

Can One Be Forgiven for Stealing When He was Younger?

## Rabbi Chaim Weg

**Question:** A certain individual engaged in the “art of pickpocketing” when he was a teenager. As he grew older, he eventually outgrew it and wanted to know how to do *teshuvah* for his sin. The problem is that he does not know who he stole from and how much it was. What should he do?

**Answer:** Chazal say (Bava Kama 94b)[EO1] that if one stole and wishes to do *teshuvah* but does not know who to return the money to, he should donate the value for *tzarchei rabim* (community service). The Aruch HaShulchan (C.M. 366:3) explains that in this case, the thief will receive *siyata dishmaya* from Hashem that all those from whom he stole will benefit from the community donation according to the value of their loss, and they will also forgive the *gazlan* for his actions. This is based upon the principle of “*haba letaher mesayin oso*” (one who wishes to purify himself receives Heavenly assistance).

The Aruch HaShulchan says further that although Bais Din normally compels a thief to return a stolen item, that is true only if he is returning the stolen object or its value to the owner. However, Bais Din does not force one who stole from the public at large to donate money for *tzarchei rabim* because that is not defined as a true act of return to the owner.

What causes qualify as *tzarchei rabim*? In Talmudic times, *tzarchei rabim* included such necessities as water ditches from which they would drink water. Concerning our times, it is said in the name of Rav Moshe Feinstein that a *mikveh* is considered to be a proper *tzarchei rabim* since it is used by many people in the community, including those stolen from or their inheritors, and one who wishes to do *teshuvah* for stealing from the public should donate to it.

**Question:** How much money must a thief give to fulfill the directive of giving money for *tzarchei rabim*?

**Answer:** He should donate the amount of money that he stole in total to the community cause, and that amount can hopefully be used as the principle from which each individual can benefit according to the amount that was taken from him.