These were the sons of Levi in order of their birth: Gershon, Kehas and Merari. (6:16)

Shevet Levi was the one tribe that was excluded from the Egyptian bondage. They studied Torah all day, while their brethren slaved for Pharaoh. One should not think for a moment that they had it "easy," since they did not work. Pharaoh was no fool. He knew that, as long as a segment of the Jewish People maintained its bond with the Torah, the nation would survive. In order to break Levi's bond with the Torah, Pharaoh decreed that only those who worked were entitled to food: no work; no food. He thought that he could starve the *Leviim* into breaking with the Torah. He did not know the Jewish People. They might themselves not learn, but they knew quite well that their survival was based upon the learning of *Shevet Levi*. Thus, they brought a part of their meager portion to the Levi. This is how and why they all survived.

The members of *Shevet Levi* were troubled over the fact that they were not performing the same back-breaking labor as their brethren. They empathized with their toil, their pain, their misery. Thus, Levi, the *rosh ha'mishpachah*, head of the Levite family, gave his three sons names which alluded to the exile: Gershon – they were sojourners in a land that was not theirs; Kehas – their teeth were blunted from the slavery (Keihos); Merari – their lives were embittered. This, explains the *Shlah HaKadosh*, teaches us to empathize with another Jew's pain – even if the pain is distant from you. Another Jew's pain is your pain.

During World War I, when many Jews were displaced and suffering, the *Chafetz Chaim*, *zl*, refused to sleep comfortably in a bed. He slept in his chair. The *Chazon Ish, zl*, would receive letters from all corners of the world: letters petitioning his blessing; letters from people who were in dire straits, suffering immeasurable pain, who needed his sage advice or, simply, a shoulder to cry on. He responded to each letter, addressing every concern and giving his blessing when needed. He saved each and every letter. When the *Chazon Ish* was *niftar*, passed away, the question was raised concerning the many thousands of letters that filled boxes and boxes. Indeed, someone asked why he had saved those letters.

Horav Dov Yoffe, zl, explains that he had once asked this question of the *Chazon Ish*. The response indicates the greatness of the *Chazon Ish* and the extraordinary thoughtfulness and empathy he had for all Jews. "When a Jew writes a letter to me," the *Chazon Ish* explained, "he imbues it with all of the pain and misery that he is experiencing. The tears that seem non- existent soak every page. The pain and suffering -- every bit of emotion that is coursing through his body -- are very much a part of the letter. If so, how can I simply discard such an emotion-laden letter?"

We have just given the reader a tiny glimpse of the empathy evoked by two of the *gedolim*, Torah leaders, of the previous generation. What about Jews that are not *gedolim: amcha*, Your people, *Yidden,* to whom *chesed*, lovingkindness, in all its forms, is an inherent part of their lives? We perform *chesed* not simply because we are compassionate. We feel for the other fellow; we

perform *chesed* because their pain is our pain; we feel their pain. We empathize for them because they are us!

Let us take this a bit further – two steps further. What about the non-practicing Jew, the Jew who basically identifies as a Jew, but observes nothing? Does he empathize with his brethren? If *chesed* is a part of our DNA, then it should cross the lines – applying equally to the non-observant as well. Last, what about empathy toward someone who is gone – who has passed from the world? The *Chazon Ish* saved letters, because they represented a Jew's pain. How far does empathy reach?

Clearly, different levels of *chesed* exist, and various personalities are involved in its execution. Some follow the Torah's guidelines; others follow their hearts. For some, Jew and non-Jew are alike; for others, they reach out to everyone – for varied reasons. The following story moved me. It is not the traditional story about a devout Jew who went out of his comfort zone to help his brother. In fact, this story is about a Jew, who, although he did very much for his people, emerged from the Holocaust a changed person. He sought revenge for what happened to his collective Jewish family. He felt the pain and anguish experienced by his brothers and sisters, but he was not prepared to accept Hashem as part of his life, at least not to the point of religious observance. We are not the ones to judge a Jew who suffered through those years. The story gives us a new perspective on Jewish empathy.

Simon Weisenthal was an Austrian Holocaust survivor, who, following the war, became the premier Nazi hunter. While he was sitting in his office in Vienna one day in 1965, a woman, Mrs. Rawicz from the city of Rabka, came by on her way to testify at a war crimes trial. She related to him the story of Sammy Rosenbaum, describing him as "a frail boy with a pale, gaunt face and big, dark eyes, who appeared to be much older than his nine years of age." But, then, many children during the Holocaust aged quickly and showed it.

