

Rabbi's Column

I think most of us have heard the folk saying, "The straw that broke the camel's back." The saying naturally refers to an event when an action, or spoken statement, or physical gesture, results in a reaction that seems completely inappropriate for the given action, statement or gesture.

In my experience, this normally has a couple of results. Most of the time, the person who provided the straw will try to refrain from providing a similar straw in the future. Some of the time, the people involved will learn more about each other as the one who reacted explains why they reacted that way, and the one who provided the straw explains where the straw was coming from. Every so often, the two effectively decide to never interact again.

The main problem, of course, is that nobody can see the burdens we carry. When the burden is physical, there are hints that show when the legs, back or arms just cannot handle anything more.

I have yet to find somebody who was not carrying some kind of burden. Some people seem better able to control when they display that their metaphorical back has been broken, which often makes it seem to others that there is no burden they cannot bear. Others continually work on removing the burdens closest to the bottom, which helps them see how this latest straw really should not be going into the same pile in the first place. A very few are seemingly able to take new straws and in a jenga-like fashion, replace an old straw with a new straw of the exact same type.

Most of us are just trying to cope as best as we can, and hope nobody gives us more than we can handle.

This can get a bit more complicated.

It can (and I think often does) happen that the reaction of the person who receives that offending straw provides a back-breaking straw to somebody else. Now two people are wounded. If they have wounded each other, my experience is that it becomes much more difficult to resolve. Not impossible, merely difficult.

When people have been physically wounded, we know that there are many reactions to offers of help, or lack of such offers. It is the same with invisible wounds. Just knowing that we are all walking wounded, as it were, is not enough to be certain of how best to interact with another person.

I have found these thoughts to be useful in dealing with most people [the main exception are people who engage in physical or emotional abuse - when you are the target, please do not give it the best spin - focus on getting to a safe space]:

Is my reaction based on what is in front of me, or do I find myself reliving a different episode in my life?

Presume that the other person has a good reason for their actions/words.

What is it about the metaphorical straw that is affecting me so much?

Is my reaction shared by others?

Is this part of the other person's normal pattern of behavior? Why, then, am I reacting so strongly this time?

What about this person reminds me of myself?

I often use some of my grandmother's favorite statements to keep things in perspective. "The first 100 years is the hardest." "In 1,000 years, will it matter?"

Kindness, patience and perspective. As we speedily approach Shavuot, may we strive to increase these in our interactions with others.