

Dear Community,

Most of us think of ourselves as empathic people. We cry during sad movies, we shake our heads sadly at tragic events while sipping our espresso, and some of us even go so far as to post sad emojis on Facebook. Empathy is rated highly as a social trait; lacking it is one of the primary symptoms of antisocial personality disorder. Society cannot function without humans having the ability to identify with each other's pain.

However, Judaism takes empathy to a higher level. Feeling sad is not enough; empathy in thought must galvanize empathy in action. *Nosim b'ol im chavero* means sharing in the other's burden, not just feeling but doing, acting to alleviate the other's pain. The Torah enjoins us to not only look at an overburdened donkey and feel bad for the poor beast and the overwhelmed owner, but to roll up your sleeves and help.

While this is an important value for the average person, the Torah considers this the basic prerequisite for a leader. A leader can not simply feel sad for his/her people's suffering but must be ready to join them in the trenches. Moshe, the model of Torah leadership, is first deemed ready when, as a pampered prince, he goes out to the work areas and sees the suffering of his people. As he stands there, he witnesses an Egyptian taskmaster beating a defenseless Jew. Moshe does not write soliloquies about anti-Semitism or op-eds in the local papers; rather he acts, he fights, he endangers himself to save his brother.

Moshe, throughout the Torah, fights for his people, suffers for their misdeeds and absorbs the brunt of their pain and fear. Moshe, in a conversation with G-d later in the Torah, reveals to us what he perceives to be the mission of a leader: "*Lo ochal levadi seis eschem*," 'I can no longer carry them alone.' A leader carries the people, an Atlas shouldering the burden of their flock.

However, in Pirkei Avot, we are introduced to a new aspect of empathy and its place in Judaism. In the sixth chapter, the Mishna enumerates 48 traits and practices necessary to truly acquire Torah knowledge. Amongst these traits, the Mishna lists *Nosim b'ol im chavero*. Why? What does a moral, social obligation have to do with a cerebral pursuit? How can feelings, emotions, deepen intellectual understanding?

To understand this Mishna we need to appreciate how one is meant to study the Torah. If we approach Torah study as simply an intellectual exercise, we lose the richness of what the Torah is supposed to impart to us. When we study Torah, we expose ourselves to divine essence, higher truths, and ephemeral experience. If we do not embrace the study of Torah and approach it with all of our faculties - emotional, intellectual, physical - we rob ourselves of its richness.

One could think that to achieve the highest levels of Torah, one must seclude oneself in the ivory company of comparable scholars, people who share the high level necessary to further and deepen his understanding. In that case, to waste one's time with those who desire to study Torah, but did not have the good fortune to develop the expertise necessary, would run counter to one's proper development.

It is this attitude that the Mishna wholly rejects. One without the empathy to recognize that Torah is for all has not truly acquired Torah himself. Torah is every Jew's heritage and thus Torah study must be available for any Jew seeking to drink of its waters. If one does not descend from his/her pedestal and shoulder the burden of Torah study for people who did not have the opportunities that he/she had been given, they are missing the ultimate essence what it means to study the Torah.

As we approach the end of the year, SBHC can look back at a year of working to make robust Torah study accessible to all regardless of background. We have had numerous classes, events, and study sessions all focused on democratizing Torah study and opening the gates to all who wish to explore their national heritage. I hope, as 2018 comes to a close, you will help us continue to grow and partner with us in this mission.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein