

Take Responsibility

Human nature is such that when it comes to public issues, they generally flee from responsibility. But what is the Jewish approach? This Parsha gives us some insight.

No Fleeing

It was Shabbos afternoon at a Chabad center in a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa. The Kiddush was almost over and only a few people were still hanging around. The gate of the front yard burst open with force, and three men burst into the building with guns drawn.

Everyone froze in fright. The rabbi could only think of one thing: “Please G-d, don’t let anyone get hurt.”

The invaders quickly identified the rabbi as the leader of the group, and one of them pointed his weapon at his chest for a long ten minutes that seemed like an eternity. At the same time, the other two invaders checked the pockets of all the others and turned the placed upside down looking for money or jewelry.

Today, when the rabbi tells the story, he laughs at these criminals for not doing their homework. You see, from the outside, that Chabad center looks like any normal home, and an affluent one at that. But when the robbers burst in, they discovered nothing more than a few folding chairs and tables—and instead of finding jewelry and items of worth, they found plates of leftover cholent.

Not only that, but when the leader of the gang asked for money, the rabbi gave him a class in the laws of Shabbos, telling him that Jews don't handle money on Shabbos. So the man asked for the cell phone—and again, the rabbi had to explain that electronic items are not handled on Shabbos.

Well, all's well that ends well, and, thank G-d, other than a little fright, no one was hurt.

But ever since then, the Chabad rabbi related, people have been asking him why he doesn't leave the neighborhood and go someplace more secure.

And he always replies that as a general rule, Chasidim do not flee—and shluchim of the Rebbe certainly do not flee their responsibilities. As long as the place has Jews and needs someone on-site to work with their spiritual needs, he will stay there with them.

My Personal Responsibility

In the year 1976, the Rebbe sent a group of shluchim to the Holy Land. Some of them were singles and some were family men. The Rebbe sent the married men and their families to settle in Tsfat, and the single students to the Old City of Jerusalem. This was a short time after the Yom Kippur War, and the security situation in Israel at the time was precarious, particularly in the places to which the Rebbe sent his emissaries.

There were people at the time who wondered out loud whether it was wise to send young families to Tsfat, which at the time

was a far out community, or to Jerusalem, which was not a calm place. But in a farbrengen, when he spoke about these shluchim, the Rebbe said that he took this mission “upon myself and upon my neck”—meaning, that it was his personal responsibility.

Rav’s Commitment

The expression “upon myself and upon my neck” is borrowed from the Talmud.

The Talmud tells us the story of Rav, who was one of the great Amoraim of Babylon. It was he who established the primacy of Torah in Babylon. Until he came to Babylon (which is today’s Iraq), most of the Jews there were people who never had the opportunity to study Torah, and Rav decided to change the situation.

For starters, Rav invented a concept called Yarchei Kallah, in which people who worked for a living all year long would stop working twice a year and go to yeshivah to study Torah. They would do so every six months—once during the month of Adar, before Pesach, and once during the month of Elul, before the High Holidays. It was sort of a national university. And indeed, thousands would come to study the Torah.

The reason it was called “Yarchei Kallah” was because the Torah is the kallah, the bride, of the Jewish Nation—and the two months of study were the honeymoon spent by the groom with his bride.

Rav also established the yeshivah in Sura, Babylon, which at its

height had 1200 students.

The Talmud (Tractate Pesachim 8b) tells us that Rav was once asked about the students who lived in nearby villages and came to the yeshivah in the early morning while it was still dark outside. It was dangerous for them to do so, Rav was told—should they continue or should they wait until sunrise? Rav answered that they should continue to do so; he added, “Upon me and upon my neck.” In other words, he would take responsibility for their safety.

When Rivka Took the Curse

The first time we find such behavior in the Torah is in this week’s Torah portion of Toldos.

In this week’s Parshah, the one “hot” story is the story of the blessings. Yitzchak called in his son Eisav and told him to put together a good meal for him, and in exchange, he’d bless him. Rivka overheard the conversation between father and son and immediately swung into action. She called Yaakov and told him that his father wanted to bless Eisav before he died, and she wanted him to specifically bless him, not Eisav. Why so? Because Yaakov had purchased the first-born birthright from Eisav, and therefore, essentially, those blessings really belonged to him.

Now, Yitzchak was blind. Rivka advised Yaakov to get some food and bring it to Yitzchak, and then get blessed by him. But Yaakov was shocked, and asked his mother, “Perhaps my father will feel me?” and discover that it’s him, not Eisav, and instead of blessing him, curse him.

The Torah then tells us, “And his mother said to him, ‘Your curse is upon me, my son.’” And the Rashbam says on this verse, “Upon me and upon my neck.”

In other words, Rivka took responsibility for anything that might occur. And indeed, when it was all over, Yaakov got the blessings, and Yitzchak even approved the entire thing after the fact, saying, “May he also be blessed.”

Step Up to the Plate

Human nature is such that when it comes to public issues that are not people’s concern, they generally flee from responsibility. They say to themselves, “What do I need this headache for?” Whenever a volunteer is sought for whatever cause or activity, people immediately think to themselves, “Why should I take responsibility? There are a lot of talented people in the community who are much smarter than me, more successful than me, etc.—why should I push myself into this matter?”

But along comes the Rebbe to teach us, “Upon me and upon my neck”—not to run away from responsibility anymore but rather, to get up and take responsibility.

So if you see something pertaining to Judaism or Jews that needs work, even if you know good and well that there will be tough moments; that there will be people who will get offended and angry; that you’ll need a lot of money that you don’t have and that it will disturb your regular routines, despite that all, the Rebbe taught us to get up and take responsibility: “Upon me and upon my neck.”