

**The audience did not
shed a tear**

THE MIDRASH (Bereishis Rabbah 33:5) on this week's *parasha* relates a story: R. Akiva was telling the story of the *Dor HaMabul* – the generation of the Flood – in a public forum. Even though he was describing the deaths of nearly all the inhabitants of the entire world – women and children included – the audience did not shed a tear. When R. Akiva began tell the sad story of Iyov, they immediately began to weep in sorrow for Iyov's suffering. The Midrash is puzzled by this inconsistency and quotes a pasuk in Iyov (24:20) in explanation: "The womb shall forget him..." Rashi interprets the Midrash's answer as follows: Upon seeing his listeners cry over Iyov's troubles, R. Akiva realized that they were not a group of hard-hearted individuals. They were truly empathetic people who shared in the suffering of others – as their reaction to Iyov's story clearly demonstrated. They would naturally have responded in a similar fashion to the plight of the victims of the flood. However, Hashem had numbed the listeners' feelings and prevented them from being sympathetic to the deaths of the *Dor HaMabul*. Just as the wicked generation of the flood did not have mercy on others, Hashem caused future generations to be apathetic and have no mercy towards them as well.

**Can anyone be
expected to cry over
the punishment of such
wicked people?**

How could R. Akiva assume that the only possible reason for his listeners' apathy was due to Divine intervention that anesthetized their natural feelings of mercy? Perhaps they did not cry because they understood that the people of the *Dor HaMabul* were corrupt evil sinners who deserved to die! Just as the Midrash says Hashem was motivated to stop others from having mercy towards them, why couldn't R. Akiva's group, for the exact same reason, naturally feel no mercy on these cruel, barbaric thieves who "filled the earth with corruption"? Rashi, in commenting on the above-quoted pasuk in Iyov, relates from the Midrash Tanchuma that the *Dor HaMabul* used their own children as human sandbags to stopper up the "springs of the deep" which poured forth in the Flood. Mothers were cruel to their own children. Can anyone be expected to feel mercy and cry over the punishment of such wicked people?

**Do we stop to let our
hearts feel their anguish?**

R. Akiva's comment reveals to us our own greatness as human beings and our profound ability to have compassion on others. Our capacity to be sensitive to the suffering of others extends even to immoral criminals. Even people who have sunk to the lowest levels, still remain human beings created in the image of Hashem. His pain is still human suffering and our hearts can and should naturally empathize with him. R. Akiva realized with absolute clarity that every Jew is supremely receptive to any human suffering, and the only reason his listeners did not cry over the deaths of Noach's generation had to be because of Divine intervention. Otherwise, their natural response would have been to shed tears – no matter how evil the victims themselves were.

Do we allow ourselves to feel the pain of other people? We hear of so much human misery and we too often see our friends and neighbors carrying heavy burdens of misfortune in their lives. The loss of a close family member, being laid off of a job, childlessness and lonely singlehood are just a few. Do we stop to let our hearts feel their anguish, and share their plight? In the merit of our mercy on Hashem's children, may He have mercy on all of us and bring us the redemption from our exile, the rebuilding of His Temple, wiping away all our tears and sadness in the joy of His salvation.