivated from the outset by consideration for the welfare not only of those people who will dwell in it at present, but also of those who may dwell there in the future. He must therefore not permit anything in his household that might cause injury to someone else."

Rabbi Hirsch extrapolates the general moral lesson of the Torah's commandments: think of the needs of others, do not put off doing the right thing. This week's parasha reminds us to return lost objects to their owners, to pay workers on time, to help unload an overburdened animal. It would be so easy to "overlook" these obligations, to pretend they don't concern us. But they do concern us! We ought not store these things away in the "warehouse of good intentions," but should act morally and responsibly.

It was said of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great sage of 16th century Safed, that he would not recite his afternoon prayers until he paid his workers for their daily work. He reasoned: how can I appear before God in prayer, when I am behaving unjustly and unkindly with my workers?

In this season of Elul, it is appropriate to turn our thoughts to repentance and self-improvement. As we contemplate these lofty goals, we ought to review our personal "warehouse of good intentions" and see if we can turn at least some of those good intentions into good realities.