

# SWAPPING PLACES WITH THE POOR

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

Empathy. Sympathy. Compassion. We use these synonyms to express the feelings aroused in us when bad things happen to others. What is the difference between empathy and sympathy? Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone. Empathy is being able to relate to someone. Sympathy is when you feel bad for someone else - empathy is when you feel bad with someone else. Empathy is when you've been there; sympathy is when you haven't.

Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) says (Koheles/Ecclesiastes 5:11):

The sleep of the simple labourer is sleep, whether he has eaten much or little. But the fullness of the rich man doesn't let him sleep.

Sefarim note that the wording at the end of the verse seems unnecessarily verbose. It could have said simply, But satiety (indigestion?) doesn't let the wealthy man sleep. Due to this anomaly, they see the "him" cited at the verse's end as referring back to the poor labourer: The worker should by all measures be sleeping peacefully at night, but the riches of the wealthy man don't let him - the poor man - sleep. Why not? Some see this as indicative of the old Jones's complex. The poor man can't sleep not because he lacks anything per-se, but because he's gazing at his wealthy neighbours across the street. "Why can't I have what they do... a wife like him, a house like them, a car, a job, etc.?" Is it deficiency, or jealousy, that keeps him awake at night?

Perhaps we can offer a different interpretation. One of Avraham Avinu's ten famous tests was to leave the comforts of home and travel to a foreign land. There he was met by famine and was unable to settle, forcing him once again to uproot. At this stage in Avraham's life he already had a reputation for his hospitality. Everyone knew; if you needed a tent in which to rest, or a nice hot meal, Avraham and Sarah was the address to come to. Why would Hashem take away this mitzvah of his, and force him to suffer the indignity of being an impoverished wayfarer? Is it to say that his own hospitality was in some way deficient?

Yes and no. In truth, Avraham's hospitality was above and beyond anything one could expect. His sympathy for the weary and hungry was endless. But there was no empathy. Avraham had grown up in relative physical comfort. He didn't know what it felt like to wander in scathing desert heat all day long, and the relief one felt when he realized at least he'd be given a comfortable bed and a warm meal. His hacnosas orchim would never be complete unless he could empathize with the people he helped. The test of Lech lecha - go out from your home - enabled him to do so.

There is a verse in this week's parsha (22:24):

If you lend money to My nation - to the poor person who is with you.

Rashi addresses the strange wording, "to the poor person who is with you." "When you give," Rashi explains, "you should imagine you are the poor person." One who has been poor before knows what it means when bills come and you have no idea how you will pay them. When lack of funds is not preventing you from getting that new cell-phone or upgrading your car, but is keeping you from obtaining the bare necessities, and is a source of embarrassment for your family.

Sometimes we give, and the recipient doesn't seem satisfied. Sometimes they brazenly ask for more. "Chutzpah!" we remark after they've left. "He's going to tell me how much I should give?!" We're right. It is a chutzpah. He should receive gracefully whatever we're willing to give. But have we emphasized with him? Do we in some way blame him for his position, as if it could never happen to us? Perhaps he needs the money to pay doctor's bills (a reality hard for Canadians to comprehend). Or to buy his children respectable clothing. After weeks away from home, he realizes he still doesn't have enough money. Should he stay "on the road," or come home not having raised the funds he desperately needs? Tough choice. Not one we'd like to make. He's frustrated, understandably, and he's bitter, and that's what you see. It doesn't necessarily make it right, but if Chazal teach that poverty causes man to transgress the gravest of sins, can we really hold him responsible for his less-than-stellar manners?

Before you reach into your wallet to give, says Rashi, or before you pass judgement ("they're all just fakers anyway - no?"), imagine yourself as the poor person. No family or friends to help out. No bank account. No credit cards. Hungry mouths to feed. Teenage children who dream of getting married with a degree of respectability. And you don't even know how you're going to pay this month's electricity bill. For those of us who have lived more-or-less insulated lives, it's a difficult exercise in visualization. Try to feel it, and only then give.

Perhaps this could be the meaning of the above verse: The wealth and good fortune of the rich doesn't let him - the poor fellow, sleep - the wealthy can at times get so comfortable that they fall totally out of touch with the suffering of those less fortunate than themselves. Sometimes their satiation doesn't let the poor sleep at night.

Of course money is not the only thing we give of ourselves to others. We are sometimes asked to give our time, our energies, our patience. It doesn't really matter what we're giving. What matters is to give with at least a small feeling and understanding for the needs of those we're giving to.

Perhaps tangentially but only minimally so, and without trying to toot my own horn, here may be the place to address what seems to be the common practice of Yeshiva and school boards worldwide: to pay rebbes, even with years of experience and large families, a salary which if not heavily supplemented by side-jobs place them squarely below the poverty line. Not to mention marrying off children and other large expenses. While no one goes into teaching Torah in order to get rich, one

wonders if those deciding how much to pay teachers have ever considered if they could make do on such a salary. We're not talking about luxuries, but living like a mentsch. How much "peace-of-mind" can a rebbe/teacher possibly have when he comes home after a tiring day in Yeshiva and has no idea how he's going to meet his mortgage payment, pay for his son's tefilin and bar mitzva gear, etc.? I know I'm not offering a solution to the severe cash-flow shortage in the mosdos - there are others more qualified than myself who can do that. But I believe, and I speak not as a teacher but as a parent who expects the best chinuch for my children, that chinuch should be a field in which a good teacher can stay even as his family grows, and live in the relative comfort of not having to worry about the most basic needs. Perhaps were boards of directors to adapt the attitude of "the poor person who is with you" a-la Rashi then at least the dividing line between reasonable expectations and reality would be narrowed.

Have a good Shabbos.

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