Jewish Tribune – Mishpotim

**True Empathy**

The observer stood in disbelief as he watched the Rov at the counter of the small fast-food store in Lakewood. He did not really know Rabbi Gissinger but had heard that he was an outstanding gaon and a remarkably caring Rov.

“Please tell me what is good? What do people really like?” asked Rabbi Gissinger to the man behind the counter.

“And what about fried onions? Are they good? And tomatoes, pickles, mustard, barbeque sauce …” added Rabbi Gissinger. The observer stood there increasingly embarrassed. Never in his life had he seen someone so busy, getting so involved in which toppings to put onto what was turning out to be a whopping sub-sandwich!

The Rov left the store exchanging pleasantries with the observer.

The observer ordered a simple turkey sandwich and headed back to his car and noticed that Rabbi Gissinger was actually driving the car in front of his, which made sense as he had only left the store a minute or two before him.

The observer fully expected Rabbi Gissinger to continue straight to his house but was surprised as he drove straight past his driveway and took the next right. The observer’s curiosity was piqued, where was the Rov going? On a whim, he decided to follow him.

Rabbi Gissinger drove for another few minutes and then pulled up outside a somewhat neglected house. The front lawn was overgrown, and the house looked dilapidated. The Rov jumped out of the car, furtively ran up to the house, placed the groaning bag with the carefully selected sub-sandwich on the door handle and dashed back to his car.

The observer was no longer embarrassed for the Rov but was now ashamed of what he had been thinking in the store. The Rov had been buying the sandwich for somebody else, someone who was down on their luck and could do with some chizuk and a good lunch.

“Please tell me what is good? What do people really like?” was asked with express purpose of giving pleasure to a Yid who needed a boost.

I read this story in the biography of Rav Shlomo Gissinger, “At Any Hour”. It is an astonishing biography of a world class posek and beloved Rov with extraordinary sensitivity.

But for me, the most remarkable part of the story is the postscript.

Sometime later, when the observer got to know Rabbi Gissinger well, he told him that he had witnessed the entire incident. He asked the Rov if could ask him one question.

“When the Rov saw me in the store, why couldn’t you just tell me, ‘Hi Meir, nice to see you! I’m just picking up a sandwich for someone else.’”

The Rov’s answer, said with genuine simplicity, showed the extent of his sensitivity. He said: “How would that have made you feel?” I.e., how would you have felt if I would have excused myself for being in the store, thereby implicitly indicating that you don’t have a good excuse for being there!

This week’s parsha deals with the eved ivri, the Jewish slave.

The Gemoro in Kiddushin (20a) explains the words כִּי טוֹב לוֹ עִמָּךְ, to mean that the eved ivri should be treated well. There should not be a situation in which the master eats fine bread and the slave eats inferior bread, where the master sleeps on a bed and the slave sleeps on straw.

The Gemoro concludes:

**כל הקונה עבד עברי, כקונה אדון לעצמו**

Anyone who acquires a Jewish slave is considered like one who as acquired a master for himself.

Tosfos there in Kiddushin ask: why is it like acquiring a master, isn’t it enough to treat him like himself?

Tosfos answer by quoting the Yerushalmi. What if the master only has one pillow? If he uses it for himself, he hasn’t fulfilled the requirement of כִּי טוֹב לוֹ עִמָּךְ. And if he doesn’t use the pillow for himself but also doesn’t give it to his slave, that is middas Sedom!

The only choice would therefore be to give it to his eved and the master sleeps without one. That is what the Gemoro means “he has acquired a master for himself”.

Rav Leib Lopian asks: What about **חייך קודמים**? Your life takes precedence over the life of your friend’s. Why then must the master treat his slave better than he treats himself?

Rav Leib explained as follows. When the master sleeps on the straw, he feels only the pain of his poverty and lack of comfort. However, to the slave, sleeping on straw highlights the fact that he is slave. It is as if the straw is screaming out “You are a slave!”

This is much worse than for the master, and that is the reason why he must give his pillow to the slave and he cannot use the halacha of **חייך קודמים**.

Rav Leib teaches us that the Torah obligates us to enter the mindset of the slave, to recognise his feelings and empathise with him.

And Rav Gissinger teaches us that this is true for people down on their luck and could do with some chizuk and a good lunch and for people who observe this.

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