

To Feel Another's Pain?

Shemini-Parah 5779

I.

From the shores of Loch Ness, Scotland, no monster emerged this week, but a fascinating story most certainly did. As was widely reported, a seventy one year old woman by the name of Jo Cameron, feels no pain. Nor any anxiety. Not during childbirth. Not when she suffers a burn. Not even when her hip had degenerated to the point where she needed an outright replacement.

On the account of a microdeletion at the front of one of her genes, referred to as FAAH-OUT, Mrs. Cameron literally does not experience any pain, either physical or psychological. And, while, one can obviously imagine how fraught this is- God forbid, if one didn't know one was in pain, one could easily do something irreversibly damaging to oneself, or worse- she has put her condition to remarkably effective use.

In particular, as noted in a New York Times article about this fascinating Scottish woman, it enabled Mrs. Cameron to teach a very difficult population of children struggling with emotional disturbances, whose aggressive behavior can be deeply unsettling to many people, or even most people, while Mrs. Cameron did not feel any different than if she was in a classroom of typically developing children.

Perhaps, one day, and usually it takes decades for the basic science to translate into tangible medical advance, the wonders of modern medicine and science will enable the utilization of this discovery, linking this gene to this particular phenotype, to helping so many individuals struggling with chronic pain or anxiety. We can certainly all pray for that.

II.

And yet, in reading this article, one thought recurred in my mind. While it is natural and obvious to point out, as I did a moment ago, the risks to Mrs. Cameron herself that are created by not sensing pain, I began to wonder how someone in such a situation would be able to perform the mitzvah of gemilut chasadim, of truly acting out of kindness and compassion, and please do not misunderstand me, I cast no aspersions whatsoever on Mrs. Cameron herself, if one is not able to truly understand what it means to be in a position of psychic distress, or physical pain.

Indeed, while chessed, in terms of concrete action, is the outward manifestation of the mitzvah, we must be clear that chessed does not begin with the legs that carry one to do bikur cholim nor the blessed hands that cook meals for those who need them, nor even the attentive ears that make themselves available simply to receive the words of another; the mitzvah begins in the heart, sensing that someone is in deep distress, recognizing their fragility and their vulnerability, and then, acting in accordance with our central moral principle, imitatio dei, והלכת בדרכיו, to imitate Hashem, as we know, who is with us in all distress, עמו אנכי בצרה, and trying our best to allow those natural feelings of empathy and shared humanity- for we all know what it means to be scared or lonely or simply overwhelmed by life- to translate into concrete and meaningful actions.

When Aharon and his surviving sons, Elazar and Itamar, were prohibited from mourning after the tragic death of Nadav and Avihu, on account of their special responsibilities as Kohanim on that inaugural day of the Mishkan, ראשיכם אל תפרעו, ובגדיכם לא תפרומו ולא תמתו ועל כל העדה יקצוף, something astonishing happened: the mourning did not disappear, but it would appear that, on that day of all days, it was transferred over to those who could mourn, the rest of the Jewish people. As such, Moshe consoled Aharon and his sons, Nadav and Avihu would not go unmourned, the great men that they were, בקרובי אקדש, במקורבי אקדש, but rather, they would be mourned by a stricken nation, the entire house of Israel, ואחיכם כל בית ישראל יבכו את, והשריפה אשר שרף ה'. The operative term here is most clearly ואחיכם כל בית ישראל, your brothers, your sisters, your extended family, feels an instinctive sense of pain and

loss in your personal moment of tragedy. That is precisely what family is, and our nation is built on this very concept, our existence as an extended family.

III.

It is within this framework, of our responsibilities to one another as members of an extended family, that I would like to discuss a very delicate matter being marked by many synagogues across our community today: abusive relationships in the home, whether it is between spouses, between parents and children, between siblings. Let us remind ourselves that abusive does not only mean physical abuse, of a violent or sexual nature, but it also means emotional and verbal abuse.

