

## **You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. (22:21)**

What kind of person would mistreat a widow or an orphan? The mere fact that the Torah admonishes us against being so cruel indicates that there are people who will do anything to anyone to take advantage – be it for money, or just because they want to show their power. Some people simply do not use their *seichel*, common-sense. To them, a rule is a rule, and it should apply to the weak as well. Thus, a widow and orphan do not receive preferred treatment. They are no different than anyone else. No leniency exists for them. This is just another method of justifying cruelty on the part of the oppressor. In this manner, the Torah teaches us that the rules change when it involves those who are unusually vulnerable.

*Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita (L'Kayeim)* cites a powerful story concerning the *Chida*, who lived during the eighteenth century. A widow had an only child, a young boy whom she supported with whatever she could scrape together. When the boy reached an age when young men enter the work force in order to support their families [*yeshivos* were at a premium and enrollment, for a number of reasons, was limited], the young orphan was prepared to go to work, but, due to his weakened physical state, would-be employers felt he was too fragile to perform any meaningful labor. The boy was frustrated, but equally adamant. He was going to find a job, despite his scrawny physique. He had the willpower to work, and he felt that was all one needed. He presented himself at the office of a large factory and asked to meet with the owner. The owner met with the boy and did his best to dissuade him, because he was certain that the physical demands of the job were too much for the boy to handle. The boy was unbudging. He wanted to work and was prepared to do whatever it took to secure a job. The owner came up with a daring – but diabolical – idea. If the boy would enter the river at dusk and remain in the water until dawn, he would give him ten thousand silver coins – more than he would earn in a lifetime.

The boy knew that the water at night was frigid, and he might contract hypothermia, but this was his only chance. His mother cried and pleaded with him not to take the proposition. He was obstinate and, despite her pleas, and the clear danger notwithstanding, he was going to spend the night in the river. He responded affirmatively to the man, with one precondition; he wanted a legal written contract to stipulate that if he survived the night in the cold water, he would be paid. [This gives us a window into the level of poverty to which people were subjected. It also demonstrated the miscreant character of a man who would take such advantage of an orphan.]

The boy entered the river exactly at dusk and settled in for a long night. As the night went on, the water became colder, reaching the freezing point. The man stopped by a couple of times to see if the boy was still there. He could not believe the boy's determination. He was getting nervous that he might have to put up a small fortune in silver coins.

The widowed mother knew that while she could not change her son's mind, she might succeed in giving him hope. She took wood and started a fire a distance from the water line. She knew that the heat of the fire would not reach her child, but the mere thought that a warm welcome awaited him

would strengthen his resolve and give him the message: "Someone cares about you."

As soon as dawn broke out in the sky, the near-frozen boy ran to his mother who was waiting by the fire with warm clothes. After warming up, they promptly went to the owner of the factory and demanded that he adhere to his promise. The man had the audacity to renege on his word, claiming that the mother had heated up the water with her fire. The widow and her son summoned this man to the *Chida* to rule on their dispute.

The *Chida* was a *halachic* authority without peer. This dispute, however, did not require a *halachic* authority. A clever person who saw what was taking place could easily cut through the ambiguity and rule. The *Chida* placed a raw egg in a saucer opposite a pot of hot water. He turned to the man and said, "Eat the egg." "*Rebbe*, the egg is raw. How can I eat it?" "It is opposite a pot of hot water." "Yes, but 'opposite' does not cook the egg. The egg must be in the water!"

"Now, you see," said the *Chida*, "that the mother's fire on the banks of the river did nothing to heat up the water. You must immediately hold up your end of the deal."

*Rav Zilberstein* derives an important lesson from this story. When someone is in a bind, when he is going through a difficult time, regardless of the challenges that he may face, it is possible to strengthen him and give him hope. How? A few well-placed words such as, "I care; I am thinking of you; I am always here for you," intimate to the person that, regardless of his situation, he is not alone. The widow could not warm the water, but she sent a message to her son: "I am waiting for you with a warm fire. You are not alone."

Sometimes, all we can do for a person in need is to make him aware that someone cares; he is not alone. This, too, is a critical act of *chesed*, lovingkindness.