

Sensitivity To All

Dear Parents,

The tendency to take advantage of (and even bully) those who are weaker and without defenders exists within all people. That is the reason, almost all the *Mefarshim* explain, for the numerous times the Torah goes out of its way to warn against oppressing a convert, as well as a widow and orphan. These three categories represent people who are alone, defenseless and without support. It is all too easy to take advantage of them, and therefore the Torah enumerates several times, that such action is forbidden and such an attitude is anti-Torah.

When bullying occurs within groups of people, and especially children in school, it is more likely in an environment and culture in which bullying is tolerated by peers. If one child victimizes another and the remaining children are silent about it, then the bullying is more likely to occur. The reverse is equally true. Opposing such behavior through an attitude of "we don't do that around here," spells the difference between a bully-prone and a bully-free environment.

Those who are silent are referred to as bystanders and they play a key role. They also bear direct responsibility. Commenting on the *Pasuk* (*Shemos* 22:21) "Any widow or orphan you shall not oppress," the *Chizkuni* points out that unlike the other commandments in this part of *Mishpatim*, the admonition against harming an orphan or widow is stated in the plural לֹא תַעֲנוּן (*Lo S'Anun*). The reason, he explains, is because "all are considered sinners, even those who didn't actively participate in the harassing behavior, because they saw the victim's embarrassment and were silent and did not protest."

You may ask, what is the Torah's expectation in a situation where the perpetrators are very strong and aggressive? How can the Torah obligate bystanders to protest in such a risky situation? The answer is apparently that while an individual may be too powerless to stand up to the individual or certainly to a group that is strong and powerful, a group of people do have that power to object, and are obligated to exercise it. A proof of that can be found (*Bereishis* 34:27) in the fact the common people of the city of *Shechem* were killed on account of the bad behavior of *Shechem* the prince. According to the *Seforno*, they were held liable for condoning his criminal act by not standing up to the lawless practices of the royal family.

In reality, there is no such thing as an innocent bystander. One is either enabling the bad behavior

through his silence and inaction, or one is proactively deterring the bad behavior through speaking out or at least projecting a non-verbal message that it is not OK to act in such a way towards another. At the very least, the bystanders could help the victim feel he or she is not alone, by expressing empathy and including the victim in their group.

Adults – both teachers and parents need to play their part in deterring bullying behavior. However, the most potent force to stop bullying behavior is the peer group that does not tolerate such behavior. In this regard, the adults have an added responsibility to continually sensitize the children towards the feelings and needs of others; to build up each child's feelings of self-worth, sense of justice and the self-confidence to be a strong voice for care and compassion.

This can be accomplished through role-modeling and verbalizing a sensitivity towards others, especially those with special needs, unfortunate circumstances and even those whose social awkwardness unwittingly provokes negative reactions by their peers. **Children must be made aware that when they lash out or mock a classmate in reaction to his or her 'annoying' them, what they are doing is called bullying.**

When it comes to interacting with struggling children who are clearly different, our *Talmidim* and *Talmidos* display incredible sensitivity and caring. For example, they are genuinely welcoming and inclusive and friendly to the children from JEMS (the special education school affiliated with our Yeshiva), with whom they interact frequently.

The challenge arises with children who are classmates and are seemingly the same as everyone else. It is imperative that we adults role-model and emphasize that every person has some inner challenge that we know nothing about and need to be sensitive to.

As Torah Jews, we pride ourselves in our ability to follow a myriad of *Halachos*, down to their most intricate detail. It is most noteworthy, that these sensitivities to those who are weaker and defenseless, are part and parcel of the *Halachos* outlined in this *Parsha* of *Halachos*, *Parashas Mishpatim*.

Have a caring and wonderful *Shabbos*,



Rabbi Kalman Baumann
Principal, EECC/KES/BTE

