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Sharing Pain – Proximity Matters

During the Yom Kippur War, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz *zt"l* delivered a *sichas chizuk* that began with a question.

“How can it be that we aren’t seeing a greater *hisorerus* in *tefillah*? How can people be so spiritually asleep that they are able to relax and lie in bed just as they did beforehand, without waking up to daven with all their heart?”

He explained this with a lesson from the story of Hagar and Yishmael in *Parshas Vayeira*. When they ran out of water, and Hagar was sure that Yishmael was going to die, the Torah tells us that she threw him under a bush and distanced herself from him, saying, אַל אֶרְאֶה, בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד – *Let me not see the death of the child.*

We learn from this that if you don’t see something with your own eyes, it doesn’t hurt as much. Although Hagar loved her son, she knew that her pain would be less if she wasn’t nearby at the time of his death.

Rav Chaim explained that when someone hears, but doesn’t see, his emotions aren’t aroused as much. Although he knows that a painful event is taking place, he cannot daven the way he would if he actually witnessed the event.

Rachel Cries for Her Children

Rav Chaim brings many examples of this principle from Tanach.

At the beginning of *Parshas Vayechi*, Yaakov talks to Yosef about his decision to bury Rachel Imeinu on the road to Beis Lechem. Rashi, based on Chazal, explains why Yaakov saw the need to recall those events and explain his actions to Yosef.

“As for me, I am troubling you to take me to be buried in Eretz Canaan, although I did not do so for your mother... I know that you have a bitter feeling in your heart against me because of this.

“Know that it was by Hashem’s command that I buried her there, so that she will help her children when Nevuzaradan exiles them. When they pass by that place, Rachel will come out of her grave and cry for mercy for her children.” –

“A voice on high is heard, Rachel crying for her children...” And Hashem answers, “There is reward for your deed, says Hashem, and the children will return to their borders.”

Initially, we struggle to understand why Bnei Yisrael have to pass by *kever Rachel*. Some mistakenly think Rashi means that Bnei Yisrael will then daven at her grave. However, Rashi’s words (based on the Midrash) make it clear he is telling us that *Rachel Imeinu will awaken to pray for her children when they pass by her kever on their way into galus.*

This is also difficult to comprehend. Even if Rachel Imeinu were buried somewhere else, of course she would still know that her children were being exiled by Nevuzaradan! But Rashi tells us that in fact, it is not the same. Her tears and *tefillos* are qualitatively different when she is there to see her children being led to exile. This was why Yaakov Avinu buried her by the road on the way to Beis Lechem.

Seeing the Lazy Man’s Field

Rav Chaim also cites Shlomo Hamelech’s teaching that appears in *Mishlei 24*.

I passed by the field of a lazy man... It was overgrown with thorns; it was covered with weeds....

וַאֲחֶזְהָ אֲנֹכִי אִשִּׁית לְבִי, רָאִיתִי לְקַחְתִּי מוֹסָר
I saw and I took mussar.

Shlomo Hamelech was the wisest man in the world and certainly could tell you what happens to the field of a lazy man. He knew it and could explain it clearly to anyone. Nonetheless, he emphasizes that only when he *looked and saw* was he able to absorb the lesson.

When we actually see something, it is entirely different.

Eyes and Heart

We also learn this lesson from Moshe Rabbeinu.

וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אָחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם – *He went out to his brothers and saw their suffering.* (Shemos 2:11) Rashi explains that this means נתן עיניו ולבו להיות – *he applied his eyes and his heart to feel pain for them.*

Moshe certainly knew that his brethren were enslaved in Egypt. Still, he wouldn't have felt the same *tzaar* as he felt when he saw them. That is why he went out to see their suffering.

Rav Chaim said, "People are being killed. People are in a state of terrible *tzaar*. If a person stands at a distance, he won't feel that *tzaar*. He may hear about it, but he won't internalize it."

"Therefore," he added, "I tell anyone who claims that he can travel to *chutz la'aretz* and daven for our brothers from a distance – he is making a false statement, because from a distance it's impossible to feel the situation. Don't say that you are travelling in order to daven. You can't daven, since you have no concept of what is happening to *acheinu beis Yisrael*.

"You may insist, 'What do you mean, I have no concept? I hear all the details of the situation; I know them so well that I could repeat them to you...'

"No! that isn't what we are talking about. We are speaking about the ability to suffer along with them. That is not possible for someone who is far away."

