

TREAT WITH CARE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"And you shall love the proselyte, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. (10:19)"

Countless times in the Torah we are warned to take special care of the ger - the proselyte who has taken the bold step of forsaking his nation and his heritage, and joined hands with the Children of Israel. (I say "countless" times quite literally; the Midrashim seem to be in disagreement as to just how many times the Torah touches on this concept. See Tanchuma (Vayikra 2) "In 48 places Hashem warned us about proselytes..." Bava Metzia (59b) mentions either 36 or 46. Tosafos in Kiddushin (70b) writes that we are warned in 24 places.) Often, as it is here, the warning is accompanied with the reasoning that, "you too were strangers in Egypt." In what specific way does our experience in Egypt offers us a degree of insight into the importance of this mitzvah?

Recently, to our great sorrow and grief, the children of the Bobover Rebbe zt"l observed the customary shiva (seven day) period following his death. As is to be expected, the amount of people, both men and women, who came to be menachem aveil (comfort the mourners) was both inspiring and overwhelming. From all over the world, people flocked to Boro Park, Brooklyn, to comfort the family and pay their last respects to the memory of the Rebbe.

Entire volumes could be written based solely on the stories and anecdotes related to the Rebbe zt"l's family over those few days. Amazingly, a number of women who came to comfort the Rebbe's daughters told of an almost identical experience. One of them told her story as follows:

"I am a divorcee. I have no children and very little family. I live a very lonely life. I was told that the best time for me to go to the Rebbe was late at night, when all the other visitors had already left, so that I wouldn't feel uncomfortable sitting around in a roomful of men awaiting my turn. I was the last person to see the Rebbe that night.

"When we had finished talking, the Rebbe asked my how I planned to get home. I told him that I didn't live far away, and I was going to walk.

"So late at night?" the Rebbe asked. 'No - you can't walk!' The Rebbe picked up the phone, and called me a car- service. 'Go downstairs,' he said, 'I'll be there soon.'

"I went downstairs to wait for the car-service. Soon afterwards, the Rebbe was there too. He waited until I was safely in the car, and only then did he retreat into his house.

"Soon after I arrived home, my telephone rang. 'Who could possibly be calling this late at night?' I

thought. It was the Rebbe. 'Hello - this is the Bobover Ruv. I just wanted to make sure you arrived home safely.' 'Yes, thank you Rebbe, I'm fine.'

"Now I know, I told myself, why I went to the Rebbe. Because he cares. Sometimes the burden of being alone is too much to bear. After all, who really cares if I get home safely, or if I was run over by a car, G-d forbid? No one knows, and no one cares. So what if I die? The fact that the Rebbe actually cared whether or not I got home safely meant so much to me. It gave me the courage and strength to go on living."

The fledgling Jewish nation spent over two hundred years as unwanted foreigners and as slaves in Egypt. We can only imagine, as the years went by and generations passed, the tremendous feeling of abandonment they must have felt. What kept them going? What gave them the strength never to give up hope? Two words. "Pakod pakaditi - I have surely remembered you. (Shemos 3:16)" These two words were given by Yosef to his brothers before dying in Egypt. They were passed down from generation to generation. And it was with these two words that Moshe was instructed to introduce himself as the redeemer of Israel. As long as they remembered that Hashem still remembered - that He still cared - hope wouldn't die.

"And you shall love the proselyte." There is no one more lonely than the foreigner, who has forsaken friends and family, and come alone to become a Jew. Show him your love. Show him you care. "For you were foreigners in the land of Egypt." As a nation, you experienced first hand what it's like to live as an outcast; and you saw that with the comforting words "I have surely remembered you" the hardships were just a little easier to bear.

There are, among k'lal Yisrael, so many dejected souls. We are told to love our fellow Jew, just as we are told to love the ger. Yet what does our love have to offer them; love can not heal the sick, nor make rich the poor. There are times we wish with all our hearts that there was something more we could do to alleviate their suffering. Yet sometimes all it takes is showing we care - that they are important to us, that we love them, and that it makes a difference if they get home.

Have a good Shabbos.

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