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DAY 34

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Dear President Biden, Vice President Harris, and Members of the 117th Congress,

The Book of Deuteronomy constitutes its audience as a family of sorts. For example, it commands the return of lost property as follows (22:1–3):

“You must not encounter your fellow’s ox or sheep gone astray and ignore them; you must return them to your fellow. If your fellow does not live near you, or you do not know him, you shall take it into your house, and let it be with you until your fellow seeks it and you return it to him. You shall do so for his donkey, and for his clothing, and for any lost object of your fellow’s that might go missing from him that you might find. You must not ignore it.”

The English words “your fellow” correspond to the Hebrew word that, alongside its use to mean “another member of the biblical community,” also has the very specific meaning, “your brother.” Occurring five times in the span of three verses, this word emphasizes that responsibility towards others stems from a sense of basic kinship. When all involved parties are family, returning missing things becomes much more than an act of common decency.

| “...transform our world from neighborhood into family.”

In a 1954 sermon at Detroit’s Second Baptist Church, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed: “Through our scientific genius we’ve made of the world a neighborhood, but through our moral and spiritual genius we’ve failed to make of it a brotherhood.” According to Dr. King, technology had bridged the physical distances between people, but people had not found a way to bridge interpersonal distances between themselves.

Although today we might refer to a more inclusive family, rather than only to “brotherhood,” still, more than sixty-five years later, we continue to face the same basic problem. At the very same time that computer programs help us solve pandemic-related problems of connecting over physical distances, ideological differences threaten to tear us apart.

The lost-property legislation in Deuteronomy 22 could have been, in Dr. King's terms, a "neighborhood" law, one that ensured nothing more than the return of goods to their rightful owners. Clearly, however, its wording indicates that it means to foster a sense of kinship. It calls all of us, and our leaders most of all, to do what Dr. King thought people had failed to do: to transform our world from neighborhood into family.

Sincerely,

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