

Moshe grew up, and went out to his brethren and observed their burdens. (2:11)

“Moshe grew up”. The Torah teaches us that the definition of “growing up” is assuming responsibility. It has nothing to do with age. Personally identifying with the plight of the Jews; viewing them as his brothers – despite the fact that he had been raised amid royalty and wealth – was a sign of Moshe’s maturation. The next step in his growth process was actually leaving the royal palace and joining together with his brothers in their labor. Last, as the well-known *Rashi* expounds – *Nosan eino v’libo liheyos meitzar aleihem*; “He applied his eyes and heart to see their suffering and grieve with them.” **Horav Aharon Kotler, zl**, explains that Moshe *Rabbeinu* did two things: he shared their burdens; he also felt their pain. The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that helping someone in need is a great *mitzvah*: lending a hand, writing a check, sending over a meal, even being there whenever necessary to support, encourage, soothe, are all important. They are, however, only part of the *mitzvah* of *nosei b’ol im chaveiro*, carrying the yoke together with his friend, sharing in his burden. Intrinsic to this *mitzvah* is actually feeling his pain. Moshe did not work alongside his brothers; he suffered and grieved with them. He experienced what they were experiencing.

We are *Rachamanim bnei Rachamanim*, compassionate sons (and daughters) of compassionate sons (and daughters): we help; we are there; we give; we visit; we talk. At the end of the day, however, we go home to our families, our lives, our homes. We do not live their pain. It does not hurt us. *Rav Aharon* explains that Moshe did more than just help – he grieved; he felt their pain in such a manner that it grieved him. He was sickened by their plight.

When a Jew provides kindness with his hands, but his heart is indifferent to the plight of the subject of his kindness, he remains detached, unfeeling, and, eventually, he will become uncaring. Empathy is an inherent component of giving. To give and not feel the beneficiary’s pain is lifeless giving. It is not Jewish giving. With this idea in mind, I think we can understand the following story, which I wrote a number of years ago.

In the slave labor camp of Plashuv, a Jewish prisoner was aroused one night to the sound of two *kapos* conversing with one another. These *kapos* were concentration camp police who were selected from among the Jewish prisoners themselves to carry out the orders of the Nazis in expediting the Final Solution. Their personal survival was contingent upon their being able to prove their fidelity to the Nazi beasts in carrying out heartless acts of cruelty against their own brethren. Not only did the Nazis kill the Jews, but they also used their victims’ coreligionists to execute these orders. One would think that finding “volunteers” for this type of work would meet with difficulty. Sadly, this is the human condition; one will do anything to survive, to save members of his own family – even at the expense of descending to the nadir of depravity and becoming an enemy to his brethren. This was truly a sad page in our history. The following conversation ensued between the two *kapos*:

One of them was crying, to his comrade's astonishment. Cruelty was part of their lifestyle, and, whatever emotions they might have had, were long gone. Tears were not an expression endemic to a *kapo*.

"Why the tears? What happened?"

"Do not ask," the other *kapo* replied. "Something occurred that shook me up terribly."

"I do not understand. What could possibly shake you up? We are unmoved by the sufferings of our wretched brothers. After all, it is either us or them. I escorted my own father to his death, and you watched as your mother was shot to death. What could possibly bring you to tears?"

Amid broken-hearted sobs, the weeping *kapo* answered, "Today was different than anything I had ever experienced. I was taking an old *chasid* to be killed, when, suddenly, he stopped, looked me straight in the eyes and said, 'Yes, we deserve this horrible punishment. We are truly guilty and warrant this terrible fate. If one Jew is capable of leading another Jew to the slaughter, then something is very amiss with our nation, and we must answer for it – even if it means such a punishment!' Whenever I think of that old Jew's condemning words, I tremble with disgust and self-loathing."

This story and the old *chasid*'s glaring words should evoke a feeling of introspection within all of us. Are we in some remote way guilty of the same form of indifference? Must one *chas v'shalom*, Heaven forbid, have to lead a fellow Jew to his death, or does a lack of empathy– or even a twinge of hatred for someone who does not maintain our beliefs - warrant Hashem's anger? Hopefully, we will never find out. Moshe *Rabbeinu* teaches us the level of empathy to which a Jew must go. It is not the gold standard – it is the minimum, because our gold standard is the minimum. Everything else is above and beyond the call of duty. Feeling the pain of the other is the Torah's definition of *chesed*.