



Supreme Sensitivity

The Torah cautions us in no uncertain terms against mistreating a widow or an orphan. “*Im aneh taaneh oto ki im tzaak yitzak eilai shamoah eshma tzaakato.*” (*Shemot 22:22*) Notice the dualistic language, “if you will surely afflict them”, “they will surely cry out to Me, I will surely hear”. Why the need for repetition? Hashem’s response to such behavior is equally unusual, He will display his anger and kill the offender so that his wife will be a widow and his children orphans, why the intensely severe reaction?

Rav Refael Sorotzkin in *Habinah Vehabracha*, understands the dual expression as referring to two different aspects of such mistreatment. One element is the actual pain and insult caused by the abuser. The other dimension of pain is that there is no one to stand up and defend the abused, no husband or father to shield and advocate for the widow or orphan who has been tormented. This latter pain brings the agony and loneliness of their situation to the fore, exacerbating the hurtful reality of widowhood and orphanhood. It triggers a deep, core pain, causing the widow or orphan acute suffering, thus the perpetrator is punished harshly for

inflicting this double dose of suffering. *Mipi Sefarim Vesofrim* believes the double language is referring to an additional dimension. When a widow or orphan cries out in pain to Hashem in this world, it awakens the spouse or parent in heaven to also cry out for the injustice and to implore the Heavenly throne to mete out retribution.

It is interesting that the *Ramban* notes that the words “*kol almanah veyasom lo teanun*” (*Shemot 22:21*) refer to any widow, despite her financial status. Even if a widow is fiscally secure, she undoubtedly feels a sense of loss, is more sensitive and must be treated with greater care. Rav Grossbard, in *Da’at Shraga* identifies the widow and orphan as part of Hashem’s personal “family”. Hashem tells us when you celebrate the festivals, I will gladden your children as long as you gladden mine. Who are Hashem’s closest children? The widow, the orphan and the *ger*. Hence, when one insults or inflicts pain on one of those belonging to Hashem, His wrath is aroused, and the punishment is heavy.

Indeed, to a certain extent we all experience a sense of fragility and vulnerability. Rav Ezrachi in *Birkat Mordechai* exhorts all of us to learn from this injunction how careful we must be in our interactions with others. None of us really knows what struggles and challenges another person endures. We must treat everyone with extreme care and sensitivity regardless

of their status, to measure our words and expressions carefully. None of us would want to be responsible for someone else's tears and cries of distress to Hashem because of the way they were treated.

Rav Krohn writes a moving essay in *Step by Step* taking this even further. When we are in a social setting do we talk about topics that may demonstrate a lack of sensitivity to someone present? Do we talk about the great accomplishments of our children and grandchildren when we know there is someone sitting amongst us who has no nachas from their family? Do we dress for a simcha in an overly exquisite manner when we know the person hosting it can't afford such clothes? Do we fuss over a baby when there is a childless couple nearby? Do we gush over a recently engaged young woman in the room when a mother of several single children is standing right there?

The Torah reminds us that to live as a Jew is to live expansively, inclusively, feeling the troubles of others, and sharing the burden of others. It is what makes us a special nation, the super sensitivity that we possess, the consideration that we demonstrate to ease the difficulties of our brothers and sisters who carry heartache and hurt. ■

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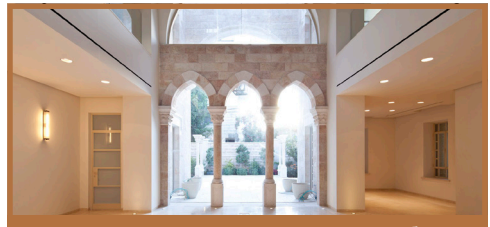
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