

You shall not taunt or oppress a stranger, for a you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (22:20)

Sensitivity to the helpless and abandoned is a given, a concept that we should all understand. Unfortunately, a tendency exists among insecure people, who contend with a negative image of themselves, to take advantage of those who are weak. Nonetheless, for the most part, the average person does not walk around with poor self-esteem. Why does the Torah underscore that we should not take advantage of the stranger, because we, too, were once strangers? The simple understanding is that we should know how it feels to be excluded, to be different. When we have personally experienced behavior which is uncomfortable for us, we should not do the same to others who are going through a similar situation.

A deeper aspect exists to remembering that we, too, were once strangers. The *Alter*, *zl*, *m'Slabodka* explains that it is incumbent upon every Jew to be sensitive to the needs and feelings of his fellow. This means to share in the “peaks and valleys” of his life -- his moments of joy, as well as sadness. This is what is meant by *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho*; “Love your fellow as yourself.” It is impossible to have equity in a relationship unless both parties are on an equal keel. A person who grew up in a close-knit community in which he was accepted does not understand the feelings of one who is on the outside, who is not included in the community. Thus, the Torah underscores to us: You were once strangers in a strange land; you understand how it feels. Therefore, you are inherently capable of being sensitive to the feelings of the stranger.

Put yourself in his shoes – if you can. Try to imagine the world from his perspective. What fears, concerns, hopes might this person have – which I am ignoring? The Torah is giving us the recipe for empathy: put yourself in his shoes. We experienced over two centuries of Egyptian slavery. We have earned the title, “stranger.” How can we ignore the plight of he who is alone? Certainly, we should never taunt or oppress. Nonetheless, the Torah issues a prohibitive *mitzvah*, because the Torah knows human nature. Often, those who had been in a position of weakness or oppression, once given power, seek to exert it over others. It is probably the result of never wanting to feel vulnerable again. It is a misguided attempt to reclaim dignity or status, born from their own experiences. The Torah teaches us that true strength lies in one's ability to use past challenges to foster empathy and kindness, rather than to perpetuate harm.

B'sof yamav, when the *Alter* reached his twilight years, he became weak and ill. The students of the *yeshivah* would spend time assisting their venerable *Rebbe* in his daily needs. His home was near a hotel which was often the venue for weddings and other joyous celebrations. The *bachurim* took turns sitting with him, so that a student was always by his side. One evening, one of his distinguished students, whose turn it was that night to sit with his *Rebbe*, walked out for a few moments to listen to the music. When he returned, the *Alter*, the premier educator who never stopped educating his students, asked him, “How are you able to listen to music when you are with a sick man who is in constant pain?” He wanted to instill an important concept/ idea in this

student's mind: empathy. We often look away from someone who is suffering. This stems from discomfort or a sense of helplessness. Witnessing suffering can evoke deep feelings of our own limitations. Some turn away, because they do not know how to help. Unfortunately, not knowing how does not give one license to refrain from trying to help. Love your fellow as yourself means to empathize, because, if you do not feel his pain, you really do not love him.