

But upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow. (10:18)

The Torah teaches us that Hashem is concerned about the honor of the downtrodden, the widow and orphan, individuals who are alone with no one to care for them. The exhortation to preserve the honor of a widow applies even to a king's widow. In his commentary to *Bereishis* 37, *Rabbeinu Bachya* quotes this from a *Midrash*. The reason for this stringency is that their spirits are low and their tears are frequent. Widows and orphans who are oppressed have no one to turn to other than Hashem – Who listens. *Horav Ovadiah Yosef, zl*, was very careful to safeguard the honor of widows and orphans. He once heard of the plight of a lonely widow, the wife of a certain distinguished *rav* who had passed away. He immediately dispatched one of his personal aides to offer her his blessing and to inquire concerning her health and welfare. When he was informed that his granddaughter's husband was traveling to Netanya, he asked that he deliver a copy of his latest *sefer*, volume, on *halachah*, with his personalized inscription and blessing, to this widow.

The *pasuk* in *Parashas Mishpatim* (*Shemos* 22:33), "You shall not oppress any widow or orphans. If you oppress him (beware) for if he cries out to Me, I will surely hear his cry." *Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl*, asks an obvious (rhetorical) question: Why is Hashem waiting for the widow/orphan's outcry? Should Hashem not pre-empt His response to the oppressed without requiring that they first turn to Him? *Rav Hirsch* explains that civil society is obliged to establish social networks to support the needs of the vulnerable in times of trouble. In this scenario, Hashem is viewed as a person's last resort – when all else fails. To paraphrase *Rav Hirsch*, "Woe if...the state (Jewish community) misuses/takes advantage of the oppressed and allows them to feel that they have lost the one who stands up for them, who looks after them." How sad it is when the community does not perform its obligations to the most vulnerable. How lamentable it is when these widows, orphans and abandoned wives (yes, they are no different) have been compelled to lose faith in their community leaders, both physical and spiritual, because they just do not have the time to care, think, reach out to the less "exotic" needs of the wider community. Woe, if these vulnerable souls must now raise up their hands and cry to Hashem: "Sorry, Hashem, that it had to come to this, but there is no one down here who considers my predicament worthy of their precious time." *Rav Hirsch* concludes with a frightening statement, "Woe, if they finally have to cry out to Me, for I will surely give ear to them, and I shall make the state and the community pay dearly for it, if their weak and unprotected ones have to appeal to Me before they can find justice."

As an indication of the frightening ramifications that result from oppressing a widow – even unintentionally and certainly with no malice aforethought, I cite an incident that occurred with no less a Torah giant than *Horav Nosson Nota Spira, zl*, author of the *Megaleh Amukos* and *Horav David HaLevi Segal, zl*, popularly known for his classic commentary to *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Turei Zahav/Taz*. It was mid-seventeenth century Poland, and the *Megaleh Amukos*, besides being the *posek*, *Halachic* arbitrator of Cracow, Poland, was one of the great *kabbalists* of his time. The *Taz* lived at the time in Lemberg, Poland, and planned to visit his father-in-law, *Horav Yoel Sirkis, zl*, author of the *Bayis Chadash/Bach* on *Shulchan Aruch*, who lived in Cracow.

One can imagine that the visit of such an illustrious personage such as the *Taz* to a city such as Cracow, a city renowned for its Torah leadership, a city in which its laymen were erudite scholars, was considered a major “state” visit. The *Bach* was one of Jewry’s most prominent *poskim*; his son-in-law was an up and coming *posek* whose commentary placed him among the Torah elite of his generation. This would be an event to remember. Everyone turned out to greet the distinguished guest. Well – almost everyone. The *Megaleh Amukos* was visibly absent. The *Taz* remained in Cracow for a number of days, during which the *Megaleh Amukos*’ absence was obvious and quite surprising. The members of the community were “quietly” questioning their revered *Rav*’s self-imposed exclusion from the visitors’ list.

Finally, after some time, indeed, shortly prior to the *Taz*’s preparation for his return to Lemberg, the *Megaleh Amukos* appeared to pay homage to the distinguished visitor to Cracow. When the close followers of the *Taz* questioned the tardiness of the *Megaleh Amukos*, he revealed to them that the *Taz* had been placed in Heavenly *nidui*, ban/ostracism. Clearly, the listeners were stupefied to hear that their venerable *Rebbe* could be guilty of a Heavenly ban. The *Megaleh Amukos* explained that this was all due to his being a *Kabbalist* who delved deeply into the esoteric secrets of Torah, thus affording him a more penetrating insight into what was taking place superficially in the world. When the *Taz* prepared to leave Lemberg to journey to Cracow, he was accompanied by a throng of well-wishers who, out of reverence for their *Rav*, sought to accompany him to the city’s outskirts. Among these people was a widow who had a question to ask of the *Taz*. As a result of the great tumult, the many people who were pressing against the carriage, and the ensuing difficulty finding a quiet place to talk, the *Taz* was never made aware of this poor woman’s request to speak to him. Due to his slighting a widow, which, albeit not intentional, made her feel bad, Heaven held him in abeyance. Just as this woman could not function as she would have wanted due to the pressing issue on her shoulders, so, too, would his ability to pulsate and congregate with others be placed in a holding pattern. It was not his fault; he had been totally unaware of her presence. When one is a leader of *Klal Yisrael*, however, Heaven applies a different barometer towards measuring infractions.

Many lonely people are out there. Each one has his/her own issues. Some are self-imposed; others are imposed on by evil people who prey on the helpless. As *Rav Hirsch* teaches, a community should have people that look out for others. If leadership is unable to do so, caring members of the community should pick up the slack. If they do not, the oppressed will cry. Hashem will listen. It should not have to come to that. We will all one day have to explain to Him why we were not among the first responders.