

If you [dare to] cause him pain! For if he shall cry out to Me, I shall surely hear his outcry. (22:22)

Causing pain to someone who is already suffering the pangs of loneliness is ethically and morally indefensible. It is such a heinous act that one is stymied to justify such behavior. As human beings, we possess the capacity for empathy and compassion. When we ignore the feelings of others and deliberately cause them pain, it contradicts the basic foundation of our humanity. In other words, such an aggriever is not a mentch, decent human being. Hashem says that He will listen to the cries of the afflicted. Clearly causing pain is reprehensible under all circumstances. It is especially cruel when the victim is dealing with loneliness, having suffered the loss of her spouse or parent. We may wonder what kind of subhuman would act in such a manner, but the fact that the Torah exhorts us against it is, in and of itself, sufficient proof that it can – and unfortunately does – happen.

If I had to choose what I feel is the most important and critical attribute to have in order to maintain proper interpersonal relationships, it would be empathy, thinking of what the other fellow is going through; wondering if perhaps he is under intense personal pressure, which is causing him to act out in an unacceptable manner. “Walk a mile in someone else’s shoes” is a popular maxim which implores us to see things from the other fellow’s perspective. Alternatively, try to look at the world through the eyes of the other.

Horav Zerach Braverman, zl (talmid muvhak, primary disciple, of the Maharil Diskin), was a tzaddik recognized by everyone as saintly and righteous. He and his Rebbetzin adopted and raised a young orphan girl named Esther. When she became of age, Rav Zerach found a young talmid scholar by the name of Yitzchak Epstein, and, a little while later, they became engaged. Shortly before the wedding date, it was discovered that Yitzchak had contracted a serious illness, affecting his vision. It could have a serious impact on his life. Rav Zerach felt that he had to share this tragic news with his daughter. As any observant girl would, she went to Horav Shmuel Salant, zl, the Rav of Yerushalayim, to seek his sage advice concerning what she should do. Rav Shmuel replied, “I cannot paskin, issue a halachic ruling, for you. The decision is in your hands. You should follow your heart.”

She decided that it was all up to Hashem. If He wanted her husband to be healthy, then He would cure Yitzchak. If the Almighty wanted her to have a husband who was unwell, she could very well marry a healthy young man who could later fall ill. Furthermore, if she broke the engagement, word would get out and her *chassan* would be shamed, and no one would want to marry him. She, therefore, decided to put everything in Hashem’s hands and pray that all would be good. It was. Yitzchak was cured, and they lived long lives together, enjoying much *nachas* from the beautiful family they raised.

A halachic query was presented to the bais din of Horav Shmuel HaLevi Vosner, zl. The Rav heard

about the *shailah* and said, "I want to participate in this *din Torah*." What was so special about these proceedings that motivated the *Av bais din* to attend?

Two families were on opposite sides of this *din Torah*. Their children, son and daughter, were engaged to be married. It was recently discovered that the *chassan*, a distinguished *talmid chacham* and *masmid*, diligent Torah scholar, had been stricken with a dread disease. After therapy, the doctors felt that he was in the clear. The *chassan's* family turned to the family of the *kallah* with an offer. They fully understood the hesitations the *kallah* and her family had concerning going forward in the *shidduch*. Therefore, they were willing to back out, so that the *kallah* would be free to find another *chassan*.

When the *kallah* heard the proposal, she said, "Absolutely not!" She was not relinquishing her "rights" to such a fine *yeshivah bachur*. He was the special type of *chassan* about which she had dreamed. Her family disagreed, feeling that it was not necessary for her to take such steps. They decided to turn to *Rav Vosner's bais din* to resolve the issue.

Rav Vosner ruled, "The *kallah* is completely healthy. The *chassan* went through a grave illness and, *baruch Hashem*, survived the treatments, and he is now in remission. If the *kallah* is prepared to break the *shidduch*, she may." The *kallah* asked the *Rav*: "Must I break the *shidduch*, or may I break the *shidduch*?" Is it discretionary or a requisite? The *Rav* replied, "The decision is in your hands. Whatever you want, you may do."

"If that is the case," she said, "I ask his honor to bless the union and that my *chassan* merit longevity and complete health."

When *Rav Vosner* heard the *kallah's* request, tears welled up in his eyes. A few minutes passed during which no one spoke. *Rav Vosner* seemed to be in a trance. Finally, he said, "Such a *kallah* does not require my blessing. Given she is a young woman with such strength of character, I ask for her blessing that I merit longevity, so that I may continue to be *marbitz Torah*, disseminate Torah."

The *kallah* blessed the *Rav*, and the *Rav*, in turn, blessed the *kallah*, and the adjudication ended with intense emotion on all sides. This is the meaning of empathy. One feels what the other fellow is experiencing.