

Parshat Mishpatim: How to help our brother – February 9, 2013

This Parsha has dozens of laws which regulates the life within society. I would like to analyze with you today one of them: “If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him.” (Ex. 23:5)

Solidarity is the first message that we learn from this law (the same law will be repeated in Deuteronomy 22:4 about your brother’s donkey): We must help those who are in trouble; we cannot ignore them.

But I think here there is an additional message: The law commands us not to lift the donkey by ourselves, but to help the owner to do it: “You shall surely release it with him”.

We must not ignore the needs of those around us, but at the same time we should not replace them in what is their responsibility. If we “release the donkey” alone, we are giving like saying to the other one “you can’t do it by yourself”. But if we release it “with him” we let him to feel responsible for his actions; he will see your solidarity and support but he will maintain his self-esteem as well.

I think we can apply this message to the relationship with our children: In our effort to spare them suffering, we tend to do for them things they could do alone without our help and advice. We overprotect them and consequently raise insecure and self-demanding children, without tolerance for frustration. In our effort to help, we forget we have to do it “with him”.

Viewing it from the other side, very frequently we wait for someone else to come to solve our problems. In this type of “messianic” attitude we lose confidence in our own capacities, but the real truth is the one that allows the other person to feel valued. Sometimes we look for help in psychologists and counselors and we don’t pay attention to the fact that they can help us very much but nobody will solve our problems more than ourselves. They will do their job, but we must do ours.

Shabbat Shalom!