Don't Separate from the Tzibbur

Rav Chaim adds that this is Chazal's intention (as quoted in *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 574:5), "Anyone who separates himself from the *tzibbur* doesn't see their consolation, and anyone who feels their suffering along with them merits to see their consolation."

The *Pri Megadim* comments,

"A person who is able to help with *tefillah*, and separates from the *tzibbur* by not davening with them, is also in this category." He adds, "Even if someone davens, if he distances himself from the *tzibbur*, thereby limiting his ability to daven, he is called a person who separates from the *tzibbur*."

There are many different levels and applications of this principle, and certainly it doesn't mean that everyone living in *chutz la'aretz* is obligated to travel to Eretz Yisrael. The main intention is to teach us how this works. When someone sees the *tzaar* of Yisrael and feels it, he davens differently. That enables him to merit seeing the *nechamah* of Klal Yisrael.

Part of our Daily Avodah

This is a fundamental aspect of *ahavas Yisrael* that encompasses many central mitzvos that the Torah commands us every day.

Every day, we are commanded to visit the sick, to take in guests, to participate in *hachmassas kallah* and in accompanying the dead to their final resting place. So many people, when they hear about someone in need, think: "Reuven's going through a hard time, poor Reuven; we have help him," and they say a *perek* of *Tehillim* on his behalf. This is a very minimal level when compared to visiting Reuven in the hospital.

Why is it important to visit? Chazal said (*Nedarim* 40a),

"Whoever visits a sick person, he asks Hashem to have mercy on him so that he should live; and whoever doesn't visit the sick, he asks Hashem to have mercy on him so that he should die."

“That he should die? How could you think that? Rather: he doesn’t ask Hashem to have mercy – not that he should live, nor that he should die.”

We see that Chazal considered the possibility that when a person doesn’t visit the sick, he is considered as one who davens that the patient should die! The Netziv, in his *sefer Meromei Sadeh*, explains that the idea behind such a prayer is our fear that the patient will recover and we will be embarrassed because we didn’t visit him.

According to the Gemara’s conclusion, someone who doesn’t visit the sick isn’t davening for him. In other words, because he doesn’t feel the pain of the patient, his prayer isn’t considered a *tefillah*.

Hearing and Seeing

In this time of war, the difference between hearing and seeing is obvious. Someone who has gone to visit the *aveilim* (mourners) returns shaken to the core, and davens very differently.

We may wonder, “Why are you so shaken? The details of the murders that you heard on the news were much more horrible than anything you encountered while consoling a living person. You haven’t heard any frightening details that you didn’t know before.”

Nevertheless, the experience of *nichum aveilim* has transformed him; he has returned home a different and stronger person than the one who set out to do the mitzvah. He saw a family’s mourning with his own eyes. He was truly *משחתף בצערן של ישראל*, which is one of the foundations of Judaism.

Initially, a person who considers visiting the sick or comforting mourners thinks, “It is a wonderful act of *chesed* to show these people that we feel their pain.” You think that you have to do these mitzvos for them. The truth is that you have to do them for yourself, in order to be a G-d-fearing Jew.

How many Jews in the world understand that in the current situation, we need to daven?

It seems clear that everyone who knows what *tefillah* is understands the need for *tefillah*, and has truly been davening. Individuals and communities across the spectrum have been davening and organizing special communal *tefillos*. Jews are suffering! Rav Chaim Shmulevitz tells us, "Let me teach you how to daven." Davening after seeing the *tzaar* with your eyes cannot be compared to your *tefillah* about suffering that you haven't seen.

It's important to emphasize that seeing the events on the news does not accomplish what Rav Chaim is describing, and in fact it causes damage. The urge to constantly check the news is based on the desire for the pleasure of gaining knowledge. Participating in the *tzaar* of Yisrael means leaving your comfort zone, traveling to comfort *aveilim*, visit the sick, or listen to someone's problems and help him.

Seeing the Needs of Those in Need

Sometimes a poor man approaches someone to speak with him and ask for *tzedakah*. Rather than hear him out, the person takes out his wallet, saying, "It's okay, you don't need to tell me anything," and gives him some money. While each case is different and it isn't feasible to listen to everyone, we need to understand that listening to someone's troubles is an important act of *chesed*, which anyone can do without spending a penny. Chazal teach us that גמילות חסד בגופו, *chesed* that we perform with our body, has many advantages over simply giving money.

