

"You shall not persecute any widow or orphan. If indeed you do persecute him and if indeed he cries out to Me, I will verily hear his cry." (22:21)

The *Torah* presents to us a sin and its punishment. The sin is apparent: Persecuting the downtrodden, those who have no one else to care for them. The punishment, however, is a bit ambiguous. What really is the punishment for persecuting a widow, orphan or anyone who cannot take care of themselves? The underlying message of this *pasuk* seems to be that - regardless of the amount of time that elapses -- the individual is guaranteed punishment. Hashem clearly states that He will listen and He will repay. That warning should serve as more than a sufficient deterrent for most people. There are individuals who foolishly think that if there is no concrete punishment mentioned in the *Torah*, then they will attempt to get away with that which is unmentioned. To these shortsighted sinners, Hashem responds, "Do not worry. I will not ignore the cry of the oppressed. Those who persecute them will surely receive their punishment."

We go through life wondering how some people can get away with murder. We see cruelty, oppression, persecution and suffering inflicted upon people, and the perpetrators do not seem to get punished. *Chazal* teach us in *Pirkei Avos 3:16*, "*The collectors make their rounds constantly every day, and collect payment from the person whether he realizes it or not.*" This is a reference to punishment. Hashem is the "collector" Who goes around collecting what is owed by people. At times a person is astute enough to realize that his suffering is a form of punishment. There are those, regrettably, who suffer but do not attribute their suffering to Divine retribution. A person's suffering, for the most part, is dictated by his deeds, even though he may have forgotten what he has done. While this may seem to be a generalization, the intention is only to arouse within a person the idea that everything occurs to him for a reason. Also, no one leaves this world with a "balance" of retribution. Years may go by, even generations, but the person who has hurt others will ultimately pay for his evil.

It is told that when the **Chafetz Chaim** was a young man, a widow in his city could not pay her rent. Her landlord attempted to evict her in the dead of winter, but to no avail. So, what did this "paragon" of human decency do? He removed the roof over her head, leaving her exposed to the harsh cold and elements. The townspeople were indignant and up in arms. Even this did not move the landlord. He remained intractable despite public censure, forcing the poor widow out into the cold. The *Chafetz Chaim* said nothing, but set the incident aside in his memory, waiting to see what punishment the landlord would receive. After all, the *Torah* says that Hashem will listen to the pleas of the widow. In no way could such an inhuman act take place without severe retribution from Hashem. It took ten years, a period of time during which most people, especially the perpetrator, forgot about the cruel incident, but Hashem did not forget. The landlord was walking outside and was bitten by a mad dog. Before long, he died after intense suffering. Interestingly, most people would never have correlated the two incidents. That is an unfortunate trait of human nature.

The *Chafetz Chaim's* son, *Horav Leib, zl*, recounts a frightening incident that occurred in Radin, where his father was *Rav*. It once happened that a butcher, whose son was drafted into the army, kidnapped a yeshivah student whom he placed in his son's stead. The *Chafetz Chaim*, was greatly disturbed by this dastardly act and remarked, "such a dreadful act cannot go unpunished by Hashem."

Thirty years later, when many people had long forgotten the butcher's cruelty, the butchers' son became ill with cholera. He suffered intensely and, before long, he died. The *chevrah kaddishah* refused to prepare his body for burial, due to the contagious nature of his disease. The elderly father was consequently compelled to bury his son with his own two hands.

These two incidents demonstrate the meaning of, "*I will verily hear his cry.*" Hashem listens and He punishes. We have to open our eyes and analyze the course of events that take place, at times even years later, to see the punishment incurred by those who prey on the weak and downtrodden. We find individuals who externally display well-meaning intentions while they destroy the lives of those who interfere with their agenda. They justify their actions, sometimes even receiving legitimacy and recognition by those who seek their favor. They should be aware that they will not escape the punishment they incur for the wrong they have committed. Regardless of their unfounded support, they will ultimately pay for the hurt they have caused.