

Then Yaakov took a vow, saying, “If G-d will be with me...and whatever You will give me, I shall repeatedly tithe to You.” (28:20,22)

The word *leimor*, saying, is an implication to future generations, that they, too, shall vow in times of distress. *Chazal* (*Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis 70*) say, “Yaakov was the first to vow, thus all those who vow in the future should attach their vow to him.” Yaakov *Avinu* merited that all sincere vows be connected and attributed to his vow. He paved the way for people to vow to Hashem. Thus, when anyone commences a *mitzvah*, a project, an endeavor that will help others or increase service to Hashem, the merit all reverts to he who took the first plunge, who established it.

Horav Chaim Kamil, zl, delivered the primary address at the establishment of an elementary school. He quoted the above *pasuk* and said, “All those who are from the *meyasdim*, founders, the initiators of an institution merit in all the Torah that will eventually be learned therein.” As in all *mitzvos*, the one who is the *maschil*, beginner, who initiates it, will share in everyone’s *mitzvah* that results from it. As this applies to the positive, it also applies to the negative. Amalek was the first nation to attack us when we left Egypt; his act of aggression will never be forgotten. *Chazal* compare it to a burning hot tub which no one is willing to enter. One wild, undisciplined person, who asks no questions and cares for no answers, just jumps in. While he is certainly burned, he does catalyze one (negative) achievement: he cools the water for everyone else. As a result, Amalek has a portion in all of our pain. It will always be reckoned against him.

Fear of initiating a project or developing an institution is not uncommon. There are those who view it like a hot bath which will scald anyone who attempts to jump in. It might be difficult initially, and it might even fail at first, but think about the merit that goes to he who commences the project. Even if it fails, he has at least made it easier for the next one to succeed. *Chazal* teach that one should rise early in the morning, so that he is one of the first ten to comprise the *minyán*, quorum, for *Shacharis*. Even if another hundred worshippers arrive afterwards, he receives the reward commensurate to all of theirs combined. The first to begin a project has enormous merit and, in circumstances which his being first generated negativity, he will have the lion’s share of the resultant deficiencies.

If I may, I digress from the focus on *avodas Hashem* and address the “mundane” issue of reaching out to people in need and offering practical assistance. “Need” is a general term that has such subheads as: economic, emotional, physical, spiritual, etc. While everybody wants to help, nobody wants to be the first to jump in. We hesitate for a number of reasons, because, for the most part, we are insecure. After all, we are always looking over our shoulder wondering what “someone” is going to say about us. Much of what happens (or does not happen) is due to this “syndrome.” We spend more time looking for excuses why not to be first and, later, to justify our decisions, that we could have already have helped and successfully extricated someone from a bad situation.

Imagine if *Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl*, would have taken that attitude: there would be no day school/*yeshivah* movement (eventually someone else would have had the courage); or if *Horav Aharon Kotler, zl*, would have worried about his own learning and not about *Klal Yisrael*? The list goes on, on a general, communal scale and on an individual scale. Every community has its founders; from the *baalei batim* who stood up and fought against apathy; from *Roshei Yeshivah* who were on a mission to build Torah; to day school principals who went door-to-door canvassing for children. They were derided, humiliated, scorned, but, nonetheless, they succeeded. They were not afraid to be the first, and, as a result, the communities that they built have mushroomed and undergone a complete metamorphosis, to the point that no one remembers what "it" looked like prior to the founding fathers toil and sacrifice. Despite the change, we are all indebted to the "first" responders who started it all and paved the way for us to enjoy and continue to build.