Furthermore, unless you hear out the poor man's description of his situation, you can't really join in his suffering.

Of course, we can't always listen to everyone's troubles, just as we can't visit everyone who is ill, or participate in every funeral. Nevertheless, we must understand that our *neshamah* needs to hear and empathize with the suffering of others.

When it comes to the suffering of Klal Yisrael, participation doesn't only make us more sensitive – it makes us part of the *klal*. We need to participate in the troubles of Yisrael in order to be part of Klal Yisrael. Once we are part of the *klal*, our *tefillos* and *teshuvah* are able to benefit the *klal*.

The Waters of Noach

In another *shmuess*, Rav Chaim spoke about Chazal's harsh view of someone who is able to daven and doesn't daven. In *Yeshayahu* (54:9), the *mabul* is called מַבּוּל – *the waters of Noach*. This term is surprising, because Noach was saved from the *mabul*. The *Zohar hakadosh* explains that Yeshayahu links the *mabul* to Noach because Noach didn't daven for the people of his generation. Rav Chaim pointed out that Noach was only one individual in a generation of *reshaim*. Our responsibility is even greater, for we can join forces in communal *tefillah* to daven for our generation.

Noach was *moser nefesh* for all the animals on the *teivah*, and successfully completed his mission. It is also important to realize that there weren't ten tzaddikim in his generation, and so his *tefillah* could not have succeeded in saving the people. (Avraham Avinu learned from Noach, whose *zechus* couldn't save his generation since there weren't ten tzaddikim.) Despite all this, Noach is held accountable.

When Avraham Avinu saw that there weren't ten tzaddikim in Sedom, he returned home, and no longer pleaded for Hashem to have mercy on Sedom. The Torah doesn't criticize Avraham Avinu for giving up at that point. If so, why should Noach be criticized for failing to daven for his generation?

The answer is that by not davening for his generation, Noach demonstrated that he wasn't pained by the situation. When something truly hurts, we scream, even if our cries won't accomplish anything. Avraham Avinu did cry and beg for Hashem to have mercy on the people of Sedom. That is why he isn't criticized for stopping when he realized that, due to the lack of ten tzaddikim, his *tefillah* wouldn't help them.

Rav Chaim says that a person needs to understand that there are two aspects to *tefillah*. One aspect is based on our *emunah* that our *tefillah* can change and influence what happens in the world. And even if it were clear to us that our *tefillah* will not help, there is still the second component: We must daven simply to participate in the suffering of Am Yisrael, to be part of the *klal*.

(It is important to note that, in fact, *tefillah* always helps, though it may be in ways that we never discover. *Sefarim* teach us that Avraham's *tefillos* helped save Lot, leading to the eventual birth of Mashiach.)

I Know Him!

When the news of a tragedy comes out, if the listener knows the person involved, he will exclaim, "Reuven! How could it be? I know him well!"

How can we explain these feelings and this statement? What aspect of the story changed now that you realize that you know the person at the center of the story? Where is the logic: if you didn't know the person, you were able to believe the story, and now you cannot accept it?

Similarly, we see that when a person tells a story about an event that he actually witnessed, he tells it differently, and it has a more powerful effect on the listeners. Because he saw it, in some way the event still lives inside of him.

When it comes to the *tzaar* of Yisrael, which is also the *tzaar* of the *Shechinah*, Hakadosh Baruch Hu says, "Your *avodah* is to have that *tzaar* penetrate your heart." While this is true for the suffering of an individual, the obligation is even greater when it comes to the *klal*, for then it is clear that the message *min haShamayim* is meant for each and every one of us.

While donating money is certainly admirable and shouldn't be discounted, the highest level of participating in the suffering of another is by in-person visits of *nichum aveilim* or *bikur cholim*.

Putting Others' Needs First

Someone told me the following story about Rav Avraham Genechovsky.

When Rav Avraham was diagnosed with a serious illness at the end of his life, the doctor in charge of his case met with him, explaining in great detail what they had found and how they planned to treat it. At the end of the presentation, R' Avraham said calmly, "Nu, nu." The doctor assumed that R' Avraham had not understood his presentation, and offered to explain the medical situation again, more slowly. R' Avraham reassured the doctor that he had done a good job of making everything clear.

As the doctor left the room, one of R' Avraham's close friends entered the room. The Rav called out, "R' Moshe, you have a daughter in *shidduchim*. I have an idea for her; sit down and let's talk about it. I think that it could be a good idea."

