

Ethical Responses to Crisis:
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August 12, 2020

Finding and Welcoming the Seekers Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 28a:2-3

It was taught: On that day they dismissed the guard at the door and permission was granted to the students to enter. As Rabban Gamliel would proclaim and say: Any student whose insides are not like his outside, will not enter the study hall.

On that day several benches were added. Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Abba Yosef ben Dostai and the Rabbis disputed this. One said: Four hundred benches were added. And one said: Seven hundred benches were added. Rabban Gamliel was disheartened. He said: Perhaps, Heaven forbid, I prevented Israel from Torah. They showed him in his dream white jugs filled with ashes. That is not the case, that was shown to him to ease his mind.

“The Lamplighter” based on a story told by Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch

In 1907, Rabbi Sholom DovBer of Lubavitch was staying in Würzburg, Germany, and a group of chassidim came to spend a Shabbat with the rebbe. Among them were Reb Yosef Yuzik Horowitz, his son-in-law Reb Feivel Zalmanov, and Reb Elimelech Stoptzer.

The rebbe prayed for many hours that Shabbat morning, as was his manner. In the meantime, the chassidim recited kiddush and consumed a quantity of l’chaims. Later, when the rebbe had finished and they sat with him to the Shabbat meal, Reb Yosef Yuzik asked:

“Rebbe, what is a chassid?”

Replied the rebbe: “A chassid is a lamplighter. The lamplighter walks the streets carrying a flame at the end of a pole. He knows that the flame is not his. And he goes from lamp to lamp to set them alight.”

There is something about a candle that makes it more spiritual than physical. A physical substance, when spread, becomes thin. Spirituality, when spread, expands and grows. When you use something physical, it is diminished. The more money you spend, the less you have; the more fuel you use, the more empty your tank becomes; the more food you eat, the more you need to restock your pantry. But spiritual things increase with use. If I use my wisdom to teach, the student learns, and I come out wiser for it; if I share my love with another, I become more loving, not less. When you give a spiritual gift, the recipient gains, and you lose nothing.

This is the spiritual property that candles share. When you use one candle to light another, the original candle remains bright. Its light is not diminished by being shared; on the contrary, the two candles together enhance each other’s brightness and increase light.

So, the chasid is a lamplighter, going from lamp to lamp to set them alight.

Asked Reb Yosef Yuzik: “What if the lamp is in a desert?”

“Then one must go and light it,” said the rebbe. “And when one lights a lamp in a desert, the desolation of the desert becomes visible. The barren wilderness will then be ashamed before the burning lamp.”

Continued the chassid: “What if the lamp is at sea?”

“Then one must undress, dive into the sea, and go light the lamp.”

“And this is a chassid?” Reb Yosef Yuzik asked.

For a long while the rebbe thought. Then he said: “Yes, this is a chassid.”

In your “Neighborhood” Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Mourner 14:1

It is a positive commandment from the Rabbis (i.e. not from the Bible) to visit the sick, and to comfort the mourners, and to escort the dead, and to provide a dowry for the bride, to accompany the [departing] guests, and to involve oneself in all matters of burial, to carry the casket, to go before it, and to eulogize, and to dig, and to bury, as well as to bring joy to the bride and the groom, and to provide them with all their needs. And these are acts of lovingkindness one performs with one’s body and there is no maximum. Even though all these precepts are of Rabbinic origin, they are implied in the biblical verse: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18); that is, whatever you would have others do to you, you shall do to your brothers in Torah (Teachings) and Mitzvoth (Commandments).

Resources From Shalom Hartman course, Shira Koch Epstein Spring 2020