

SEEING DOUBLE

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Any widow or orphan, you shall not afflict. For if you indeed afflict him [or her], only to Me will he surely cry, and I will surely hear his cry." [22:21-22]

In the original language of the Torah, the second of these verses contains three verbs, each of which is emphasized via a "doubled expression." "Aneh S'aneh" -- indeed you afflict; "Tza'ok Yitzak" -- he will surely cry; and "Shamo'a Eshma" -- I will surely hear. These "doubled expressions" are rare, and we do not find another verse in the Torah where there are several verbs, every one of which is emphasized in this way.

What is the lesson of these "doubled expressions?" What is the Torah trying to teach us?

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, the Kotzker Rebbe, says that the Torah's message is that the pain of a widow or orphan is not the same as the pain of another person. If "Reuven" does something bad to the average person, be it physical damage or monetary loss, "Shimon" feels only the pain of the thing that Reuven did. Whether Shimon feels physical pain, embarrassment, or financial loss, that is all he suffers.

This is not true, however, in the case of a widow or orphan. It is completely natural for such a person to respond to an injury or financial loss by remembering and feeling again the painful loss of spouse or parent. The orphan's heart cries inside him, and says: "if my father were alive, 'Reuven' would not have dared to hurt me like that." A widow says the same of her husband.

This is why the Torah uses the doubled expression of "Aneh S'aneh" -- if indeed you afflict -- for the affliction itself is doubled. Thus the cry of the orphan is doubled -- "Tza'ok Yitzak." And because of this, HaShem warns: "Shamo'a Eshma" -- I will surely hear; I will listen "twice."

The Torah is not speaking to the sort of creature who would, Heaven forbid, deliberately take advantage of a widow or orphan. The Torah was not written for evil people. It is speaking to ordinary, good people, who might not think about the special circumstances of others.

The Torah is warning us that we need to take the situations of others into account. We must empathize with others, and keep their circumstances in mind. If a person is poor, it is that much more important that we pay him promptly. If a person is an orphan, it is that much more important to avoid slighting him, even accidentally. If a person is emotionally fragile, it is that much more important to avoid anything which might bring him or her to tears.

And when we do look out for the circumstances of others, and we take special care to address their needs -- our Sages teach that the positive effect of good is always greater than the negative effect of evil. Imagine, then, the good which we can do!

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Yaakov Menken