People of profound *emunah* are able to put others' needs before their own. This power comes from their absolute integrity, the ability to clearly understand what's important, unswayed by personal considerations.

However, some people go about this the wrong way. They ignore the needs of their immediate family in order to care for the needs of others. Often, their motivation is not so much the caring for others as their own need for personal satisfaction. It's as if this person declares, "Forget about my wife and children; I'm busy getting my personal satisfaction."

When we speak of someone who can put the needs of others first, we mean someone who does it in the right way.

A Question of Comfort

When a person refuses to leave his comfort zone, this can prevent him from developing this depth of *yiras Shamayim*, because it will take away his ability to empathize. He isn't a criminal; he's just a person

who prefers to remain within his comfort zone. He has his daily schedule, his house, and his bed. He says, "I don't have time for people right now. Please don't disturb my tranquility."

This can be a very subtle point. A person may argue that if you disturb his peace of mind, he won't be able to learn, daven, or take good care of his family. There is some truth to that concern. A person does need a schedule; without some predictable framework, he will be confused and incapable of accomplishing anything. Nevertheless, he must know that *yishuv hadaas* or peace of mind is a resource that is meant to help him develop his sensitivity and feelings.

For example, when someone lacks *yishuv hadaas* and his child comes to tell him something, he may be gruff and rejecting, because he is preoccupied and has no strength to deal with childish chatter. In contrast, someone with *yishuv hadaas* will smile, encourage the child to tell him whatever is on his mind, and listen patiently. This is just one illustration of how *yishuv hadaas* helps a person develop emotional intelligence and helps him accomplish whatever he has to accomplish in life.

A person also needs *yishuv hadaas* in order to daven and learn as he should. Without it, his mind darts to a hundred places at once, preventing him from being able to focus on Torah or *tefillah*.

And yet, Hakadosh Baruch Hu says: "If you want peace of mind just because you like to be comfortable — that has no place in *Yiddishkeit*. You are supposed to be *moser nefesh*. If you say you need peace of mind for *avodas Hashem* — realize that if you avoid sharing in the suffering of fellow Jews by actually seeing them, speaking with them and feeling their pain, you aren't developing the feelings that a Jew is meant to have. Peace of mind won't help you learn or daven properly, or have any *taam* in Shabbos, or feel pain for the *galus haShechinah*, if it comes at the cost of your Jewish heart."

Learning to Feel

Sometimes we have the privilege of seeing a Yid who is able to burst out crying because of *galus haShechinah*, or shed tears of yearning for

kirvas Elokim while singing *Lecha Dodi* Friday night. Where do those powerful feelings come from?

The answer is that this person is unlike the majority of those around him. Most people hear about an event, and go on with their life. The information doesn't enter and affect their hearts; it gets filed away in the mind along with thousands of other bits of information. The person who can cry for the *Shechinah* has allowed the right information take up residence in his heart, and touch his innermost feelings and move him to tears.

Someone who doesn't see and hear what other Jews are going through, and keeps busy with other things, doesn't have that deep connection with Hashem that can impact his emotions. Someone who does listen to the suffering of broken or depressed people, and opens his mind and heart to their pain, has a deep *kesher* with Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

The *Shechinah* is together with Am Yisrael and with each individual Jew in their suffering, as the *pasuk* in *Tehillim* (91:15) says, עֲמוּ אֲנֹכִי בְצָרָה. Someone who doesn't try to be with other Jews in their times of trouble, and feel their pain, cannot feel the *tzaar* of the *Shechinah*. Then, even when he has opportunities to experience *kirvas Elokim*, he won't have the depth of emotion necessary for that experience.

If he gained *yishuv hadaas* by distancing himself from the pain of his fellow Jews, but the *yishuv hadaas* doesn't enable him to experience *kirvas Elokim*, then what is it worth? He isn't doing anything with it!

Help from Above

It once happened that the Meor Einayim of Chernobyl, who devoted endless time and energy to the mitzvah of *pidyon shevuyim* (redeeming captives), was himself imprisoned.

Sarah Imeinu appeared to him in a dream, and asked, "Why did Hakadosh Baruch Hu tell Avraham לך לך, which means להנאתך

ולטובתך – *the journey will be for your benefit and your good* (Rashi)?
Would we imagine that without that reassurance he wouldn't have undertaken the journey?"

