

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

IN THE END, YOU suffer alone. That was one of the last Facebook postings of a young mother of six children who took her life this last Shabbos. Her marriage had failed and ended in divorce. After suffering for years, she shot herself while in her parents' home, with five of her children in the house at the time.

Tragic?

A gross understatement.

Shocking?

Incredibly.

The woman had been religious with a Charedi background. She grew up in a world in which suicide is VERY extreme and far more rare an occurrence than in the secular world. Suffering or no suffering, one's life is not theirs to take. Doing so, in most circumstances, is considered a sin.

Therefore, once upon a time, a Jew who committed suicide was not allowed to be buried in the main part of a cemetery. Today, because of all the insanity in the world, the halachah is usually more lenient and people are considered less responsible for the tragic act.

Nevertheless, suicide is still quite taboo, almost on par in Charedi circles with taking someone else's life. For a religious Jew to carry out such an act of finality, they have to have been desperate, VERY desperate.

After all, for a secular person, suicide just means the end of their pain. Suffering terribly, that is more important to them at the time than the family and friends they might end up leaving behind.

I did not understand what that might be like until about 10 years ago when I herniated a disk. The pain was incredible, over my entire body, and relentless. I could not find ANY relief at all, even after taking the strongest pain killers I could get my hands on. I could not imagine living the rest of my life like that. I could not enjoy any good I had at the time.

Nevertheless I had hope. It could take time, more time than I could handle, but eventually the pain would subside. Eventually I would heal, b"H, even to the point that I would forget about the pain I once had.

What about the people for whom this would not be the case? What about the people who suffer

emotionally, something that is much harder to solve and which does not self-heal so easily? How could they be expected to put up with such agonizing pain day-after-day, year-after-year? What hope do they have to carry them until the situation improves?

There is always hope. The problem is not the lack of hope. It is being unable to find it or believe in it when the pain is excruciatingly distracting. We've all seen how our minds can take pain and multiply its negative meaning. We've all blown situations out of proportion, only to find out later that the crisis was not as hopeless as we had been led to believe by our panic center.

For the person suffering, this does not seem the case. They see themselves, in extreme cases, as dying emotionally. Taking their own lives is just a way of bringing the physical reality in line with the psychological one. They are very wrong, but they can't see that while alone and drowning in the darkness.

For the person who suffers alone, there is truly tragic pain.

Someone told me shortly after the news hit Facebook, that he was amazed by the response of those who had seen the woman's previous postings. He was stunned, he told me, at how many people wrote that the "writing had been on the wall" that she would kill herself. Apparently they had seen the potential for her to commit such a desperate act, and were not surprised that she actually carried through.

The person said to me, "If they saw the signs that she was suicidal, why did they not do something about it?"

In all fairness, I do not know who did what when to try and help the woman out. Perhaps some people did respond to her silent scream for help. Perhaps efforts were made to help her cope with her pain and survive her situation. From the fact that she complained about suffering alone makes me wonder if people made enough of an effort to save her life.

What happened represents a failure for mankind. Social media, for all of its attendant ills, provided an opportunity for people to know about someone else's extreme pain and death wish, and to do something about it. It provided a unique window to another person's inner being, and a rare opportunity to save a life. Nevertheless, the life was lost just the same.

Ironically, this happened during the week of THE parsha that address THIS issue. The Torah says:

And the person with tzara'as, in whom there is the lesion, his garments shall be torn, his head shall be unshorn, he shall cover himself down to his mustache and call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" All the days the lesion is upon him, he shall remain unclean. He is unclean; he shall dwell isolated; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Vayikra 13:45-46)

And call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" [This teaches that] one should make his distress known to many, so that many pray for mercy on his behalf. (Moed Katan 5a)

This is amazing. Even though the Metzora spoke loshon hara and brought his suffering on himself, still others must take note of his plight and pray for his mercy! The Torah says that he must live in isolation for his sin, and yet the community must NOT exclude him from their prayers!

If this is true for the sinner, how much more so must others take note of the suffering of the innocent? How much more so must people have mercy on them, and do whatever they can to ease their pain and save their lives, and the lives of all whom they affect.

Only God can judge the person who has taken his or her own life. He will also judge, however, all those who let it happen. It may turn out that the sin of those who could have helped but didn't, will be greater than the sin of those who could not have helped themselves.