

# Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Shmos

“AND HE SAW THAT THERE WAS NO MAN ...” (SHMOS 2:12)

MOSHE WITNESSED an Egyptian beating a fellow Jew. Before Moshe took action to stop this Egyptian from possibly killing the Jew, the *pasuk* relates, Moshe looked around and saw that there “was no man.” The Midrash Rabbah (Shmos 1:29), quoting R. Yehudah, explains this to mean that there was no one else present possessing zeal to rise up and kill the Egyptian. The Mahrzu points out that, according to this explanation, other Jews were indeed present and witnessing the assault, yet they were not willing to take the necessary action.

**What difference does it make that the onlookers did nothing?**

Why does the Torah take pains to describe the passivity of the bystanders, and that Moshe noticed it? What difference does it make that the onlookers did nothing? The simplest explanation would be that Moshe only stepped forward to kill the Egyptian because there was no one else willing to do so. Indeed, the Mahrzu quotes the mishna in Pirkei Avos (2:5), “In a place where there are no men, try to be a man,” applies here in the sense that Moshe acted (“tried to be a man”) only because no one else was “a man.” However, this explanation is vulnerable to a serious question: Wouldn’t Moshe have rushed to fulfill this great mitzvah of saving a fellow Jew even if other people were available? The Gemara teaches us that one should always try to be the first one to do a *mitzvah* (Bava Kama 38b). Surely Moshe, who possessed a highly developed *middah* of *z’rizus* – zeal, would not have hesitated to grab this opportunity to perform the incredible *mitzvah* of saving a Jewish life; how is it conceivable that Moshe would have passed it up?

**This knowledge only caused Moshe to increase his zealous fervor**

We must conclude that Moshe really would have seized the chance to do this *mitzvah* even if there were others that were ready and able to kill the Egyptian. The lack of response by other Jews did not determine whether Moshe would react, but rather how he would react. Moshe would not have acted with the same intensity had he known that other people were available. The Midrash is explaining that Moshe surveyed the scene and saw no one else ready to act. This knowledge did not make him hesitant, feeling alone and unsure. Instead, seeing this state of affairs filled him with courage and strength. He focused on the fact that he was the only one willing to save his Jewish brother. This knowledge only caused Moshe to increase his zealous fervor.

**We should be galvanized to act with greater decisiveness**

How often do we find ourselves in situations that call for action, that require us to stand up and do the right thing, and we look around to see if anyone else is thinking the same way? If others don’t seem motivated to act, it sometimes makes us afraid to play the “righteous” or “religious” person, and we back off. Even if we have the backbone to step forward and take the initiative, it’s with reluctance and hesitation. “After all,” we think to ourselves, “no one else is doing it...,” so we feel embarrassed and insecure. From Moshe’s example we learn that not only shouldn’t we hesitate to do what’s right, despite the ambivalence or apathy of the spectators, but to the contrary – we should increase our zeal and energy level, magnify our courage and our fortitude. Precisely because they are uncaring and unmotivated, we should be galvanized to act with greater decisiveness and more strength, because “there is no one else but me to do the will of Hashem!” May we merit to be Hashem’s messengers as we carry out His will with zeal, with confidence and with *simcha*.