

ONE STEP BACK - TWO STEPS FORWARD

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Among the complicated fiduciary matters that this week's portion discusses, the Torah deals with seemingly simple and mundane issues as well. The Torah talks about donkeys. Heavily laden donkeys that belong to your enemy. The Torah tells us, "if you see the donkey of someone you hate and you refrain from assisting him, you shall repeatedly help him" (Exodus 23:5). Obviously the interjected phrase "and you refrain from assisting him" begs clarification. After all, if you mustn't refrain from helping him, why mention it in the first place? Rashi explains that the words are to be read rhetorically, "Would you refrain from helping him? How can you let a personal grudge take precedence over the poor animal's pain? Surely you shall continuously help him." The Talmud (Bava Metzia 32) takes the words at face value and explains that there are actually certain situations where one must actually refrain from helping unload donkeys. I would also like to offer the verse at face value.

As a youngster, I heard the following story about the great mussar luminary, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. Rabbi Salanter was traveling by train from Salant to Vilna and was sitting in a smoking car holding a lit cigar. A young man accosted him by yelling about the putrid odor of the smoke. Other passengers were appalled. After all, they were in the smoking car. Despite that, Rabbi Salanter extinguished the cigar and opened the train's window to dissipate the fumes. It was only a few seconds before the young man slammed the window down, while screaming at the elderly sage for opening it. Rabbi Salanter apologized profusely to the man young enough to be his child, and buried himself in a Jewish book of law.

Upon arriving in Vilna, the young man was horrified to see throngs of people gathered to receive one of Europe's most prominent Rabbis. The man immediately ran to the home where Rabbi Salanter was staying. He began to beg forgiveness. "Don't worry," explained Reb Yisrael, "a trip can make one edgy. I bear no ill will. Tell me," continued the mussar master, "why did you come to Vilna?"

The young man explained that he was looking to become an ordained shochet, (slaughterer), and an approbation from a Vilna rabbi would be universally accepted. Rabbi Salanter smiled. "My own son-in-law, Reb Elya Lazer, can ordain you. He is a Rav in Vilna. Rest up and tomorrow you can take the test.

The next day, it was apparent that the man needed more than rest, for he failed miserably. However, that did not deter Rabbi Salanter. He encouraged the man to try again. For the next several weeks,

Rabbi Yisrael arranged for tutors and prepared the young man well enough to pass Reb Elya Lazer's make-up exam along with the tests of a host of other well-known Vilna rabbis. He even arranged for the man to get a job.

Before leaving Vilna, the man appeared before Reb Yisrael with tears in his eyes. "Tell me, Rebbe," he cried. "I was able to understand that you could forgive me for my terrible arrogance on the train. But why did you help me so much? That, I can never understand."

"Reb Yisrael sat him down, held his hand and explained. "It is easy to say 'I forgive you'. But deep down, how does one really know if he still bears a grudge? Way down in my heart I actually was not sure. The only way to remove a grudge is to take action. One who helps another develops a love for the one he aided. By helping you, I created a true love which is overwhelmingly more powerful than the words, 'I forgive you'."

The Torah tells us that if you see the donkey of your enemy keeling from its burden and you want to refrain from helping, know then, that now is the time to help. The minute your feet falter, then it is time to quicken the pace, overpower your emotions and make a move. The Torah understands human nature all too well. The sub-conscience speaks very loudly and often tells us to take three steps backwards. That is the time to make a move that will heal old wounds and close open sores. Overpowering kindness will not only help ease burdens off a donkey, it will make things a lot lighter for you as well.

Dedicated in memory of Morris Propp by Mr. and Mrs. Ephraim Propp
Good Shabbos!

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