

How great! My son Yosef still lives! I shall go and see him before I die. (45:28)

True greatness is measured by how much one empathizes with the pain and joy of his fellow. At its simplest, empathy is the awareness of the thoughts and emotions of others, it is the ability to see the world through the eyes of others. It is the link between ourselves and others, because it is how we as individuals understand what others are feeling, as if we are feeling it ourselves. In cognitive empathy, one understands the thoughts and emotions of others in a very rational, rather than emotional, sense. We try to get into their minds, to attempt to understand why they feel the way they do. Then we can become emotionally attached to the point that we feel their pain. We must then act on these feelings to alleviate the pain that our fellow man is experiencing. We must learn to see the world through the eyes of our fellow man who is not as fortunate as we are. Sometimes it is necessary to “walk a mile in someone else’s shoes in order to understand them.” It is so easy to criticize when one does not know what the subject of his critique is experiencing.

When a *Rav* issues a *psak*, renders a *halachic* decision, he must take into consideration the emotions of the people who stand before him. This does not mean that *halachah* is altered due to emotion. It is just that how one presents the *halachah* can make a difference. Furthermore, in the event that the *halachah* is not clear, it is then based upon the common sense and discretion of the *Rav*. It is at such a juncture that empathy plays a powerful role. The following story emphasizes this truth.

The joy evinced by Yaakov *Avinu*, upon hearing the news that Yosef was alive, was palpable. On the other hand, the joy is a strong indicator of the enormous pain that our Patriarch must have experienced when he was informed of the loss of his dear son. The pain suffered by a parent, *chas v’shalom*, Heaven forbid, over the loss of a child, is immeasurable. Therefore, one who has *Baruch Hashem* not suffered such a loss might find it difficult to understand what such a parent feels. Each and every time that a person or situation alludes in some way to their loss, it opens up the floodgates of pain and emotion, releasing a fresh torrent of tears and misery.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, related the following story to his revered brother-in-law, *Horav Chaim Kanievsky, Shlita*. A couple who had just been blessed with their first son came before *Horav Shlomo Zalmen Auerbach, zl*, with a *shailah*, question, concerning what they should name their son. The husband had just recently lost his father, so it was natural that he would want to name his son after his father. His wife refused to give that name because, a short time earlier in their apartment building, a young child with that name had died an untimely death. The mother feared that it was a bad sign to give her son that name. The husband argued that *Kibbud Av*, honoring the memory of his late father, was more important than her concern about a negative omen. She responded that under no circumstances would she put her son’s life in “danger” by giving him that name.

Rav Shlomo Zalmen gave the matter some thought, then rendered his decision in favor of the mother – but for another reason. He said, “The baby should not be named after his paternal grandfather, but not because of the mother’s fears concerning a bad sign. It is just that a few years down the road, when her son will go out to play, and his mother will call out from the window, ‘Yankele,’ and her neighbor (who lost a child by the same name) will hear the name of her late child called out; she will be hurt. One cannot give such a name that quite possibly will cause pain to another Jew.”

When Rav Chaim Kanievsky heard this *psak*, tears welled up in his eyes. This is what is meant by sensitivity in rendering a halachic decision. To most people, the halachic response to the dispute between husband and wife was “black and white”; to Rav Shlomo Zalmen, however, it was not.