

She said to Yaakov ... “Give me children” ... Yaakov’s anger flared up at Rachel and he said, “Am I in the place of G-d?” (30:1,2)

Rachel *Imeinu* pleaded with Yaakov *Avinu* to grant her children. *Chazal* (*Midrash Rabbah* 71:7) explain that she was asking that he pray on her behalf as his father, Yitzchak *Avinu*, had prayed on behalf of his mother, Rivkah *Imeinu*. Yaakov was brought to anger by virtue of her implication that he had the ability to give or withhold children. Then he added what appears to be a callous statement: “You say I should be like my father. He had to pray for my mother, because she, too, had no children. (If she would not have conceived, he would also have been rendered childless.) I, however, have children. It is from you that Hashem is withholding children – not from me.”

On the surface, to someone who is unschooled, Yaakov’s retort seems insensitive. This is not the manner in which one addresses anyone, let alone a barren woman who was pleading for a child. Furthermore, Rachel was no ordinary woman. She was his wife. *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl*, explains the rationale of Yaakov’s remarks. Rachel was well aware that Yaakov was the third Patriarch, and from him would emerge the *Shivtei Kah*, Twelve Tribes, who would comprise the nucleus of *Klal Yisrael*. The question was who – which wife – would merit to produce the greatest number of these sons. Yaakov was, thus, intimating to Rachel that, indeed, his father had to pray for his mother, because, if she had no child, *Klal Yisrael’s* future would have been impaired. No child – no *Klal Yisrael*. Yaakov, however, knew that he would father twelve sons, and he was on the way to seeing his mission realized. The present question was who would be the mother. This was Rachel’s issue for which she pleaded Yaakov to petition Hashem.

Clearly, this explanation somewhat assuages what seems to be Yaakov’s disregard for Rachel’s predicament. It does not, however, completely negate his attitude. Indeed, *Chazal* say that Hashem rebuked Yaakov for his words: “Is this the way you answer an aggrieved person? You will see that your sons (by your other wives) will stand (in submission) before her son” (when the brothers stood before Yosef [son of Rachel] viceroy of Egypt).

Hashem was alluding to Yaakov that Rachel not bearing a son would be a serious problem, because his other sons would one day need Yosef, Rachel’s son. Their survival depended on Yosef; thus, it would be prudent to take Rachel’s barrenness a bit more seriously. *Horav Avraham Pam, zl* (cited by Rabbi Sholom Smith in “*Rav Pam On Chumash*”), derives from this dialogue and commentary that one must go to great lengths to demonstrate great sensitivity when dealing with an aggrieved, distressed person. One who suffers from emotional distress or physical pain does not necessarily think or act rationally or with great care for another person’s feelings. They may lash out, say what comes into their minds, and let the chips fall where they may. Who cares? The general feeling is to “let them have it,” mete our rebuke and discipline without remorse. This is not the proper course to take. We must attempt to feel their pain, understand the adversity which they are experiencing, and attempt to alleviate their troubles in some way. While we might not succeed,

we will have at least achieved two things. First, we show them that we care. Second, we debunk the notion that we are their enemy (which is sadly a common feeling that they harbor). If we cannot make the situation better, we should at least not make it worse.

In the parlance of *mussar*, ethical discourse, this is called *nosei b'ol im chaveiro*, to carry/share the yoke with his friend. All too often we want to help, but the extent to which we are prepared to go is limited. The following vignettes present instances in which our *gedolim* showed the way which should serve as our lodestar concerning behavior.

A baby boy was born to a young Bnei Brak couple. When the *mohel*, ritual circumcisor, came to examine the infant before the *Bris*, he was concerned with the baby's color. A doctor was called to further examine the child and, after a battery of tests, discovered that the infant was suffering from a serious heart ailment that required surgery. The problem was that the surgeon was in Boston, and the doctor in *Eretz Yisrael* felt that the infant would not survive the trip. What does one do? The young father went to *Horav Aharon Leib Shteinman, zl*, to seek his counsel. *Rav Shteinman* told him to make arrangements for the trip, and he gave his blessing for a *refuah sheleimah*. Three months later, the child had sufficiently recuperated that he could now have his delayed *bris*. The young father once again returned to *Rav Shteinman*; this time, however, it was to request his presence at the *Bris* and ask that he accept the honor of being *sandek*, holding the infant during the ritual. *Rav Shteinman* replied: "You came to me originally the night before the *Bris* (three months prior). Surely one of the grandfathers or someone close to you had already been asked to be the designated *sandek*. This person has been waiting anxiously for three months for the infant to recuperate. He has been looking forward to this *Bris* for three months. Now, I should come along and take away his honor? Absolutely not."

Horav Meir Karelitz, zl, married off his daughter to *Horav Zalmen Rotberg, zl*, who was *Rosh Yeshivah* of Bais Meir in Bnei Brak. A few minutes prior to the *chuppah*, *Rav Meir* approached *Rebbetzin Greineman* (who was *Rav Meir's* niece) and asked her to walk down his daughter, the *kallah*, bride (rather than *Rebbetzin Karelitz*, the *kallah's* mother), down the aisle. The *Rebbetzin* was surprised, but, knowing her uncle, she understood that there was a special reason for the sudden change in procedure. She asked her aunt, *Rebbetzin Karelitz*, for an explanation. The response was, "I will explain after the *chuppah*." It troubled her, especially since she was younger than the *kallah*.

Following the *chuppah*, *Rav Meir* came over to his niece and explained his actions: "The *chassan* is an extraordinary young man, both in his erudition and character refinement. Sadly, both of his parents were murdered during the Holocaust. If he were to see his *kallah* walking down to the *chuppah* accompanied by both of her parents, it would be disconcerting for him. Why cause a young man to be sad on his way to the *chuppah*? In my desire to somewhat alleviate his pain, I asked you to walk down the *kallah*, so that she, too, would not walk down with her parents."

This, in and of itself, is a testament to *Rav Meir's* extraordinary sensitivity, but the story continues.

When *Rav Meir's* son, *Rav Chaim Shaul*, went to the *chuppah*, *Rav Meir* once again asked his niece to do the honors and walk the *kallah* down. This time, she was especially taken aback, since, *Baruch Hashem*, the *chassan* had both living parents in attendance. *Rav Meir* explained, "I am doing this not to cause my daughter (*Rebbetzin Rotberg*) undue agitation over the fact that her mother did not walk her down to the *chuppah*, yet walked her future sister-in-law down." Another person's feelings played a primary role in *Rav Meir's* life.