

LEND ME AN EAR

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

And Rachel saw that she had not borne a child to Yaakov, so Rachel became envious of her sister; she said to Yaakov, "Give me children - otherwise I am dead."

Yaakov's anger flared up at Rachel, and he said, "Am I in place of G-d Who has withheld from you fruit of the womb?" (Beresheet, 30:2, 3)

When Rachel Imenu a'h saw that Leah, her sister, bore four son's to their husband Yaakov, she became jealous and complained to her spouse. He reacted angrily as quoted in the verse above. The Midrash reveals that Hashem became incensed with Yaakov for his insensitive reaction to his wife's sorrow. "Is this the way one answers those in distress? I swear that your children will bow before her son!" And so it was many years later when the brothers bowed before the viceroy of Egypt - Yosef the son of Rachel.

One might ask, "Why the angry response? What would Yaakov be expected to say? After all, he did tell the truth! The gift of children is dependant on the grace of the Almighty!"

Our Rabbis explain that our Patriarch was expected to minimize the problem and show concern and sympathy for Rachel's plight. It would be best if he changed his words in order to console and lift the spirits of his downtrodden spouse.

In Gemara Bava Metzia (84b) the story is told of a time when Rabbenu Hakadosh was teaching a lesson when some people passed talking a calf to slaughter. The calf broke loose and ran to lean against the robes of Rabbenu Hakadosh as if to be begging mercy and assistance. Rabbi (Rabbenu Hakadosh) stood by and coolly said, "go to your slaughter - it is for this that you were created." A man of his stature, The leader of his generation, should have been more compassionate and more selective in his use of words even to a calf. True - the calf was created to serve as food for the human being - yet a better choice of words was in order. Rabbi suffered a stomach ailment for 13 years due to this faux pas.

His remedy came when a maid in his palace was sweeping away a nest of baby rodents from the palace floor. When Rabbenu Hakadosh instructed her to leave them alone the servant replied, "The mistress would not like me to leave rodents - even babies - in her palace." I say be gentle -- they are babies!" was the quick response. His ailment disappeared. A harsh word brought on the illness and a kind word healed the malady.

A contemporary Rosh Yeshivah said, "We have a gmach (organization that supplies people's needs free of charge- like a free loan fund, a free bridal gown loan, and other free kindnesses) what we need is a Gmach that lends an ear!" This organization would listen to other people's woes. The members would console and advise - even if they were unable to help in a practical sense. This in essence was Hashem's complaint to Yaakov Avinu zt'l, "Is this how one should answer the downtrodden?"

The greats knew this important trait. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein zy'a used to give approbation on many sefarim (books on Torah subjects). His approval was written on his stationary which had his address AND PHONE NUMBER in the heading. When he became older and his health became weak his wife suggested that he change the number and keep it private. She explained that this was a way to cut down on the volume of calls and also the hours during the night that disturbed the Rosh yeshivah's much needed rest. 'What are you suggesting?" Rav Moshe responded, "that a fellow Jew might need me and I will not be available to hear his plight?" Of course the stationary remained as always with the rabbi's phone number clearly displayed for all to see.

In an age where e-mail, text messaging, I-M and the like are making our interaction with friends and others more and more impersonal, we must re- focus ourselves on real communication. It is not merely the speed with which your message is conveyed that is important - it is how much of your heart is infused in your reply.

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