Sammy's father was a tailor who lived with his wife, young son and daughter in two musty rooms and a tiny kitchen in an old house. They were a happy family. Sammy accompanied his father to the synagogue every Friday night after his mother and sister lit the *Shabbos* candles. Everything changed in 1940 when the SS set up a training center in a former Polish army barracks outside of Rabka. It was the early phase of the war, so the SS platoons would shoot their victims, anywhere from fifty to one hundred and fifty daily. This was the way the SS trained their troops to become hardened and insensitive to what they would soon be doing. They wanted speed, no fuss, and maximum efficiency.

The school's commander was a cynical and brutal hardened SS man. Untersturm – fuhrer Wilhelm Rosenbaum walked around with a riding crop. His very presence inspired spine-chilling fear in the inmates of the "training center."

In early 1942, all of Rabka's Jews were ordered to present themselves at the local school to

“register.” As would happen throughout Poland, the sick and elderly were deported, and the others would labor for the Wehrmacht. As they were going through the names, Rosenbaum noticed the names of the Rosenbaum family. He went berserk, beating his riding crop on the table and screaming insanely, “How dare a Jew have my good German name!” He immediately threw the list of names on the table and stormed out of the room. Everyone knew what this beastly outrage meant: it would only be a matter of time before the Rosenbaums would be murdered.

The SS training center “students” practiced executions in a clearing in the forest. Rosenbaum watched with a careful, almost clinical, eye, to see if a soldier demonstrated any semblance of emotion as he shot the hapless Jews. Mrs. Rawicz (who was testifying) worked in the training center as a charwoman, cleaning off the blood from the boots of the SS, and then polishing them. One Friday morning in June, 1942, as she stood bent over cleaning, she saw the Rosenbaum family – father, mother and fifteen year old daughter – being led by two SS men to the clearing place. Behind them, walked Rosenbaum. The witness related that the mother and daughter were immediately shot. Then Rosenbaum took out his anger on the father because, after all, he was the one who had introduced the Rosenbaum name to his family. With his riding crop swinging, he mercilessly beat the father senseless – for what? For having the same name as he. Then he emptied his revolver into the martyr.

Rosenbaum was still enraged. Where was the boy? Without Sammy, his vengeance would not be complete. There still remained a Jew who bore his name. When he discovered that Sammy had gone with a work detail to the quarry, he immediately dispatched an unarmed Jewish kapo to bring Sammy to him.

The kapo went by horse drawn cart to the quarry, and when he saw Sammy, he waved. Everyone stopped working. The Jews all knew the meaning of that wave. Apparently, Sammy’s time had come.

Sammy looked up at the kapo and asked, “Father, Mother and Paula – where are they?” The kapo just shook his head. Sammy knew. They were dead. Sammy spoke matter of factly, “Our name is Rosenbaum, and now you have come for me.” He alighted the wagon and sat down next to the kapo. Sammy did not run into the woods. He did not cry. He knew what must have transpired. He knew that he was next. There was no running. These creatures were fiends of the lowest order. Sammy asked the kapo if he could stop – one last time – at his house. The kapo said yes.

On the way, the kapo related to Sammy what had taken place earlier that morning. They arrived at Sammy’s house, went in and noticed the partially eaten breakfast. By now his parents and Paula were already buried, and no one had lit a candle in their memory. Sammy cleared the dishes of half-eaten food off the table and placed candlesticks on it. Sammy put on his *yarmulke* and lit the candles: two for his father; two for his mother; and two for his sister. He began to pray, then he recited *Kaddish*, the prayer recited for the dead, for them. Sammy remembered that his father always recited *Kaddish* for his parents. Now that he was the surviving member of his family, it was

his turn to say *Kaddish*.

Sammy began to walk toward the door, suddenly stopped, shook his head – and returned to the table. Sammy had remembered something. He took out two more candles, placed them on the table, lit them and prayed. (Later on, when it was all over, the kapo said, “He lit those candles and said *Kaddish* for himself.”) Sammy came out of the house and sat down on the wagon next to the hardened kapo, who was now crying. The kapo wiped his tears, and they rode back in silence to the camp. The boy did not speak. He touched the older man’s hand to comfort him – to forgive him for taking him to his death.

They arrived at the clearing in the woods, where the accursed SS Untersturmfuhrer was waiting with his students. The abominable creature screamed out, “It’s about time!” He raised his revolver and shot the child.

Simon Wiesenthal concluded the story, “No tombstone bears Sammy Rosenbaum’s name. Quite possibly, had the woman from Rabka not come to my office, no one would have remembered him. But every year, one day in June, I light the candles for Sammy and recite *Kaddish* for him.”

Jewish empathy transcends observance and the possibility of receiving gratitude. We are all family. It is who we are. It is what we do.