

“And when Avram heard that his kinsman (his nephew, Lot) was taken captive, he armed his disciples who had been born in his house.” (14:14)

Empathy for another person is a character trait we should learn from Avraham *Avinu*. As soon as he heard that his nephew, Lot, was taken captive, he immediately assembled a small army and risked his life to save him. From a cursory perspective, it seems like the right thing to do. My nephew is in trouble – I go out to save him. Is that what we do? How often do we find a way to rationalize away our responsibility to our fellow man? Avraham had every reason to turn his back on Lot. It is not as if Lot did not ask for this by moving away from Avraham and seeking the lush, fertile land of Sodom. Lot was greedy; he received what he deserved.

Yet, Avraham did not act this way. He sought every reason to justify Lot’s move and to risk his own life to rescue him from captivity. All too often the response to the suffering of another is apathy. Whatever happened to the “Jew” in us, as descendants of Avraham *Avinu*, who could not tolerate an injustice, even if the person on the receiving end probably “asked” for it? As Jews we are all part of one unit – one people – one nation. When another Jew in any part of the world suffers, we should feel it.

Life goes on. We hear constantly of Jews suffering throughout the world. Whether it is illness or persecution, they are suffering. We respond with some *Tehillim*, which we at first recite with feeling. After awhile, however, the emotion dissipates, and the feeling becomes less intense.

The Nazis that exterminated six million *Kedoshim*, martyrs, in the most inhuman manner were, for the most part, considered normal people. They did not look like beasts. For all intents and purposes, they did not act like beasts. They believed that Jews were a subculture and, therefore, a threat to the human race. They were indifferent to the persecution of innocent people, because they did not consider them people. They rationalized away their indifference. Thus, they were able to continue their dirty work without a heavy heart.

It begins with rationalization, progresses to indifference, and ends with downright cruelty. I recently read some poignant but compelling remarks made by a German Protestant minister, who, upon his release from a Nazi concentration camp, said the following:

“In Germany, they first came for the Jews, and I did not speak up, because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists, and I did not speak up, because I was not a Communist.

“Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up, because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the gypsies, and I did not speak up, because I was not a gypsy.

“Then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak up, because I was not a Catholic. Then

they came for me. And by that time, there was no one left to speak up.”

Avraham *Avinu* taught the world and imbued his descendants with the mindset that the empathy we have for another person defines our humanness. Lot was Avraham’s nephew. Yet, the Torah calls him “his brother”, *achiv*. When another Jew is in need, we do not dismiss our responsibility. He is our brother, and for a brother there is no rationalization—we just do it.

In an incredible *mussar shmuess*, ethical discourse, delivered to an audience of elderly rabbis, *Horav Yitzchak Aizik Sher, z.l.*, reiterated the theme of *kavod ha'briyos*, heightened sensitivity to human beings and the importance of empathy. On a visit to America shortly before *Rosh Hashanah* of 1939, he addressed this august assemblage. He began by posing a question: “What are you worried about? *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment? You observe *Shabbos* and *Kashrus*; your integrity is impeccable; you do not speak *lashon hara*, slander, of anyone. So what is it that worries you?”

After a lengthy discourse, *Rav Sher* arrived at his response, “My friends, you are all fine, upstanding Jews, and you do not sin. Yet, you pick up the *New York Times* in the morning, read that a man was killed, and you continue to drink your coffee. How can you drink coffee when you read that a woman just became a widow and children lost a father? You should faint in anguish, but you do not. Why? Because you do not care how death affects other people. As long as it is not you or yours, you simply continue with your coffee. Yes, you have something to fear on the *Yom HaDin*, for the *Ribono Shel Olam* is stricter with the righteous than with ordinary people. On the Day of Judgment, you all have to be careful.”

Rav Sher’s message is timeless. Are we any different today? We read the paper; we listen to the news; the *korbanos* in *Eretz Yisrael* increase steadily, and to us it is a mere statistic. True, we recite *Tehillim*, but has our lifestyle been altered in any way? Do we continue with our cup of coffee, rationalizing our lack of empathy for our brethren throughout the world – and at home? When I recently asked this question of an individual, his response was, “Things are so bad, I can no longer read the paper with my breakfast; it is so depressing.” This person simply has no clue. Are we any different?