



Among the topics addressed in Parashat Naso is the law concerning one who steals from his fellow and falsely denies the theft on oath (5:5-8). The Torah requires that upon confessing and acknowledging his crime, the thief must return the stolen sum – plus a 20% fine – to the victim or his inheritors, and bring a special offering. The Sages explain that this section reviews the laws presented towards the end of Parashat Vayikra (5:20-26), and was added for the purpose of addressing the specific case of *gezel ha-ger*, theft from a convert. According to *Halakha*, the process of conversion eliminates all legal family relationships. Hence, if a person stole from a convert and confessed to his crime only after the convert passed away, and the convert did not father any children after his conversion, there are no inheritors to whom to return the stolen money. In such a case, the Torah requires the thief to pay the funds to a *kohen*.

Interestingly enough, Maimonides cites a verse from this section as the Biblical source for the *mitzva* of repentance. The Torah requires that thieves "confess their sin that they had committed" (5:7), and Maimonides infers from this verse the general obligation for a sinner to confess his sin and repent (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *asei* 73; *Mishneh Torah* – *Hilkhos Teshuva* 1:1). Maimonides disagrees in this regard with Nachmanides, who claimed that the Torah introduces the obligation of *teshuva* in the Book of Devarim (30:1-2), where the Torah speaks of *Benei Yisrael* returning to God after enduring punishment for having forsaken the Torah.

The question naturally arises, why, according to Maimonides, would the Torah choose to introduce such a fundamental *mitzva* specifically in the context of *gezel ha-ger*? Why is this rare situation the most appropriate forum for presenting the general obligation for all sinners to repent?

The Torah occasionally introduces a *mitzva* in a context where it is most likely to be overlooked. Most obviously, perhaps, the prohibition against striking a fellow Jew appears in the particular context of court-administered lashes; the Torah (Devarim 25:3) forbids lashing a violator beyond the prescribed number of lashes, thereby introducing the general prohibition against striking one's fellow. Since this setting might lend itself to a disregard for the individual's rights, as he in any event is to be beaten, the Torah emphasizes that the prohibition to strike one's fellow applies even in such a situation.

Conceivably, this is, in Maimonides' view, the case regarding the *mitzva* of *teshuva*, as well. Recall that the Torah here speaks of a thief who stole and uttered a false

oath of denial, after which the victim died leaving no legal heirs. In such a case, the thief might, instinctively, feel no need to repent. After all, his crime affected only a single individual, the convert, who is no longer living and left no heirs who could benefit from the return of the stolen funds. Though he might acknowledge having wronged the convert, once the convert has died the thief may likely figure that no purpose is served in undergoing the emotional process of *teshuva* or paying the money.

Specifically in this case, therefore, the Torah emphasized that the criminal bears an obligation to verbally confess his crime and express regret. What more, he must indeed pay the stolen funds (to a *kohen*, as the representative of God), despite the fact that the victim died and left no inheritors. The Torah thereby conveys the critical message that a violator must work to erase his wrongdoing even when it does not appear to affect any other individual. Although there is nobody suffering any harm or loss as a result of the transgression, the act itself demands a process of *teshuva*, if only to erase its harmful effects on the perpetrator's soul.

What is true of sins is likely true of virtuous acts, as well. Many *mitzvot* we perform do not appear to yield any tangible effect on the world, and not even on any individuals. People might at times begin to wonder whether any purpose is served by their private Torah study or *mitzva* performance. But we believe that a person's conduct – both in public and private – is significant and yields repercussions. We must feel proud for the *mitzvot* we perform even when they do not appear to benefit others, and express remorse for the misdeeds we commit regardless of whether or not they appear to yield any tangible effects.