

You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. (22:21)

It is understandable that one should not afflict the widow and orphan. Why would anyone who has a modicum of human decency have to be commanded not to take advantage of the weak and defenseless? Apparently, when a profit can be made, or one can assuage his ego by dominating over others, human decency has little meaning – and even less influence.

Horav Yechiel Meir, zl, m'Gustinin was asked why the Torah emphasizes that one may not afflict a widow and an orphan, as if one is permitted to do so to an ordinary Jew who is not a victim of tragedy. The Torah writes, "When he cries out, I will surely listen to his cry." Does this mean that Hashem does not answer the cry of an ordinary Jew? Certainly, Hashem listens to everyone. What distinguishes the widow and orphan from other Jews who are victims of travail? The *Rebbe* replied: "When an ordinary Jew cries out to Hashem, if he is justified in his grievance, Hashem listens. If his complaint requires serious validation, Hashem does not listen. If a widow or orphan cries out to Hashem, He listens, regardless of justification or not. He listens to them all the time." Thus, the Torah warns us to beware of their cries.

Horav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zl, was a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, who became the *posek ha'dor*, generation's *halachic* arbitrator. He was a unique blend of brilliance coupled with extreme humility. His love for all Jews was legend. His sensitivity towards the weak and defenseless was extraordinary, as evinced by the following story.

Early one morning, an *avreich*, young man living in the Har Nof section of Yerushalayim, called an ambulance for his wife. She was about to give birth, and it was best that they reach the hospital as soon as possible. Suddenly, as they were preparing to leave for the hospital, the young man's heart gave out. The medics worked on him, to no avail. Tragically, he died before his wife gave birth to their son. The tragedy was great, the grief overwhelming, but, as believing Jews, we know that we have a Heavenly Father Who decides everything that occurs in this world, Thus, with profound faith and trust, we carry on. This young mother was heartbroken, her life was presently shattered, but she was well aware that several *halachic* questions had to be clarified, one of which was: Could she give her newborn son his father's name? Her late husband had died at a young age, which was reason to refrain from naming her son after him. She asked someone to approach *Rav Shlomo Zalman* with the *sheilah*, *halachic* query.

After hearing the question, *Rav Shlomo Zalman's* immediate response was, "I would like to visit the mother." He wanted to hear from her in person, so that he could hear her story first-hand and rule accordingly.

Rav Shlomo Zalman did not visit women in the hospital. This time, he digressed from his usual practice and went to the hospital. He sat with the young widow and comforted her in her bereavement. He instructed her to name her son after the infant's father: "This boy will not have a father. I want you to know that I accept upon myself to be his father! Furthermore, I will be a father

to your other children, and I will take care of them and of you, too, just like a real father!”

Rav Shlomo Zalman kept his word. Despite having no prior acquaintance whatsoever with the family, he filled the role of a concerned parent to each and every child, involving himself in both their spiritual and material wellbeing. He assisted the widowed mother in marrying off all of her children, and he later helped her to find a spouse as well.

We can glean one powerful lesson from this story. *Chesed* means more than writing a check or even making a phone call. It means making an attempt to fill the needs of the beneficiary. A widowed mother needs reassurance that someone has her back and will be present for her. An orphan requires a parent to fill his void. Obviously, the benefactor cannot be the parent, but he can fill the void. For some, giving a check is a way of saying, “Here, take this, help the family, but please do not bother me.” For others, it is a way of assuaging their guilt. While no one is ignoring the check, true *chesed* means filling the beneficiaries’ needs.

A well-known incident occurred concerning the *Chafetz Chaim* which, due to its compelling lesson, deserves repeating. A wealthy philanthropist came to Radin to obtain a *brachah*, blessing, from the saintly *Chafetz Chaim*. The man entered the room and was shocked at the *Chafetz Chaim’s* cold response to him. Instead of garnering the respect he was used to receiving wherever he went, he was the recipient of an icy stare from the *Chafetz Chaim*. This could have traumatized anyone. Being a decent person and not overly arrogant, he begged to speak with the *Chafetz Chaim*. He was beside himself over the *Chafetz Chaim’s* puzzling welcome. He finally confronted the holy *Chafetz Chaim* and asked, “*Rebbe*, what did I do to deserve his honor’s cold stare?” The *Chafetz Chaim* looked him directly in the eyes and said, “It is all your fault!” Now the man was even more perplexed. “*Rebbe*, what is my fault?” he asked. “More than three million of our brothers and sisters are suffering pain and oppression – both physical and religious – under the harsh yoke of Communism. Everything that they are experiencing is your fault!”

“Many years ago,” the *Chafetz Chaim* continued, “you administrated a school which had a student by the name of Leibel Bronstein who challenged his *rebbe* and the entire system. He was an orphan who had lost his father. He lived with his widowed mother who struggled to put bread on the table. Disciplining her Leibele would have to wait. The pressure on Leibel was too much for a young boy to bear, so he acted out and caused trouble. He wanted to ‘share’ his deprived childhood with everyone.

“In the end, you lost patience and had Leibel removed from the school. [He felt that he had a responsibility to the other children, which he did, but...] As a result, Leibel attended a secular school where he flourished. He reneged his religious heritage and became a secular leader, indeed, one of the founders of Communism. He became the supreme commander of the Red Army. Yes, Leibel became Leon and Bronstein became Trotsky. Leon Trotsky, who is responsible for so much Jewish suffering, was the boy whom you ejected years ago! Now, I ask you, who is responsible for all this pain, if not you?”

I will not bother to state the ramifications of this incident and how they affect us in a practical manner in our own educational institutions, particularly the frequent double-standard we manifest toward children who do not live up to our expectations. At the end of the day, it is all the home – the parents. They are the first line of defense, the first responders and, also, the first despoilers, either actively or passively, perhaps by default, by not noticing a problem and acting to ameliorate it.

Zero Mostel was a famous American actor and comedian. His real name was Shmuel Yoel Mostel. He was born in Brooklyn and grew up, together with his seven siblings, in a very observant home on the Lower East side. Ultimately, he repudiated his heritage and left Jewish observance. He called himself “Zero” Mostel, a truly strange name for such a successful entertainer. He explained that his father had constantly told him, “You are a zero! You will always be a zero!” Sadly, he proved his father right. He became a “zero” – leaving nothing for Jewish observance. How careful we must be to accentuate the positive and never focus on the negative.