

WHAT CAN I DO?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

A man from the House of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son. She saw he was good, so she hid him for three months. When she could no longer hide him, she took a reed-basket, coated it with clay and tar, placed the child in it, and placed it among the reeds at the river bank. His sister stood at a distance to know what would happen to him. Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe by the river; her maidens walked along the river bank. She saw the basket in the reeds—she stretched out her arm and took it... (2:1-5)

The holy Chafetz Chaim zt"l (R' Yisrael Meir Kagan, 1838-1933) used to tell the following story: The famous Maggid of Dubna zt"l (R' Yaakov Wolf Krantz, 1740-1804) was once strolling in the streets of Dubna when he saw something that caught his attention, stopping him in his tracks. Ahead of him, a blind man was being lead through the city thoroughfare by his young son. From their dress, it was obvious they were poor.

Some people might have passed the pair by without giving them much of a thought. One with a more sensitive heart might stop for a moment, reflecting sadly on the hard life this man and his son must lead. Someone else might take the opportunity to silently thank Hashem for the blessings of good health, before continuing on. "Tomorrow," he would promise himself, "I will say 'Blessed are You, Hashem...Who gives sight to the blind,' with extra concentration!"

The Maggid had a sensitive heart, and knew how to count his blessings, but above all he had compassion. Despite realizing he was unable to solve all the world's woes, he felt compelled to do something to help this unfortunate pair.

"Shalom aleichem, peace to you, my brothers! How are things?"

The blind man, resentful of his bitter lot, did not return the greetings, nor answer the Maggid's query. The son looked up at the distinguished rabbi with eyes full of pain and suffering. "This is my father," he said quietly. "My mother is dead. We live at the far end of town. Our house is run down, and very cold. We can not afford wood to light the oven."

Hearing his son's words, the blind man chimed in: "Shloimie, who are you talking with? Come, let's go—there's no time to waste on such idle chatter."

"My dear brother," the Maggid said, "please, there's no rush. Tell me, have you eaten?"

"I'm just now taking father to the soup kitchen. We will receive a hot meal, and then we will go back

home. That's why my father's in a rush—he doesn't want to miss our one hot meal."

"Then please, come to my house. I promise to serve you a fine meal—even better than the soup kitchen!" With his offer, the young lad's sad eyes lit up with the slightest spark of joy. For a moment, the Maggid saw through the sadness. Beneath those mournful eyes, he realized, a radiant soul lay dormant.

At first, to his son's disappointment, his father refused the offer. It was beggarly enough, it seems, to be served by the anonymous workers of the soup kitchen. But the Maggid would not take no for an answer, and eventually the father was convinced of his sincerity; he consented to come.

The Maggid brought them into his warm house, and prepared them a sumptuous meal. He did everything he could to make them as comfortable as could be. Slowly, the blind man's icy demeanour began to thaw. "Not bad," he said quietly after the meal, "it's nice being here."

The delicious meal and first-class service could not possibly have prepared him for the rabbi's next words. "Perhaps you'd like to move in with me?" he asked matter-of-fact. "I've got a spacious, heated, guest room for you to sleep, and we eat three meals a day. Thank G-d, I can afford to share with others. This way your son can learn in cheder with other boys his age." The mere thought of living in a normal, warm home, and being able to go to school with other children brought a gleam to the young boy's eyes. His father wasn't sure. But after some sincere words of encouragement from his host, he consented to move in, "...on a trial basis!"

Despite the upgrade in living conditions, the blind man remained lonely and self-pitying; at times his grumpiness was almost too much to bear. Yet the great Maggid did bear it all, with a smile.

"Welcoming guests is even greater than receiving the presence of the Shechina (Shabbos 127a)," he would remind himself when things got particularly rough. Rabbi Krantz's home was to be the man's last; it was there, a few years later, that he breathed his final breath.

As time passed, the young boy's true potential began to emerge. After quickly catching up to the other students, he overtook them. He was blessed with what some called a photographic memory, able to recall almost everything he had ever learned to near perfection. And his remarkable diligence became a matter of wonder among the townsfolk. He approached his studies with a sharp, penetrating mind-set; he was never satisfied until he understood a topic to its absolute depth. With time, he began to compile his own novellae, which were in turn discussed by the eminent Torah scholars of the city, much to the satisfaction of his step-father, the Maggid.

When the time came for him to marry, the Maggid arranged a suitable shidduch. With his help, the young man began building his own family and home, much to our eternal gratitude. You see, after a short while, he was asked to become the Chief Rabbi of the famed city of Brody. His name? R' Shlomo Kluger zt"l, eminent halachic authority and prolific author.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that things had worked out differently. That the Maggid, in a rush to

get somewhere—had sighed in silent sympathy with the unfortunate father-and-son, regretting there was nothing much he could do for them—and then continued on his way. They too would have continued on to the soup kitchen, just like they did every day. No one would ever have known—what we would have lost, what the boy would have lost—what the Maggid would have lost! A single moment of contemplation, of asking, "How can I make a difference?" changed all that for eternity.

Basya, daughter of Pharaoh, had no way of knowing who lay in that reed basket floating among the reeds. A Jewish child—yes—but what a Jewish child! She did know she could make a difference; there was something she could do, and she didn't hesitate to do it. In Tanach (Divrei Ha-yamim-1 4:18), Basya is mentioned as Moshe's mother. She may not have borne him, but if not for her initiative, for her commitment to do what she could...we can only speculate. (Mayan Ha-shavua)

Her maidservants walked along the riverbank—"Our Rabbis explained that walked has the connotation of death. Her maidservants objected to her saving the Jewish child, and were liable the death penalty for disputing Basya's act," writes Rashi. "Scripture supports their interpretation—for what other purpose could be served by the Torah writing, 'And her maidservants walked...?'"

Even after the Rabbis' explanation, we are still left wondering: What purpose is served by the Torah telling us this—why do we need to know the dispute that transpired between Basya and her maidens?

Perhaps the message is this: Whenever we undertake to do something significant, something of true value, we should expect naysayers who attempt, with their negativity ("realism"), to dissuade us. Often, the obstructions and difficulties are directly proportionate to the greatness of the deed. Sometimes the dissuading voices are those of well-meaning friends and relatives. Sometimes they belong to those who intentionally seek to lead us astray. Most often, the voices are our own. The truth itself is crystal clear; it is the voices that cloud our vision.

Today, every Jewish soul—whether affiliated or not-yet—is another Moshe-in- the-basket. We, like the Maggid and Basya before him, have to realize that sighing and sympathising is not enough. Those who educate and reach out to Jewish souls, bringing the light of the Torah into their lives, will receive unimaginable reward. Likewise, those who give generously to Torah institutions become partners in the incredible work they do. We can't know from where today's Moshes and R' Shlomo Klugers will appear, but by asking "What can I do?" we ensure they will.

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