

## You shall grope at noon, as the blind man gropes in the darkness. (28:29)

The *Yalkut* (also *Talmud Megillah* 24b) questions the implication of this curse. Does it matter to the blind person whether it is dark or not? He does not see anyway. Rabbi Yosi explains that he once had an experience which provided an answer for him. It was late one night when he saw a blind man walking down the dark street with a torch in his hand. “I questioned him, ‘What is the torch to you?’ He replied, ‘When the torch is in my hand people see me and prevent me from falling into pits.’”

What a powerful lesson for us to absorb. Some people are blind; they cannot see, but no one is aware of their plight. Some people suffer unimaginable pain, but no one knows. Some people are victims of serious trauma, but no one wants to know about their plight, since it is dark and no one sees them. Our people have suffered immensely throughout the anti-Semitic darkness that has pervaded the millennia. I say darkness, because the world has turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to our anguish. We suffered, but no one wanted to know. It was not in vogue to recognize Jewish pain. Sympathy was out of the question. Oppression became a way of life, and the resulting lack of self-esteem cultivated a generation that was rife for the blandishments of the *Haskalah* /Enlightenment. Why feel like a parasite because no one wants to see you? Assimilate and be like them? When a pogrom, an inquisition, or a holocaust occurs, the world becomes aware of the stark reality: the Jews are suffering! The tragedies serve as the blind man’s torch, letting the world know about our existence.

How sad it is to suffer alone. How laudatory is the individual who shines the spotlight on the plight of the blind man. Anyone who suffers alone – who has experienced a traumatic experience, endured abuse, denigration, humiliation, and either had no one to tell or no one who would listen – is very much like the blind man, only he does not have the comfort and aid of a torch to inform, to scream out to people: “Help me!”

The following letter was submitted a few years ago to one of the weekly *parshah* pamphlets in *Eretz Yisrael*, by a young man, an excellent student in a prominent *yeshivah* – but it was not always like that. His purpose was to shine a spotlight on a failing, a deficiency that could happen to anyone, anytime – but it should not – ever. Do I think his experience was an isolated case? No. Does it happen? Probably. Should it happen? Never. My feeling is: Anyone can err, and, when it does happen, correct it. Apologize and make amends. Not everyone will be as lucky as the student who wrote the letter. I would like to add that there are many forms of abuse to which our children might be subjected. If we do not shine the spotlight on the darkness, they will continue to suffer alone, and we will have committed the unforgivable, unpardonable act of allowing the blind to grope in the darkness – alone. Now for the letter.

“I was born to a family who had the good fortune of deriving *nachas* from their children. Every

report card was worthy of being framed; every *rebbe's* comment was a testament to an excellent upbringing, replete with *middos tovos*, wonderful character traits, coupled with desire and diligence in learning. At first, it appeared that I was following in the path of my predecessor siblings, until I entered upper elementary and had a *rebbe* who believed that every infraction – even the slightest, even if it was imagined by the *rebbe* – must be judged and punished to the fullest extent of his determination. Every time I acted in a manner which the *rebbe* felt was an infringement on his *kavod*, honor, I was severely punished. The taunting and degradation just egged me on, to the point that I actually deserved the punishment that I received. My parents were upset; I was upset. I just could not take it any longer. So I left school in the middle of the year. The suffering was finally over – or so I thought.

“I had impugned the *rebbe's* ego. How dare I leave his class and make him appear to be incompetent? He took my leaving school as a personal affront. He wanted vengeance. There was no way that a young *mechutzef*, insolent student, would tarnish his reputation. He would show him – and he did. When I returned to school the following year, calm, rested, my self-esteem returned, I was confronted with my past.

“I know all about you,” the new *rebbe* said. Apparently, last year's *rebbe* left a very damaging report in my file. Why the *rebbe* did that I cannot understand; why the *menahel* felt it prudent to keep it, is difficult to understand; why the new *rebbe* felt that he was unable to judge a student on his own, but felt it was necessary to pass judgment based upon the determination of the previous *rebbe's* bruised ego begs elucidation. Nonetheless, this is how my school year began – and it was downhill from that point.

“The principal was no longer a friend of mine, adding another year of misery to my life. The *rebbeim* were warned, ‘There is something wrong with this boy.’ My parents were ‘counseled’ by the principal to seek out the services of an experienced psychologist. Their son was ‘missing’ something. All of this was based upon the ego of my *rebbe* two years earlier. I suffered through the end of elementary school until it was time to go to *yeshivah*.

“What can I say? Wherever I applied, they checked me out. No one wanted a student who had emotional issues. My life was ruined. Even the third-rate *yeshivah* that finally accepted me treated me like a pariah. My life was worthless. Out of desperation, I was considering the worst exit strategies – from leaving *Yiddishkeit* to ending my life.

“Finally, after four years of bitter anguish and isolation from my friends and family (No respectable parent allowed their son to be my friend. After all, who wants their son to hang around with a ‘loser’ who had emotional issues?), a new *yeshivah* opened up. My parents had never given up on me (although I think they had serious misgivings about me. The *rebbe* and principal left a lot of unanswered questions in their mind), and they now wanted me to try one more time. This *rosh yeshivah* was different. He did not care about anyone's past. He certainly did not judge a student based upon the word of a *rebbe* who was having a ‘bad year.’ He felt himself capable of making a

judgment call 'all on his own.' So began seven years of bliss, of recapturing my self-esteem, learning all that I had heretofore missed, and becoming the true *ben Torah* I was destined to be.

"Why did I write this letter and circulate it at the beginning of the school year? I want to scream out to educators: 'Watch what you say! Guard your words! Do not judge a student based upon the opinion of another person who was probably on an ego trip. I pray that you listen, because the future of your students' lives depends on it.'"

The letter is my free translation. I altered the style (for effect), and I emphasize that this young man's case is the exception, not the norm.

*Baruch Hashem*, our *mechanchim* today are *bnei Torah* of the highest caliber. They love Torah; they love teaching Torah; they love each and every one of their students; and they are devoted heart and soul to the *mileches ha'kodesh*, holy work, that they do. We are, however, all human beings. Therefore, occasionally someone falls through the cracks of the system. This is not the forum for discussing *chinuch* issues, parent participation, administration support, etc. My purpose is to call attention to those of our community – young and old – who are groping in darkness. Let us look out for them and be their torch.

As we near the end of the year and approach the beginning of the New Year, may this be a merit for all of us to be blessed with a healthy year filled with *nachas* and joy.