

## And it was in those days, when Moshe grew up and went out amongst his brethren and saw their burdensome labor. (2:11)

Empathizing with another person's plight is clearly a laudable trait. It shows sensitivity for others. What really constitutes empathy? Does empathy mean visiting someone in the hospital and feeling bad for them--then going home and forgetting about their anguish? Is empathy showing concern for someone who is starving while we eat our own meal? Feeling for the downtrodden, even helping them--while life goes on as usual--is that empathy? Most people would consider the aforementioned to be genuine manifestations of empathy.

**Horav Yerucham Levovitz, zl**, asserts that the *Torah* does not accept the current standard of care and empathy. He views this attitude as a superficial expression, something to quell one's guilty feelings. While the individual feels that he empathizes with his friend, he is actually far from demonstrating the *Torah's* idea of empathy. Regarding the *pasuk*, "*Vayaar b'sivlosam*," "*And (he) saw their burdensome labor*," *Rashi* comments, "He put his eyes and his heart into suffering with them." It is not enough merely to feel sorry for someone in distress. *Moshe Rabbeinu's* entire being empathized with *Bnei Yisrael's* suffering. He tried to understand their anguish, to actually feel their pain, to experience in some manner what they were living. It would be similar to visiting someone in the hospital--but only after one has studied the effect of the illness, understanding the therapy, coming to grips with the consequences and side effects of the cure. When he knows and feels and understands--when his entire being is involved--then he is capable of empathy.

*Rav Yerucham* adds that *Moshe* carried the burden together with *Bnei Yisrael*. This was not because his carrying would make the load any lighter, but because he sought to experience their hardship so that he could understand their pain. Then, he could empathize. By nature, we tend to divorce ourselves from the other's pain. We visit them; we are there in their time of need, but we go home when it is all over. We can leave the pain behind. We learn from *Moshe Rabbeinu* that there is a new dimension to empathy, one that requires us to attempt to understand and experience our friends' pain.