One week from tomorrow, our community will gather for the Project SARAH breakfast, SARAH, stop abusive relationships as home, and I will have the privilege of representing all of you there. If you would like to attend in person, there is no charge whatsoever, and all of the information is in the bulletin. Project Sarah is funded by N.J. Department of Law & Public Safety, U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Violence Against Women, N.J. Department of Children and Families, Jewish Family Children Services.

Before I share my final message with you, please allow me to be perfectly clear. We must all have a deep respect for the privacy of our friends and neighbors. The Sages of the Talmud taught us that it is not appropriate for one to enter one's home suddenly, let alone someone else's residence. Bilaam so famously praised the Jewish people, **מה ישראל טובו אהליך יעקב משכנותיך ישראל**, on account of the fact that the openings of the tents did not face one another. This means much more than avoiding voyeurism, but more importantly, having a true respect for the privacy of other people, in deed as well as in word.

IV.

And yet, respect for privacy is no license for shirking a sense of profound responsibility towards our family members, friends, and neighbors.

I have a personal relationship with the director of Project SARAH, Rabbi Michael Bleicher, who is the Rav of the Elmora Hills Minyan, and I can assure you, that he is very busy. Both he and I would like nothing more than for his organization to have to close for lack of a need. Sadly, that does not appear to be likely any time in the near future.

For too long, it was perhaps simpler for our community, by and large, to imagine that we did not have such problems in our community, **שלא עשנו כגויי הארצות ולא שמנו כמשפחות האדמה**. Those were problems, it was convenient to say, that impacted other groups, but not our own. And yes, no matter how far along one moves on the religious spectrum, it is there as well.

With all due respect for privacy and a deep concern for the dangers of a false accusation, which are very real and can just as easily destroy lives, we are all bound by the simple principle, **לא תעמוד על דם רעך**, we cannot simply remain passive if we know that someone around us is suffering abuse.

And, if there is real and concrete information, which of course must be verified, than we are not permitted to delay in moving in assistance of the abused party. Rambam teaches us that we violate the prohibition of **לא תעמוד על דם רעך** not merely by failing to do anything, but through **התרשלות**, failing to act with sufficient speed and vigor.

Abuse of any kind, be it physical, sexual, verbal, or emotional, is traumatic enough when it happens anywhere. And yet, when it happens in the home, there is a whole different level of pain which is inflicted, depriving someone of that place which is their natural refuge. You certainly do not need me to tell you that the impact of such horrific abuse, tragically, can last a lifetime. And, perhaps even more tragically, that it can be passed on to another generation, as tortured and anguished souls can indeed make that terrible journey from abused to abuser.

V.

And yet, in direct proportion to the gravity of abuse, so is the potential to do good, to truly save a spouse, a child, a friend, a neighbor, who may feel completely trapped, with nowhere to turn.

If someone you know is in danger, please remind them that no one, but no one, deserves to be abused, whatever they think. An intrinsic part of the pathology and shame of abuse is the victim's sense that they indeed deserve to be treated this way. No one does. Please let them know that they can call the New Jersey Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-572-SAFE, or, Project Sarah's Confidential Hotline, 973-777-7638.

VI.

On a limited basis, there may be some blessings associated with not being able to feel pain or anguish altogether, as Mrs. Cameron does not. Perhaps our new understanding of her genetic profile will indeed translate into therapies and novel approaches that can improve the quality of life for future generations.

And yet, for now, let us see just a bit deeper into the double edged sword which is inoculation against pain. For, more than anything else, it is our own experience with pain, translated into empathy, which is the very foundation of every act of chessed which we may perform.

With regard to those for whom home feels like the very farthest thing from a safe place, they need us to sense their pain, to let them know that they are not alone. If we can allow ourselves to sense their struggle, and not to look away because it is cleaner and easier and demands much less of us, it is no exaggeration to say that, in so doing, we are not merely changing the life of one person, or one family, but generations yet to be born, and indeed, an entire world.