

And He will give you mercy and be merciful to you and multiply you. (13:18)

Being designated as agents of destruction can take its toll on people. We read horror stories about young high school graduates who enlist in the military, and, after a tour of duty, become hollow, often depraved individuals. This is what death and killing can do to the mind. Of course, this is especially true when the victims are one's own people. The inhabitants of the *Ir Hanidachas*, wayward city, have committed a most egregious crime, for which they are duly and rightfully punished. The ones carrying out the punishment, however, might become affected by it. They might develop a callousness toward killing and persecution, thereby eroding their natural proclivity toward sympathy and compassion. There is a serious fear that these obedient servants of G-d will become heartless and cruel as a result of the mission they have been sent to execute. The Torah allays these fears by stating that Hashem will infuse them with new feelings of compassion and sensitivity. As they progress, they will merit greater compassion from Hashem, Who will reciprocate in kind.

Rachmanus, compassion, is one of the three primary character traits by which a Jew is defined: *rachmanim*, merciful; *baishanim*, easily embarrassed, *gomlei chassadim*, carry out acts of loving-kindness. Compassion is derived from the above *pasuk* which supports the notion that Jews are a compassionate people. Indeed, in the *Talmud Beitzah* 32b, *Chazal* state that one who is merciful towards people indicates that he is of Avraham *Avinu's* offspring. One who does not show mercy towards others demonstrates the obvious, that he is not of Avraham's offspring.

In his *Mesillas Yesharim*, the **Ramchal** observes that Hashem rewards a person *middah k'negged middah*, measure for measure. Thus, one who is compassionate towards others can expect the Almighty to deal with him mercifully. One who is not forgiving of others, who does not go that extra mile to overlook the dent in his ego caused by another, will have great difficulty in presenting his own case for mercy before the Heavenly Tribunal. Toward the end of the *parsha*, the Torah admonishes us to be merciful with the poor person. "If there shall be a destitute person among you, any of your brethren in any of your cities, in the land that Hashem, Your G-d, gives you, you shall not harden you heart or close your hand against your destitute brother" (*Devarim* 15:7). It seems that the Torah is connecting the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*, charity, with *Eretz Yisrael*. Otherwise, why would it write, "In any of your cities, in the land"? The obligation to be charitable transcends land; it is a *mitzvah*, everywhere, anytime. All of this is part and parcel of *rachmanus*, compassion.

In his *Od Yosef Chai*, **Horav Chaim, zl, m'Bagdad**, explains this with an analogy. A poor man was making the rounds on a cold, winter day. The roads were slushy and mud was everywhere. His shoes were filthy, the mud seeping into his socks. He knocked on the door of the palatial home of a wealthy man. The servant allowed him to enter as he called for the owner of the house. The poor man entered a foyer whose floor was made of solid white marble. Indeed, everything in the room was white. The mud on his shoes and pants began to drip all over the floor. One can imagine the

reaction of the homeowner when he came out to greet the poor man who had just soiled his beautiful, shiny floor. He screamed, berated the poor man, and instructed his servant to rid his home of this pest!

The poor man “agreed” to leave. Actually, he had little choice in the matter. He did, however, beg the homeowner to permit him to say a few words – to which the man acquiesced: “We say in *Pesukei D’Zimra, Baruch meracheim al ha’aretz*, Blessed is the One Who is merciful on the land; *Baruch meracheim al ha’briyos*, Blessed is the One Who is merciful on the creatures/people. This should motivate us to derive a lesson from the Almighty: as He is compassionate, so should we be compassionate. I see that you have adopted to follow Hashem’s way with regard to showing compassion to the land/ground. You seem overly concerned about the welfare of your beautiful floors. Perhaps you should take your compassion to the next level and also care about people. You see before you a poor man whose clothes are tattered and soiled. All I ask is a few rubles to help satisfy my basic needs. Is that too much to ask of you?

“Rav Yosef Chaim explains the meaning of *artzecha*, your land. The Torah alludes to the individual who has ‘made it.’ He has an impressive home, fine furniture, beautifully sculptured lawns. All of this demands money to sustain it. The upkeep of a house and its grounds requires more than pocket change. The Torah addresses the individual who has been blessed with affluence, who finds the funds to take care of his personal physical accouterments, but lacks the compassion and thoughtfulness to help people in need.

“The Torah writes: ‘If there shall be a destitute person among you,’ someone just like you, an observant, virtuous person, whose good fortune was not as good as yours. You are able to sit in a palatial home while he must go door to door, begging for alms. He needs your help. He is not asking for much. So, why do you not reach out to him? At this moment, when the down trodden man stands before you, his hand stretched out for assistance, reflect upon all the blessings which you have received from Hashem. Think about the ‘land,’ the physical luxuries which you have – and how much effort and money you expend to see to it that they remain beautiful. Why not do the same for the poor fellow at your door? As you show compassion for the *aretz*/land, so should you show equal compassion on the *briyos*, people. They deserve at least as much.”

