

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

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Jews came from far and wide to the modest Bnei Brak apartment of Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky zt'l, the Steipler Gaon, to consult and discuss Torah topics, and seek the blessings and advice of one of the generation's great sages and poskim. The renowned author of the multi-volume Kehillot Yaakov on the Talmud, the Gaon was recognized not only as one of the great Torah minds of our time, but as a sensitive, caring heart. By the end of each day there was a large stack of kvitlach piled on his desk, hand-written notes with names of petitioners and specific requests to daven for. One evening, the Steipler noticed an overly curious family member perusing some of the kvitlach, and firmly admonished him, "KUK NISHT, don't look!" As the family member, embarrassed that he had acted inappropriately, slunk away, he heard the Steipler say under his breath, "You will not be able to handle the pain!"

As part of the retribution for suffering at the hand of the Egyptians, our Parsha recounts MAKAT CHOSHECH, the Plague of Darkness and how it cast a heavy darkness over the land: "No man could see his brother, nor could anyone rise from his place, but for B'nei Yisrael there was OHR

B'MOSH'VOTAM, light in their dwellings" (10:23). But what was so horrendous about this plague; being without daylight in certain places on the planet is not so uncommon? Among the many answers to this question, the one offered by Rebbe Yitzchak Meir of Gur, the Chidushei HaRim, speaks to a fundamental ethic so vitally necessary today.

The Rebbe taught that there is no greater darkness than one in which "a man saw not his fellow"; in which we are unaware, blind or oblivious to another's needs. Enveloped in darkness and unable to see each other, we become distanced from our neighbors and friends, so self-absorbed, stuck and wrapped up in our own personal issues and pursuits that the other appears not to even exist at all! When the Torah testifies that in the physical Plague of Darkness, "No man could see his brother", it was because "nor could anyone rise from his place..." When we are enveloped in a darkness of our own selfish preoccupations, in a blackness so metaphorically thick that we are unable to move, unable to see beyond our own needs; when we are "LO KAMU - cannot rise from our place", break out of our closed-in self-centeredness, then tragically, no man will ever "see his brother". Our friend and neighbor will languish in a place of utter loneliness with no one to empathize with him, advise and help him, and

give him chizuk he so urgently needs. Such a shameful and disgraceful state of affairs among people is nothing short of a plague, an accursed blight on humanity.

True, it is natural to wince and want to avert our eyes from witnessing something scary or unpleasant. It can be difficult to see and relate to the pain others are enduring and to open our eyes and heart to their distress. But our experience in Egypt, recounted in MAKAT CHOSHECH, reminds us to do our best to see others, with their experiences, needs, and feelings, in the same way that we would want to be seen. To NOS'EI B'OL IM CHAVEIRO, "help carry the yoke of one's fellow" (Avot 6:6) goes beyond just noticing them. It is also means to lovingly make space for them to share what they are going through and for you to help shoulder the weight of their pain so they can unburden and uplift themselves. Thus, the Torah's declaration that "for Bnei Yisrael there was OHR B'MOSHVOTAM, light in their dwellings" finds its ethical realization in the redemptive light of AHAVAT YISRAEL, where, turning toward our friends and fellows with deep connectivity, we recognize them, open our eyes and hearts to them and say, "I see you."

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This extraordinary moral mandate has

been more than exemplified by our brethren in the wake of the barbaric attack of Hamas on October 7th. Our Medina, our country, heavily polarized before the war, acted upon this ethical principle by recognizing that far more important than personal issues and grips was the obligation to find common ground with one another. And there is simply nothing more basic and vital to the human condition than to feel the pain, the distress and suffering of one's fellow and join together in mutual compassion, empathy and material support and assistance. Jews in Israel and throughout the world rallied together to remind us all - and the world - that the Jew, no matter where he resides, feels intimately connected with his brothers and sisters world-over.

The Talmud (Ta'anit 11a) relates that, "When the community [of Israel] is steeped in distress [and misery], a person should not say: I will go to my home and eat and drink, and peace be upon you, my soul... Rather, a person should suffer along with the community; for we have indeed found regarding Moshe, our teacher, that he suffered along with the community, as it is stated [during the war with Amalek]: "And the hands of Moshe were heavy; and they [Aharon and Chur] took a stone and placed it underneath him and he sat upon it" (Sh'mot 17:12). But did not Moshe have one cushion or one pillow upon

which to sit? Rather, thus said Moshe: 'Since [the Children of] Israel are steeped in suffering, I shall also be with them in suffering' ... "

The above Talmudic passage concludes with this rousing lesson. "And whoever suffers along with the community will merit seeing the consolation of the community." In this difficult and stressful time for us all, may our mutual love and support for one another - our sharing this painful burden together - evoke HaShem's merciful intervention to vindicate His and our cause and thus grant us the consolation we all so desperately crave. 🙏