

“Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and observed their burdens.” (2:11)

Although raised in the splendor of Pharaoh's palace, exposed constantly to the anti-Semitic vitriol that was undoubtedly a part of the daily conversation, Moshe *Rabbeinu* remained the son of Amram and Yocheved. He did not become an Egyptian prince; he remained a Jew, proud of his heritage, empathetic to his brethren, compassionate for the downtrodden, broken slaves. He did not merely identify with his People through lip service; he went out to them. He wanted to observe their suffering and grieve with them. He was a true “*noseh b'ol im chaveiro*,” one who carries the yoke with his friend. He sought to be a part of their persecutions.

Horav Simchah Zissel, z.l., m'Kelm observes that Moshe's empathy extended beyond the larger community. He also demonstrated his sensitivity to the needs of the individual when he rescued a Jew from the murderous hands of his Egyptian oppressor. In another incident, when two Jews were fighting with each other, Moshe intervened. Moshe's efforts were not limited only to his country. Also in Midyan, when he saw the Midyanite shepherds abusing Yisro's daughters, he came to their rescue. He even gave water to their sheep.

When Hashem appeared to Moshe through the Burning Bush, He was thereby conveying a message: *imo anochi b'tzarah*, I am with him in his pain. Hashem empathizes with the oppressed, the downtrodden, the persecuted.

Furthermore, out of the eighty years of Moshe's life preceding his first meeting with Pharaoh, the only episodes of his life that the *Torah* finds worthy of inclusion are those in which his empathy for another Jew is manifest. This demonstrated the essence of Moshe *Rabbeinu's* leadership capabilities.

Moshe *Rabbeinu* finally achieved his primary vocation – “Moshe was a shepherd” – taking care of Yisro's sheep. *Horav Matisyahu Solomon, Shlita*, observes that this is the zenith of Moshe's career to this point in his life. He attained the position of *roeh*, shepherd. All of the previous incidents in his life, the sensitivity, the caring, the empathy, all climaxed at this moment – he became a shepherd. Our greatest leaders were shepherds. Yaakov *Avinu* and David *Ha'melech* were both shepherds. The *Midrash* tells us that one day a young sheep ran away to drink water from a stream. When he was found, Moshe came over and apologized, saying, “I did not realize that you were thirsty. You must be tired from the running, I will carry you.” When Hashem saw this, He said, “You have compassion to lead the sheep, by your life, you will lead My sheep: *Klal Yisrael*.” We derive from here that when the leader, the elder, the parent, the teacher, apologizes for a slight error, it is not merely a lesson in humility – it comprises a prerequisite for leadership. One who apologizes is sensitive to the other's feelings. He is, thereby, strengthening his friend. He empathizes. He is ready to lead.

When Hashem asked Moshe to go lead the Jews from Egypt, Moshe refused. Where was his empathy for his oppressed brethren then? For seven days, he refused; for seven days, his brethren suffered. Where was his sensitivity? *Chazal* tell us that Moshe refused to lead out of a sense of respect for his older brother, Aharon. Yet, we still must ask: If Hashem Himself makes a request and the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews are at stake, does Moshe have the right to delay their liberation and refuse Hashem—all because of his sensitivity towards Aharon?

We see from here, maintains *Horav Yaakov Beifus, Shlita*, the extent to which one must concern himself with his friend's sensitivities. Moshe *Rabbeinu* would absolutely not do anything that might impinge on his brother Aharon's esteem. Hashem would take care of *Klal Yisrael*. Moshe would not lead if it meant hurting his brother. Furthermore, we derive from here that the end does not justify the means. Even if the entire nation was waiting, it did not warrant hurting another Jew's feelings. A *mitzvah* should not be performed through the medium of an *aveirah*, sin.

Horav Sholom Schwadron, z.l., cited by Rabbi Peysach Krohn tells a poignant story which underscores this idea. *Reb Nachum* was the *baal tefillah*, *chazzan*, on the *Yamim Noraim*, High Holidays, in the *shul*, in which *Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, z.l.*, was the *rav*. To be selected for such an eminent position in such a prestigious *shul* was truly a distinctive honor. It happened one a year, several weeks prior to *Rosh Hashanah* that *Reb Nachum* took ill and died. Naturally, everyone mourned the passing of their dear friend, a Jew whose moral rectitude matched his beautiful voice.

After the period of mourning had passed, the elders of the congregation approached the *rav* and asked him what they should do to secure the service of a *chazzan* whose penetrating voice would inspire them as *Reb Nachum's* did. *Rav Yosef Chaim* told the people not to worry—they would have a *baal tefillah* in due time. A few days passed. It was five days to *Rosh Hashanah* and still there was no mention of the appointment of a new *chazzan*. Indeed, they were getting somewhat apprehensive that at such a late date this position had not yet been filled. A few days later, they approached the *rav* again, only to receive the same answer: when the time arrived, they would have a *baal tefillah*.

On *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, they still had no *baal-tefillah*. The members of the *shul* were getting slightly impatient, to say the least. They could not contain themselves any longer. “*Rebbe*,” they demanded, “tomorrow the *chazzan* will stand before Hashem, imploring Him on our behalf, and as yet we do not have a *chazzan*.” The *rav* responded in his calm voice, “I told you that you have nothing to worry about; tomorrow you will have a *chazzan*.”

The next day there was a sense of anticipation in the air as everyone waited to see who *Rav Yosef Chaim* would “produce”. *Shacharis* was concluded, followed by *Krias ha'Torah*, the *Torah* reading; the *Shofar* was about to be blown, and there was still no *chazzan*. All eyes were on the *rav*. Suddenly, he arose from his seat and went over to *Reb Nachum's* son. He bent over him and said, “You are to fill your father's place: you will be the *baal tefillah*.”

The young man was stupefied. He had never considered the idea that he would be asked to lead the *Mussaf*. He began to protest, "I am not prepared: I did not look over the *davening*. How can I go up to lead the congregation?" Rav Yosef Chaim responded in a soothing voice, "Do not worry. You have listened to your father *daven* for years. Go up there; it will all come to you. I am sure that you will do well." The young man listened to the *rav* and went to the *bimah*, lectern, to *daven*, to the consternation of the congregation.

After *Mussaf*, a group of esteemed lay people went over to Rav Yosef Chaim and respectfully asked him why he had sent an *avel*, mourner, to lead the services. It clearly states in *Halachah* that a mourner does not lead the services on *Shabbos* or *Yom Tov*.

The *rav* looked at the group and responded, "Perhaps you do not realize, but *Reb Nachum's* widow was with us today in *shul*. Can you imagine the grief and sorrow that she is feeling, especially on this day when her beloved husband was usually the *chazzan*? Imagine the pain she would have sustained if someone else had *davened* the *tefillah* that her husband had led for so many years. Her tears and anguish would be heard and felt by all. To minimize her grief, I sent her son to take his late father's place. Perhaps the *nachas* of seeing her son at the *bimah* might in some way mitigate her pain. We are admonished by the *Torah* to be sensitive to the needs of a widow. I felt that appointing *Reb Nachum's* son to *daven* outweighed the law that prohibits a mourner from leading the *tefillah* on *Yom Tov*. Indeed, for the sake of the widow there was no one else."

It takes a great individual of the calibre of Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld to act with such empathy. It takes a great person to think of the small things, because what might seem small to some of us is actually very big in the eyes of others.