

Being Sensitive To Our Surroundings

In "Touched By A Story," Rabbi Yechiel Spero relates a poignant incident that occurred concerning Rav Isser Zalman in which this virtue was manifest.

Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, was the Rosh Hayeshivah in Kletzk, Poland, and also a son-in-law of Rav Isser Zalman. As the war clouds became more and more imminent over Europe, Rav Aharon decided that the yeshivah in Kletzk would be forced to move to America. Yet, he felt that with a future filled with uncertainty, it would be best that he send his son Shneur, the future gadol and his spiritual heir, to his grandfather in Eretz Yisrael. Rav Shneur spent the war years under the watchful eye of his revered grandfather, who doted on him. Rav Isser Zalman imbued his grandson with an ahavas Torah and ahavas Yisrael, love of Torah and love for every Jew, which became his hallmarks.

When the war ended and life was beginning to return somewhat to normalcy, Rav Aharon decided it was time to send for his son. The news obviously brought a bittersweet reaction from the grandparents, as (Rav) Shneur had been their pride and joy for the past five years. Life must go on, however, and the young bachur had to go home to his parents. Arrangements were made, and the day on which - (Rav) Shneur was to go home arrived. The taxi that would take him to the ship that was sailing to America pulled up to the curb, as Rav Isser Zalman and his rebbetzin waited with their grandson outside their apartment.

It was now time to say goodbye. The rebbetzin hugged her beloved grandchild and blessed him one last time. Rav Isser Zalman, normally an individual who did not conceal his emotion, stuck out his hand and bid his grandson a safe journey and hatzlocha, good luck, in the future. Rav Shneur entered the taxi and left.

A man of Rav Isser Zalman's stature was always surrounded by his students. This time was no different. They watched incredulously as their beloved rebbe gave a "cold" goodbye to his grandson. They knew him to be a warm and sensitive person, traits which were inconsistent with the way he had just acted. Surely, a grandson deserves more than a handshake!

Students must learn, and the only way to grow is to ask - which they did. "Rebbe, not even a hug?" Rav Isser Zalman looked at his students and smiled, as he wiped away a tear from his eyes, responding, "My dear students, yes, I wanted to hug and kiss Shneur with all my heart. Trust me, it was quite difficult to contain my emotions, but I felt it would be wrong to publicly express my true emotions.

"You see, there are many grandfathers who can no longer feel the loving embrace of a grandson. Likewise, there are many grandchildren who can no longer experience the warmth and caring that a grandfather has to offer. Many of our people have perished during the war. I felt that in some way I had to share in their pain and suffering. If I refrain from hugging my beloved grandson, perhaps I can sensitize myself, ever so slightly, to what these unfortunate Jews are going through."

We now have a glimpse of what it means to transcend the physical and develop one's tzelem Elokim.