

## To Comfort a Mourner

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### Chizuk - Inspiration

In the early 2000s, a fellow student at Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim in Queens, NY, experienced the loss of his mother, who passed away unexpectedly at a young age. Along with several friends, I traveled from Queens to Brooklyn to pay a Shiva call.

As anticipated, the atmosphere in the Shiva home was deeply somber. Although we endeavored to find the right words of comfort, it became apparent that none of us found the right words to console the bereaved family. After some time, our group approached the mourners, recited “Hamakom Yenacheim Es’chem,” and respectfully departed.

As we walked down the driveway, feeling that we had not found words to truly comfort the mourners, we saw a car come to a stop in front of the house. Rav Dovid Feinstein ZT”L stepped out, along with others who had come with him to pay a Shiva call.

My friends and I recognized that this was an important opportunity to learn how to comfort a mourner, so we turned around and returned to the Shiva house. We hoped to observe Rav Dovid and discover what words of comfort he might offer in such a difficult situation.

After sitting down in front of the mourners, Rav Dovid did nothing but join the family in their sorrow, quietly expressing his deep sadness. I expected him to offer words to help the grieving family understand their loss, but he remained silent. His presence alone, without a single word spoken, made his empathy and pain unmistakable. Remarkably, we all felt that his silent, compassionate presence brought genuine comfort to the family during their grief.

This experience illustrates an essential principle: the purpose of a Shiva visit is to demonstrate care and

a shared sense of loss for the mourners. Contrary to common belief, Nichum Aveilim (comforting mourners) does not require eloquent words or solutions intended to alleviate grief. Understanding this clarifies the intention behind a Shiva visit and may ease the apprehension felt by those who wish to offer support to mourners and can’t always find the right words to do so.

But the lessons learned during that Shiva visit soon grew exponentially. After some time, one of the mourning children said to Rav Dovid, “An earlier visitor suggested that since our mother passed away young, it means she was able to accomplish in a short amount of time all of the good deeds that normally would take most people another 20 or 30 years to accomplish.”

The child clearly wanted to hear Rav Dovid agree, and tell him what kind of a righteous woman his beloved mother must have been. However, as a purveyor of truth, that is not what Rav Dovid chose to do. He humbly admitted that we cannot truly understand the reasons behind Divine actions. He pointed out that while events unfold according to a greater plan, the logic behind them is beyond our grasp.

Instead of offering conjecture regarding the reasons for their mother’s passing at a young age, Rav Dovid opted to address the family with honesty while imparting an important lesson. Proposing theories to explain Hashem’s actions may offer temporary comfort but ultimately amounts to speculation. Assuming we fully comprehend Hashem’s intentions can potentially be more damaging over time, especially when such assumptions prove unfounded.

*“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” says Hashem. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and*

*My thoughts [higher] than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)*

(As told by Rabbi Akiva Males – Rav of the Young Israel of Memphis)

### On The Parsha

And he [Yosef] turned away from them [the brothers] and wept, then returned to them and spoke to them; and he took Shimon from among them and imprisoned him before their eyes.” (Bereishis 42:24)

There is a fascinating Midrash (Midrash Tanchuma in Vayigash 4) that captures the conversation between Shimon and his brothers at the moment that Yosef, disguised as the Viceroy of Egypt, took Shimon away and imprisoned him. When seeing that his brothers had agreed to the demand of Yosef to imprison him, Shimon immediately said, “What you did to Yosef, is the same thing that you wish to do to me now!” The brothers responded, “What should we do? Our entire household will starve to death [from the famine, as we will not be permitted to buy food from him if we do not acquiesce to his demands]!”

The comparison that Shimon made to Yosef is that just like the brothers are acting upon feelings of hostility and ill-will towards him now by giving him up to Yosef, so they had done to Yosef when they threw him into the pit and sold him into slavery because of the hostility and ill-will they harbored towards him.

Shimon’s reaction is very puzzling. Shimon knew what had just transpired. He knew that the brothers’ hands were indeed tied, and that Yosef would refuse to sell them food unless the brothers allowed Yosef to take him as a captive. Nonetheless, Shimon still suspected them of these ulterior motives.

That being the case, how did the brothers’ response allay his concerns? All they said was that they had no choice but to acquiesce to Yosef’s demands or else they would not be sold any food and they would starve. Shimon knew that already and yet somehow, when the brothers stated what was plain for Shimon to see, his concerns were alleviated.

The answer is that it appears that the brothers were able to convince Shimon of the purity of their motives, not by

the information contained in their response, but rather by the earnestness and the sincerity contained within their words. It was not “what” they said, but “how” they said it.

We see from here, the power of sincerity and its ability to change a person’s perceptions about the motivations of someone whom he had previously suspected.

However, we all know too well that many dishonest people have the ability to trick others into believing that they are sincere. Shimon was not naïve and knew this as well. Why did he not suspect the brothers of faking their sincerity?

Shimon was convinced that the brothers were not faking their sincerity because of the brothers’ track record of honesty. In the past, when discussing the brothers’ aversion to Yosef, the Torah tells us (Bereishis 37:4), “They [the brothers] could not speak to him [Yosef] peacefully.” Rashi comments that from the negative, we see the positive – since they disliked Yosef, their honesty prevented them from pretending that they liked him - that is why, “They could not speak to him peacefully.”

It is important to realize the power of sincerity and how it has the ability to allay concerns and to persuade people to see things our way – as the brothers’ sincerity did with Shimon above. We also see the importance of having a track record of honesty and sincerity – a good reputation. If it was not for the brothers’ reputation of honesty, Shimon would not have believed in their sincerity. As King Solomon has said “Tov Shem MiShemen Tov” – a good name is far better than good oil. (Koheles 7:1)

*“May I back out of a school carpool that I have already committed to?”  
 “Should I report a co-worker who is acting dishonestly?”*

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