

Caring For Others

Rav Shraga Feivel was an individual who lived with a sense of responsibility for his fellow Jew. In fact, no subject so dominated his teaching or private conversation as the need for every Jew to concern himself with the fate of his fellow Jew. Among the most important phrases in his repertoire was, "What are you doing for Klal Yisrael?" He would go so far as to posit that a person who partakes of Hashem's bounty- who breathes His air, who eats His food, and who benefits from His knowledge - yet does not feel compelled to share his money, food or knowledge with others serves no purpose in Creation. He would interpret Chazal's maxim in Pirke Avos 2:18, Al tehi rasha bifnei atzmecha, "Do not judge yourself to be a wicked person," with a homiletical bend. Anyone who limits his efforts to himself alone - who is bifnei atzmecha, for himself - is derelict of his obligation as a Jew.

Rav Shraga Feivel went one step further in his devotion. He felt that reaching out meant to attend to a person's material needs, as well as to his spiritual deficiencies. There is no dearth of stories about Rav Shraga Feivel's sensitivity to the material needs of his students. He understood that a hungry boy could not learn, and that clothes for Yom Tov were a staple. The list goes on. A young refugee from a very distinguished European family arrived penniless at the yeshivah. Rav Shraga Feivel saw to it that this young man would "find" a dollar in his jacket every week. Furthermore, knowing that this delicate young man found it difficult to partake from the meals served in the kitchen, Rav Shraga Feivel thought of a ruse to supply him with an adequate meal every day. He told the young man that a distinguished Torah scholar had arrived from Russia. Since it was not befitting a man of his stature to eat his meals in the dining room, it would be best that he eat at a restaurant. Would the young man be willing to accompany the scholar to the restaurant, so that he not be compelled to eat alone? The ploy worked, and the young man had one daily meal at the restaurant.

Rav Shraga Feivel made it a point to know each student's financial situation. One of today's leading philanthropists remembers how, as a young student in Torah Vodaath, he suffered real want. His father had passed away, leaving his family with very little. Rav Shraga Feivel was acutely aware of his circumstances: "Before he would talk to me about an afternoon chavrusa, study partner, he would inquire if I had eaten a filling lunch. He always asked me about my mother, and how she was faring at home."

Tuition was never an issue that would bar anyone from attending the yeshivah, as long as Rav Shraga Feivel was at its helm. One day as he was walking through the hall, he heard a woman sobbing in the financial office. When he investigated, he discovered that this woman, who had three sons in the yeshivah, was literally begging for a tuition reduction. Observing this, Rav Shraga Feivel signaled to one of the officers to follow him out of the room, "Come, let us go see for ourselves how she is living." They went to her apartment and discovered a place where the very walls cried out from the poverty within. Rav Shraga Feivel took out a few dollars from his pocket and left it on the table.

Understandably, he reduced her tuition, explaining to the board that they were dealing with pikuach nefesh, issues that border on life and death. In the future, he instructed them to view all tuition issues in this manner. Torah is the lifeblood of our People. There is no reason to spill Jewish blood in order to have access to it.

Men such as Rav Shraga Feivel, and others like him who built Torah in this country, viewed their work as a mission, themselves as agents of the Almighty and their sense of responsibility for Klal Yisrael their *raison d'etre*.