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Our Bar Mitzvah Eli taught us about our obligation to go beyond what we see around us, to go further afield to help those in need. He taught us: If you find something that belongs to someone who is not your friend, you should return it just as if they were your friend.

The Torah says:

If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow.

This verse is not so surprising. Our ancestors lived in small tight knit communities. It makes sense to have to return a lost object to your sibling, your family member who is close by. When someone lives nearby, you can easily return the object to him or to her.

But as the verse continues, we learn about our obligation to safeguard lost objects of those who may not live nearby or a lost object even if you don't know who the owner is. You must not remain indifferent. (Deut. 22:1-3)

Isn't this pretty amazing? Even in the ancient world, in small-knit biblical communities, you would think the obligation would only apply to those in one's immediate circle. Yet, we are obligated to make every effort to return a lost object, even if you don't know who the owner is. How difficult was it for our ancestors to fulfill this mitzvah when their fellow wasn't right next door? Imagine such an obligation in a world before the internet and the connectivity

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that we all take for granted. And now, in the world in which we live, what might this obligation look like for us?

In one of the most famous stories of the Bible, Cain sets upon his brother Abel killing him. God questions Cain: “Where is your brother Abel? And Cain responds with perhaps one of the best known lines in all of Torah: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

We might be lulled into thinking that a brother is only someone in our immediate circle. But the Hebrew word, Ach, meaning brother, is also translated as your fellow human being – someone you might not even know. And today’s Torah portion reminds us that we are truly siblings to each other.

Am I my brother’s keeper? Consider this question outside of the filial murder scene, and many other questions come to mind: What are we responsible for? To whom are we responsible? Bringing Cain’s famous question into our own lives, we ask:

Am I my brother’s keeper if my brother lives halfway around the world? How big is our universe of obligation?

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In article by Ruth Messinger and co-author Aaron Dorfman, this question is explored with regard to two tsunamis: one in 1991 in Bangladesh and 2004 in Thailand. The first killed 138,000 people, the other 225,000. The first tsunami produced an underwhelming international humanitarian response. The second resulted in more humanitarian aid committed by governments and individuals than any other natural disaster in human history up to that time.

What is the difference? By watching the 2004 Tsunami on television, with images captured by tourists' cameras, we were brought into the lives of people halfway around the world; we could see their humanity, if only for a moment. But in that moment, there was an opening for us to feel obligated to them as fellow human beings. We understood what a tsunami could be and our hearts opened up in an unprecedented way. The comparison of these two tsunamis taught us: seeing is believing. Seeing can obligate us to action.

These images enter our brains, these people are in our hearts, and we can feel a sense of obligation to them. The Chief Orthodox rabbi of Great Britain, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, says it this way:

“. . . our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from family members to our neighbors, our society and the world. Our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them.”

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But TV and the Internet have effectively abolished distance, bringing images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience.

Today's Torah portion anticipates what a digital world has made possible: We live in a world where technology has in Sacks' words, "abolished distance" and increased the capacity for relationship and obligation to each other. But what then? How do we act? We feel the compassion, but we feel we can't act because of the geographic distance between us and those who are suffering. Our compassion for the poverty, war and famine victims runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated. We feel that something should be done, but what, how, and by whom?

And we can experience what social psychologists call "compassion fatigue," as we struggle to cope with so many images of suffering and violence. We can get overwhelmed, yet in the words of the Mishnah, our tradition reminds us:

"It is not your task to complete the work, but you are not free to abandon it, either."

In Eli's words, "Whenever I find a lost item I should try my best to find who it belongs to." I should try my best. I am not free to abandon the work, even when

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compassion fatigue sets in. We all want to live in a world where people don't stop trying and don't give up.

One of my rabbis taught me that there are many different things that you can return to a person. Some of us literally return objects themselves to their rightful owners. But if we believe that all humanity has a right to dignity, to fairness, to be clothed, sheltered and fed, then any act we take to ensure this, is like returning a lost object. Judaism teaches us that we are all in the business of restoring what was lost. Whether it is a tsunami that robs survivors of shelter and safety, or hunger that ravages a family, we have a chance to restore what others have lost through the mitzvah of tzedakah. That's what made the Thailand tsunami different from the Bangladesh tsunami: people saw and people gave.

Let us not become used to the images we see, so that we become dulled to the pain of others. Eli underscored the importance of living in a world in which we do our part. We are our brother's keeper, now more than ever.

Shabbat Shalom.