She answered the question: "Avraham Avinu devoted all his strength to *gemilus chasadim* – acts of lovingkindness. Nevertheless, he had the feeling that something was missing in his fulfillment of that mitzvah. He was upset that he didn't know what else he could do to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *gemilus chasadim* more completely.

"Hakadosh Baruch Hu told him, "You feel that something is missing because you never had to be a guest in someone else's home. That means you don't fully understand the needs of the guest who come to your tent.

"This is why I am commanding you to take your staff and your pack and travel. This will be להנאתך ולטובתך – *for your benefit* – because when you yourself are a guest in others' homes, you will truly understand your guests, and learn to fulfill the mitzvah of *hachmassas orchim* to its fullest extent."

Sarah Imeinu told the *Meor Einayim*, "You, similarly, have devoted yourself to the mitzvah of *pidyon shevuyim*, but you were never imprisoned yourself. You are now in jail להנאתך ולטובתך – *for your benefit* – so that you will experience the life of a prisoner, and from here on you'll be able to fulfill the mitzvah to its fullest extent."

There is an additional level of understanding that will inspire us to do גמילות חסד בגוף, physical acts of lovingkindness, and not just give money.

We usually assume that we have to understand the needs of others in order to properly fulfill the mitzvah of *gemilus chasadim*. For example, when someone goes to console a mourner without having an idea of what is appropriate or inappropriate to say, he may end up causing pain to the *aveilim* instead of comforting them.

In *Maseches Bava Metzia* (58b), Chazal give an example of someone who transgresses the *aveirah* of *onaas devarim* (words that hurt others)—“If someone has become ill, or if he has had to bury a child, you should not speak to him in the way that the friends of Iyov did.” (Iyov’s friends argued that his suffering must be the result of his sins.)

Even if the one “giving *mussar*” has a valid point, by making his point at the wrong time and in the wrong way, he is violating the *issur d’Oraisa* of *לא תונו איש את אחיו* – *do not hurt someone [with words]*.

One might ask: If the point of causing Avraham Avinu to wander, or causing the Meor Einayim to be arrested, was for them to understand the needs of a wanderer or a prisoner, why couldn’t they learn it in a less painful way? Couldn’t they take a course that would teach them about the needs of these people and how to interact with them?

The idea shouldn’t be dismissed. Making it our mission to develop sensitivity to others’ needs can be very valuable. However, that isn’t all Hashem wants from us. Empathy isn’t only a means to learn about the needs of our fellow Jew and help them in the best way possible. Hashem wants us to be there.

The Tzaar of the Shechinah

Our obligation to share the pain of our fellow Jew accomplishes far more than just providing the right words of *chizuk* for someone who needs it. When you share the pain of a Jew, you share the pain of the *Shechinah*. If you sit with an *avel* (even if he is distant from Torah and mitzvos), when he expresses his pain over the loss of a loved one, you are witnessing the *tzaar* of the *Shechinah*. Connecting to that pain brings you closer to Hashem. The closer you are, the more *yiras Shamayim* you will have.

The *yiras Shamayim* that you will experience isn’t fear of Gehinnom, but a much higher form of *yiras Shamayim*. You experience it because you have elevated yourself, just as a person may become elevated by

performing a great mitzvah or by learning Torah for hours without interruption. You have elevated your reality; this-worldly concerns take up less of your inner world, and you can do *teshuvah* more easily and more powerfully.

Communication Gap

Someone who doesn't feel the *tzaar* of the *Shechinah* is distant. If he is happily enjoying life with his friends during wartime, someone may rebuke him. "How can you behave this way while so many Jews are suffering? So many people are sitting *shiva* for their loved ones, and you're having fun as if nothing happened?"

He will hear the words, but he won't understand why this person is so upset with him. He says, "I gave money. I said Tehillim. Why are you so upset? Did I commit a crime? Is any of the food at my party not kosher?"

The difference is that one person is distant and one is close. Someone who is close to the *Shechinah*, and feels the pain of the *Shechinah*, can't bear to see someone so disconnected that he simply doesn't care.

In Conclusion

Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants us to be close to Him. One of the ways to achieve this is to be *בצער בשותף*, to share the pain of others. The exact type of pain doesn't matter. If you see a Jew suffering, and you listen to him and get a sense of what he is going through, you become a better Jew. You are sharing in the *tzaar* of the *Shechinah* and getting closer to Hashem, and this is what will bring *geulah* to the world.



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