

Loneliness

The story takes place in Yerushalayim, outside a yeshivah gedolah where a group of yeshivah bachurim, students, were gathered during their bein ha'sedarim, break time. They stood talking; some in learning, others were discussing the current Israeli political scene; while yet others were just enjoying the invigorating air. Absorbed by conversation and friendly camaraderie, few paid attention to the unfolding scene on the street.

One sharp-eyed young man, however, noticed something approaching them, growing in the distance, as it came closer and closer. He stiffened and motioned to his friends, "Look at that!" he said, pointing at the object rapidly advancing towards them.

"How sad," murmured several of the bachurim, transfixed as they observed the scene and absorbed its implication. One lone Jewish hearse - unaccompanied by the usual mourners, no long procession, no entourage - just a single solitary hearse, was moving slowly down the street. The young men were riveted by this sad scene. It evoked a profound sense of poignancy within them. Imagine, a person so alone that no one attends his funeral. How could someone die alone without family, without friends or neighbors? Did not anyone care? Was it possible that the deceased was so detached from society that no one knew or cared if he or she lived or died? If this was true, it was a great tragedy. They must do something about it - now.

These young men had no idea what the word loneliness meant. Most came from large families, had a multitude of friends and acquaintances, and had gregarious personalities. The word "alone" was not in their lexicon.

Indeed, it is a word that should not be in the Jewish lexicon. The experience of the Jewish community is one of unity, solidarity, friendship and support. This stark demonstration of the lonely life was too much for them to accept.

"This is just heartbreaking," said one. "It is a terrible tragedy," said another. "We must do something about it," said a third. The fourth bachur had the most practical idea, "Let us follow the hearse and be its entourage. We will participate in the funeral and burial. That is the right thing to do." The fifth student made a bolder suggestion, "Let us call the rest of the students. It is bein ha'sedarim. We will all attend the funeral." And off they went.

Shortly thereafter, the hearse was accompanied by an impressive column of hundreds of yeshivah students, who followed it slowly and solemnly to the cemetery. It was only when the hearse came to rest at an open gravesite and a lone rabbi emerged from the hearse that they discovered the identity of the deceased.

"This is so appropriate!" exclaimed the rabbi when he learned who they were and which yeshivah they attended. "How did you learn about her death? She was a total recluse, living like a hermit for the last fifty years. She would have nothing to do with people, rebuffing everyone's efforts to reach out to her. I am shocked that anyone knew that she died."

The bachurim looked at the rabbi and said, "Really, we have no idea who the deceased is. We never knew her, nor is she connected to any of us in any way."

"If you do not know whose funeral you are attending, then why are you here?" the rabbi asked incredulously.

"Well, it is a long story," and they began to explain how one thing led to another and before they knew it, the entire yeshivah was involved in the special mitzvah of halvoyas ha'mes, accompanying and seeing to the needs of the deceased.

The rabbi listened to the story and began to cry. After a while, he calmed himself and explained his behavior. "My dear bachurim," he said softly, "Your presence here today, escorting this lonely woman to her final resting place, is Divinely ordained. Let me tell you a story. Seventy years ago, a wealthy Jewish businessman donated an expensive piece of real estate to the Jewish community for the explicit purpose of building a yeshivah - your yeshivah.

"But, that was not all that he contributed. Beyond the initial donation of the land and the building, during his lifetime he made every effort to support the fledgling yeshivah with large sums of money, nurturing it and helping it flourish into one of the premier institutions of Torah.

"As he aged, on several occasions, the yeshivah tried to show its gratitude and bestow honor on him. But his exceptional humility and private nature did not allow for it.

"He had an only child - a daughter, who was the apple of his eye, the pride and joy of his life. When the rabbis would approach him wondering what they could do for him, how to repay his magnanimity, he would respond, 'Thank G-d, I am a wealthy and happy man. I really need nothing. But, maybe one day you can be of service to my beloved daughter. Maybe one day she will be in need of your help.' The rabbis, of course, gave their solemn word that they would never forsake his daughter.

"After a long and productive life, the philanthropist left this world. His daughter, sad to say, became distanced from the religion of her youth and abandoned it. She slowly severed her relationship with the Jewish community altogether. As time went on, her mind began to show signs of serious psychological trauma. She was in and out of psychiatric institutions for the rest of her life.

"The rabbis who remembered their promise to her father tried desperately to keep in touch with her, following her from one incident to another, from one home to the next. They offered her support and encouragement. She rebuffed their overtures and continued to live like an eccentric hermit. No one lives forever, and the original rabbis who had founded the school passed on. With their death, the pledge made to the woman's father was forgotten. The daughter was neglected and lived out her remaining days in depression and seclusion.

"My dear bachurim, it is to this woman's funeral that you "coincidentally" come today; she is the daughter of the major benefactor of your yeshivah. With your presence here today, you have fulfilled your Rosh Ha'Yeshivah's pledge many years ago - never to neglect the benefactor's daughter. You have repaid his largesse by performing this final act of chesed."

Another aspect makes this incident even more startling. The bachurim later learned that the hearse was not supposed to travel on the small, obscure street where the yeshivah is located. The driver for "some reason" became lost and drove down the wrong street. This is but one more episode in the unfolding saga of Divine Providence, of how Hashem repays everyone for their good deeds.