



Taking Responsibility, Part II

Two weeks ago, we discussed the responsibility of each of us to use our talents and energies to alleviate the suffering of our fellow Jews and to bring Klal Yisrael closer to its ideal state. Our starting point was the statement of Rabbi Chaim Shmuelewitz, *ztz"l*, that taking responsibility for Klal Yisrael is perhaps the principal measure of a person's spiritual state.

Taking responsibility goes far beyond showing concern or davening for others, though doing so is certainly vital. If, *chas v'shalom*, we had a sick child, we would not content ourselves with davening without also exhausting all medical avenues. In the 1960s, long before the underground *baal teshuvah* movement began in the Soviet Union and emissaries from the West started traveling regularly to the FSU, they used to recite a *kapitel Tehillim* for the Jews of the Soviet Union in a certain yeshivah. A former student of the yeshivah approached the Rosh Yeshivah after Minchah and told him, "Nothing will ever come from such *kapitel Tehillim*; it is not serious."

The former student explained himself: "I come from South America where there are hundreds of thousands of Jews for whom a great deal could be done. If we really cared about doing something for Klal Yisrael, we would be focusing on what can actually be done to bring Yiddishkeit to the Jews of South America, not contenting ourselves with saying Tehillim for Jews behind the Iron Curtain." The Rosh Yeshivah acknowledged the force of his point.

The percentage of those in our community who are constantly on the lookout for ways to improve the lot of Klal Yisrael is one of the glories of the Torah world. Reading the English *Mishpacha's* pre-Yamim Noraim *Mosaic of the Jewish World: A Panoramic View of Institutions and Initiatives*, I was struck that virtually all of these initiatives were the products of individuals or small group of individuals who saw a particular problem and devoted themselves to solving it.

They did not convince themselves that if they had noted the problem, someone else more qualified to solve it must have done so as well. Nor did they place the responsibility elsewhere, telling themselves

that if the issue were truly of importance, it is already being addressed by the *gedolim*. Rather, they accepted that their noticing a particular problem was likely a reflection of Divine Providence — an indication that one of their life tasks was to do what they could to solve it.

The same sense of responsibility is reflected in the far higher rates of volunteerism in the Torah community. Many of our most important *chesed* organizations depend on massive amounts of volunteer labor. Mesila, an organization that offers guidance in money management to families and businesses, for instance, utilizes 300 volunteers in Israel, who have each completed an intensive training course, and who contribute two to three hours weekly to working directly with clients. And thousands of Israeli *youngermen* set aside an evening a week to teach Torah to nonreligious Jews, and an even larger number of *frum* women do so via telephone.

Nothing provides me with more satisfaction than when I see the efforts of one of the *meshugayim l'davar echad* — upon whom, the Rambam writes, the world depends — crowned with success. Last year I wrote about Jeff Cohn, a Baltimore businessman, who was so moved by the tales of woe he was hearing from local singles that he decided to devote himself to finding solutions. One of his brainstormings was to increase the *shidduch* possibilities for singles outside of the New York metropolitan area by making it possible for them to meet initially via video conferencing. Armed with *haskamos* from leading *gedolim* and the support of generous sponsors in Baltimore, Detroit, Chicago, Toronto, and Lakewood, ShidduchVision is now a reality, and the Baltimore-Chicago couple who inaugurated the system pronounced themselves well-satisfied with the naturalness of their meeting.

For years, a Flatbush businessman named Albert Kahn has been obsessed with the necessity for every young couple to purchase low-cost term life insurance so that in the event of tragedy, *chas v'shalom*, the surviving family members will not have to endure the humiliation of being

dependent on communal efforts. Partly in response to his efforts, a growing number of yeshivos and Beis Yaakovs now include term insurance in their salary package. And recently, Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood announced that all *talmidim* of the yeshivah are eligible to be part of a group policy providing up to \$250,000 of individual term-life coverage, with the yeshivah covering one-third of the cost of premiums.

Not all communal issues, however, are susceptible to individual initiatives. Those affecting the entire community — e.g., *parnassah* and housing — are too complex and involve too many different aspects for any single individual to develop the type of comprehensive plans necessary. Doing so requires a great deal of research and bringing together many different people with relevant expertise to exchange ideas and develop plans over an extended period of time, in consultation with *gedolei Yisrael*. Only umbrella organizations, such as Agudath Israel of America, can provide the necessary framework.

I have my own idea for a project someone should undertake. While writing my pre-Succos column on the full-scale war that might erupt in the wake of an Israeli attack on Iran, I started to think about how the Torah community would be able to contribute. With the IDF and civil-defense structures stretched thin, many of us would be eager to do anything we could to help. But our ability to do so productively would be severely limited by our lack of prior training. It occurred to me that it might be worthwhile to set up some kind of training program in advance for those no longer learning full-time so that we could make a maximal contribution in the event of catastrophe, *chas v'shalom*.

The truth is that I have no more of an idea how to set up such a program than I would have an idea how to start a business, even with a million dollars in start-up capital. I'm not sure that is an excuse, however. Before approaching the *gedolei Yisrael*, I would be interested in hearing from readers as to what they think of the idea, how they think it should be done, and whether they would be interested in participating. ■