How often is it that we lose sight of our ‘beginnings?’ Many of us do not always have the ability to help others. Indeed, most of us, for the most part, have been on the receiving end. Hashem has blessed us, and now we are able to be of service to others. We should step up to the plate. There is no motivator like past experience that one puts to good use. While the following story was used by **Horav Shabsi Yudelevitz, zl**, during the *Chanukah* season, its message is timeless:

It was during the early twentieth century, and the Jews in Yerushalayim were suffering through another year of hunger and deprivation. At a meeting attended by the leaders of the community, the leaders decided that they would send an emissary to the various Jewish communities in Europe. His function would be to appeal to the hearts and pocketbooks of European Jews. Perhaps

they would help. They selected *Reb Avraham* to represent the community. Our “hero” spent his days and nights engrossed in Torah study. Fundraising, as well as travel, was beyond his experience. Yet, if the community asked him to volunteer, how could he refuse?

Boat travel was dangerous in those days. Foul weather, pirates and poorly constructed ships all added to the traveler’s anxiety. Finally, after experiencing many terror-stricken days at sea, *Reb Avraham* reached Italy’s shores. He sat there on the dock with his little bag that held his *Tallis*, *Tefillin* and barest essentials, and he began to weep uncontrollably. A few hours elapsed and suddenly, as if out of nowhere, an exquisitely appointed coach pulled by four white horses pulled up, and the man in the coach, who was obviously Jewish, offered *Reb Avraham* a ride.

The man listened to *Reb Avraham*’s story and assured him that he would help both personally and through his many contacts in the business world. Shortly, they pulled up at the man’s home or, rather, his palace. The edifice was huge and luxurious. The man encouraged *Reb Avraham* to take a tour of the house while dinner was being prepared. *Reb Avraham* could not believe his good fortune. He had never even dreamed of such a mansion. Every room he entered was stunning beyond belief – until he came to what appeared to be a study, or sanctuary. There were no books-- only a simple table in the middle of the room, an old chair. On top of the table was a broken jar that was soiled and greasy. If there ever was an anomaly, it was this jar in this room. It was not consistent with the setting in this elegant mansion.

Dinner was an event in its own right. Indeed, *Reb Avraham* had never seen so much sumptuous food in his life. It was a veritable feast. It was during dinner that *Reb Avraham* asked his host to explain the meaning behind the broken jar in what seemed a special room. “It is a long story, and, if you are willing to listen, I will share with you the basic story of my life,” the host began. “I grew up in Spain in a wonderful home, to loving, observant parents. My grandfather, who was the Patriarch of the family, lived in Italy and was a successful merchant. As he aged, it became evident that he required assistance with managing his business. Being the eldest grandchild, I was nominated to join my grandfather in his business.

“I was young and energetic, and my grandfather allowed me to innovate. Before long, business doubled and tripled. We opened stores in other cities. At first, my grandfather studied Torah with me daily, but, as he became weaker, he left it up to me to study on my own – which, regrettably, I did not. As I became more and more immersed in the business, I became less and less involved in *shul* and in performing daily *mitzvos*. As we spread our wares, I was forced to travel throughout the country. Kosher was a problem at first – until I decided that kosher was an encumbrance which would not permit me to travel freely. Once my grandfather died, all attempts at concealing my diminishing Jewish observance came to an end.

I met a like-minded young woman; we married and began to raise a totally assimilated family. Life was good. Business was good. My family was well. For what more could a person ask? Then, one day, during the *Chanukah* season, I had occasion to be walking through the Jewish ghetto when I

noticed a young boy sitting on the curb crying incessantly. I approached him and asked him what was wrong. He explained that his father had been saving his pennies every week, so that he would have enough money to purchase pure olive oil for *Chanukah*. When the required amount was reached, his father had entrusted him with the money and sent him off to the store to purchase a jar of oil. On the way home, the child's excitement got the better of him as he skipped freely through the street. A loose stone caused him to fall, during which he released the jar from his hand, causing it to break and spill the oil. When I heard the child's story, I was moved at how his father had saved every precious penny to purchase a jar of oil for a *mitzvah*. I gave the boy enough money to purchase more than one jar, but I insisted that he give me the broken jar as a memento. There was something about this broken jar that invoked feelings of sadness – for a past, my own, that had once shown so much promise.

“As I was leaving the ghetto, I noticed a sign that invited the community to a lecture at the local synagogue given by a noted *Maggid*. Something within me compelled me to attend. The room was packed, nary a seat to be found, as the entire town turned out to hear this prolific speaker. He ascended to the podium and began to cry. He commenced his speech with the heart-rending words of Yehudah, *Ki eich e'eleh el avi v'ha'naar eino iti*, ‘For how can I go up to my father if the youth is not with me’ (*Bereishis* 44:34). (This was a reference to Yehudah's promise to Yaakov *Avinu* to return with Binyamin.) The *Maggid* began, ‘We will all have to face our Father in Heaven and He will ask us, “What happened to your youth? What did you do with your youthful potential; your many opportunities for spiritual growth which you squandered?”’

“I did not need to hear any more. The *Maggid* was talking to me. I immediately went home, and, after a long and serious conversation with my wife, we both decided to change our lives, to return to religious observance. I kept the glass jar because, through it my spiritual metamorphosis was catalyzed. Every day I enter this room and remind myself from where I came and how it all began.”

This is called remembering. One must never allow himself to forget how and when his life changed and who played a role in assisting his growth.