

If your brother becomes impoverished, and his means falter in your proximity, you shall strengthen him. (25:35)

Rashi explains *vehechezakta bo*, “you shall strengthen him,” to mean that, if one sees a decline in his fellow’s business, if he sees that the money does not flow in his home as it once used to, he should step in and slow the descent, helping him to regain his financial footing. It is that much more difficult once the fall has gone too far. *Rashi* compares this to a donkey who is struggling with a heavy load. As long as the donkey is erect, albeit struggling, one person can support him. Once the donkey has fallen to the ground, even five people are unable to right him.

A powerful lesson may be derived from *Rashi*. At times, we have no idea the extent our assistance provides to the person in need. We might think, “What did I do? It was nothing.” Little do we know that we quite possibly have saved the individual’s life. The *Midrash Rabbah* takes this idea further. “Whoever gives a poor man a penny, Hashem will give him many pennies. Does Hashem then give him pennies? Hashem gives him his life! How is this? A loaf of bread sells for ten pennies. A poor man who is starved and at a point of near exhaustion must eat, or he will die. Along comes a kind-hearted man and gives him one penny. He has saved the poor man’s life.” He gave one penny and he is rewarded with his life. Why? He only gave a penny! That penny was the turning point in this man’s sustenance. Otherwise, he would have died.

Chazal are teaching us that it is not how much we give to the individual in need; rather, it depends on the effect it has. That poor man only needed a penny. The man only gave a penny, but that penny saved his life. Thus, Hashem will save the benefactor’s life. Who knows what punishment, what decree had been lurking in his future? At least now, one of those life and death decrees will be averted – because of one single penny.

This *Midrash* serves as the basis of an appeal made by the Lomza *Rosh Yeshivah*, **Horav Yecheiel Mordechai Gordon, zl**, during the dark days of the Holocaust. From among the distinguished *Roshei Yeshivah* of Pre-World War II Europe, *Rav* Gordon was the only one who was stranded in relative safety prior to the war. As a result, he could not return. He succeeded in saving the lives of thousands through his unstinting involvement in *Vaad Hatzalah*, the relief and rescue organization, and through his travels through the United States raising money to save European Jewry. Alas, he failed to save his own *yeshivah* and family from the death knell.

Rav Gordon happened to be in America prior to the war, and, when war broke out, it was impossible for him to return. He was shocked at the pathetic attitude of American Jewry toward their European brothers and sisters. He partnered with *Horav Eliezer Silver, zl*, and others to raise money and guide the efforts to ransom whomever he could. Basically a withdrawn and quiet person, *Rav* Gordon’s speeches were passionate and fiery, because of his intense love for every Jew. The following is an excerpt from one of his most famous speeches.

“How can we stand idly by as thousands of our brothers and sisters are being led to their slaughter?! Let me share with you some of the terrifying events which have recently become public. When the evil beasts were gathering the poor men, women and children to be killed, anyone who had with him fifty dollars was able to buy their way to freedom – and life.

“Imagine for yourselves, if any one of you would know that for fifty dollars you could rescue a Jew from the inferno – who would not jump at the opportunity to help a fellow Jew? Yet, the *yetzer hora*, evil-inclination, has its ways of subverting our efforts. It raises questions: Can it really be done? Will fifty dollars really be enough? Surely, if everyone knew his moral obligation to save a Jewish life – no one would refrain. Everyone would certainly do everything within his ability – and beyond – to help his fellow Jew!”

The *Rosh Yeshivah* cited the above *Midrash*, indicating to the assemblage that, when one gives to help a fellow Jew, it is not how much he actually gives that matters, but rather, the benefit which it engenders to the subject in need.

Let us be so bold as to go one step further. *Chesed* extends beyond the realm of material sustenance. We quickly forget that spiritual sustenance might be even more important. Reaching out to someone who is searching, who is making the attempt to embrace a life of Torah and *mitzvos*, can be more difficult than writing out a check. It requires time and an abundance of patience – which may be tested at all intervals of the journey. *Chumash*, *Mishnayos*, *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, etc. require time, which many of us do not have. If it may be the catalyst, however, for turning around one’s life, saving a family, changing a generation – can we say “no”?