

If you will behave casually with Me and refuse to heed Me. (26:21)

The *pasuk* introduces us to a new aspect of/on sin: Casualness. We persist in thinking (or acting as if we think) that all of Hashem's carefully and meticulously calibrated punishments are merely coincidental: "Things happen." When we act toward Hashem with casualness, He responds, in turn, by making it more difficult to discern the Divine Hand when things happen to us. This leads to *Hester Panim*, Divine concealment, Hiddenness of Hashem's Countenance, making it harder for us to perceive the truth. The concept of *keri*, casualness, applies likewise (not equally) in our interpersonal relationships with our fellowman. We pass people on a regular basis: Do we notice their facial expressions? Do we see joy, sadness, satisfaction, remorse? Do we care? Will our lives change in accordance with our fellowman's circumstances? Are we casual to their plight, or do we carefully calibrate our reactions and responses to them?

Empathy is the ability to share and understand the emotions of others. Such a person himself/herself feels a visceral reaction to the pain of others. They feel fear and/or pain within themselves when seeing others in such a situation. Others feel emotion on a cognitive level, understanding what the other person is going through – but not actually personally sharing in that feeling. There are those who, although exposed to deep emotional conflict and reaction, are personally able to regulate their own reactions and exert control over their emotions. This does not mean the person does not empathize. He just happens to be able to control the expression of his empathy.

These are all terms that apply to the individuals who are not connected to one another and how they react to another person's pain, etc. As *Yehudim*, we are all part of one large collective body. Terms such as ethnic group and cultural/religious similarities do not apply to members of one's family. In our case, we are all components of one body called *Am Yisrael*. Thus, the reaction should be shared overtly, because when one part of the body hurts, the entire body is in pain.

The Torah expects us to feel the plight of others. *Rashi* writes that when we give a loan to a person, it is incumbent upon us to attempt to feel what it is like to be poor. As *Horav Avigdor Nebentzhal, Shlita*, puts it, we must lend money not only with our hands, but with our hearts, as well.

Horav Eliyahu Chaim Meizel, zl, was *Rav* of Lodz, Poland. He took his position seriously, not only in the area of *Halachah*, but also in feeling and caring for the dire circumstances experienced by many of the members of his community. No government programs existed to assist the poor. If one could not afford wood for the winter, his family froze. It was not uncommon for people to sit wrapped in a blanket (for those who had access to one) in order to stay warm. The *Rav* was often seen going from door to door, seeking assistance for those in need.

One frigid, blustery night, he knocked on the door of a wealthy townsman. When the man opened the door to greet the *Rav*, *Rav* Eliyahu Chaim pushed the door wide open and, while standing in the doorway, began to converse with the man. "How are things with your family?" he asked. "How is your wife? Your children? Is your business prospering?" All this was taking place while the icy winds penetrated the cozy warmth of the house, and the wealthy man stood shivering, biting his teeth in the bitter cold. *Rav* Eliyahu Chaim continued what was becoming a monologue, because his teeth were chattering to such an extent that the man could hardly speak. Finally, he said, "*Rebbe*, it is bitter cold outside. Why does his honor not come in, sit down, have a glass of hot tea – and then we can talk?" *Rav* Eliyahu Chaim replied, "I am collecting money to establish a fund to help the needy survive the frigid winter. These people have no heat in their humble homes, and we are seeking to provide them with the bare minimum. I held the door open because I wanted you to experience firsthand what your brothers are experiencing. By feeling the bitter cold, you are able to identify with their suffering. Thus, you will give handsomely to our fund."

As long as a person sits in his warm house, he does not truly understand the plight of his poor brother. Perhaps if his body feels the cold, his own heart will warm up, causing him to be more generous with his contribution. His mind rationally understands what the poor man is experiencing, but this is insufficient empathy. He must actively empathize, viscerally feel the pain, in order to respond appropriately.

Another form of empathy is difficult for many of us to understand, so that we are unable to share in the pain effectively. Some members of our Jewish community (every city has its share of individuals in pain) are alone, in the sense that they are compelled to confront challenges which are complicated and formidable. And they do this alone, because people, inasmuch as they want to help, just do not understand. I say complicated, because every case, every scenario, is different. One can have family that is supportive, but still feel alone: "If 'Avraham' or 'Sarah' do not understand what I am experiencing, then I remain alone."

The following story is both inspiring and eye-opening, teaching us how a great man, a *gadol b'Yisrael* thinks, thus demanding of each of us to think likewise. A man came to the *Yeshuos Moshe*, *Horav Moshe Hagar*, *zl*, the *Vishnitzer Rebbe* of *Eretz Yisrael*, with a request for a *brachah*, blessing. Apparently, he was marrying off his daughter the following night, and he felt that he required an extra dose of blessing, as his wife had passed away six months earlier. The *Rebbe* blessed him, but insisted that he call him after the wedding, after the last guest had left the hall. He wanted to speak with him. "But *Rebbe*, it will be very late," the man said. "Do not worry. Regardless of the time, I insist that you call."

One does not say "no" to a *Rebbe*, so, at 3:00 a.m., the proud father called up the *Rebbe*. "*Mazel tov!*" the *Rebbe* began. "How was the wedding? Tell me about the dancing. How many people attended? Who was there? How was the band? Were there flowers on the table? What kind?" The conversation, seemingly about nothing of great significance, continued for almost an entire hour! Finally, the *Rebbe* bid the man, "Good night," and hung up the phone.

The *Rebbe's gabbai*, aide, listened to the conversation in amazement. The *Vishnitzer Rebbe* was a world leader. It was three o'clock in the morning. Surely, he had better things to do and worry about than to discuss the mundane aspects of a wedding.

"Why did the *Rebbe* do this?" the *gabbai* asked incredulously.

"Let me explain my actions to you," the *Rebbe* began.

"This man's wife just passed away. Aside from being left bereft of his life's companion, he also has no one with whom to share the joys and sad events of life. This man just married off his daughter. What do husband and wife/father and mother talk about after a wedding? They review all of the mundane questions that I asked this man. This is what he needed at three o'clock in the morning – someone to talk to, to review the wedding. He no longer has his wife. Instead, I was that 'someone!'"

The *Rebbe* understood what this man was lacking, and he endeavored to fill the need. This story should inspire us to think, to understand and to act accordingly.