Parshat Mishpatim, which follows the giving of the Ten Commandments, mainly consists of a list of civil laws. Following the intensity of the revelation at Mount Sinai, where the Israelites directly encountered G-d, the laws presented in Mishpatim feel surprisingly down to earth. These laws deal with interpersonal relationships rather than our relationship with G-d. Rashi says that the reason these civil laws come right after the commandments about building an altar is to teach us that the Sanhedrin, the high court, should sit in the vicinity of the Temple. The spiritual and the day-to-day are related, not separate. How we connect with other people is just as important as how we connect to G-d.

One of these interpersonal laws that has always stood out to me is:

כִּֽי־תִרְאֶ֞ה חֲמ֣וֹר שֹׂנַאֲךָ֗ רֹבֵץ֙ תַּ֣חַת מַשָּׂא֔וֹ וְחָדַלְתָּ֖ מֵעֲזֹ֣ב ל֑וֹ עָזֹ֥ב תַּעֲזֹ֖ב עִמּֽוֹ׃

When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless help raise it.

Even when we see the animal of someone we hate struggling we are still obligated to help them. Our feelings towards the other person shouldn’t factor into our decision to help the suffering animal. In fact, when Maimonides codified this into law in his legal code, the Mishneh Torah, he didn’t even make the distinction between enemy and friend. Anyone who sees another person’s animal struggling is obligated to help, regardless of whether the person is considered a friend or a foe.

Some commentators, such as Chizkuni and Rabbeinu Bahya, read this verse as teaching that the distress of the animal is what must be alleviated. The suffering of the animal takes precedence over one’s feelings towards another human being. Consideration for other beings and their suffering goes beyond interpersonal issues. And if we view this verse in the context of our highly polarized society, there is also an important lesson in cooperation. There are some things that transcend sides and require us to actively work together, particularly when another being is in distress. We need to be responsive to suffering regardless of how we may personally feel about the person who benefits from our help.