

So that my name and the names of my Fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, may be called in them. (48:16)

Yaakov *Avinu* blesses his grandsons with a blessing that has become the standard for parental blessing throughout the ages. *V'yikarei bahem shemi v'shem avosai, Avraham, v'Yitzchak*, "So that my name and the name of my fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, may be called in them." The commentators wonder why the Patriarch placed his name first in the sequence of the *Avos*, Patriarchs. Simply, I would venture to suggest that he was alluding to the sorry state of affairs that exists when one must revert back to the previous generation to find someone whose spiritual repute is worth emulating. Sadly, we find parents who have been lax in their Torah observance. This applies even to those who received a solid Torah education, but, after leaving the *yeshivah*, discovered a world of materialism which was too tempting to resist. Now, when they seek blessing for their children, they must turn to their own parents and grandparents as symbols of adherence to Torah, as individuals who represent blessing, whom they want their children to accept as models.

Thus, Yaakov mentioned his name first. He prayed that he be worthy of being the first one whom his grandsons would emulate, and then *l'malah ba'kodesh*, to ascend in sanctity, to his father and grandfather.

The *Sefer Bais Yisrael HaShalem* offers another explanation which provides us with a window into understanding the true meaning of serving Hashem and executing acts of lovingkindness. The *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* 1:2, states, "The world stands upon three things: on Torah (study); *avodah* (service to Hashem through prayer, etc.); and *gemillas chassadim* (performing acts of lovingkindness). It is these three activities that maintain the world. Without continued effort towards Torah study, prayer to Hashem, and reaching out with kindness to our fellowman, the world would cease to exist. Indeed, it would lose its very purpose for existence.

When we peruse the *pesukim* of the Torah, it is apparent that the first person to perform an act of *avodah* was Adam *HaRishon*, Primordial Man, when he offered a *korban*, sacrifice, to Hashem. Likewise, the first one to carry out an act of *chesed* was Noach, when he spent day and night serving the various creatures that were his fellow travelers on the *Teivah*, Ark. The Torah, however, was not given to *Klal Yisrael* for another two thousand years. If so, why does the *Tanna* of the *Mishnah* mention Torah first – before *avodah* and *gemillas chassadim*?

In his commentary *Ruach Chaim* to *Meseches Avos*, **Horav Chaim Volozhiner, zl**, derives an important principle from this *Mishnah*. It is possible that, without the Torah as our guide, a person could have spent his entire life engrossed in performing acts of *avodah* and *chesed* and be certain that everything he is doing – every action, with every activity – he is performing at the optimum level. Once the Torah was given and we study its *halachos*, we discover, to our dismay, that we were wrong! What we were certain was consummate *chesed* is not! What we assumed was *avodah* was deemed invalid!

Why is this? Because the Torah not only serves as our blueprint for life, but it is also our guide for daily living. Its *halachos*, code of Jewish Law, determines what is appropriate and what is not, what is valid and what is not. For example, if someone lends a person in need one million dollars to start a business, pay up accrued debt, etc. and he charges him half of one percent as interest to cover the expenses of the loan, one might think it is *chesed*. The Torah, however, considers this loan sinful! One may not take *ribbis*, usury. One may not charge a premium on a loan. The Torah defines *chesed* – not society.

The *Talmud* (*Meseches Smachos* 4) relates that, prior to studying Torah (and becoming aware of the law), Rabbi Akiva (who was not yet the great Torah luminary) discovered a *meis mitzvah* (dead body which had no one to take care of his burial). There was no burial place in the immediate area, so Rabbi Akiva carried the dead weight over his shoulders for a number of miles until he located a suitable burial place for the deceased. At first glance, Rabbi Akiva's actions may be perceived as a noble *mitzvah*; the Torah, however, has another take on this. The *halachah* is clear that a *meis mitzvah koneh mekomo*, acquires the place where he is laying. Thus, the deceased may – and should – have been buried where he was found. Carrying the body was not only unnecessary – it is considered *k'ilu shofeich damim*, as if (Rabbi Akiva) had spilled blood! The Torah determines what is *chesed* and what is *avodah*. It is not defined by human emotion.

Having said this, the *Bais Yisrael HaShalem* explains Yaakov's blessing. One might think that he is serving Hashem (*avodah*); one might feel that he is a wonderful *baal chesed*; if his actions are not able to pass the Torah's litmus test for *chesed* and *avodah*, however, he is neither a *baal chesed* nor an *oveid Hashem*.

Avraham Avinu was the *amud hachesed*, pillar of kindness, exemplified by his constant endeavor, empathy and love for his fellowman, which he infused into the genes of his descendants. Yitzchak Avinu personified *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty, on the highest level of spirituality. As the *Olah Temimah*, perfect sacrifice, he represented an unparalleled level of devotion to Hashem that has become a DNA marker of the Jewish psyche.

With his blessing, Yaakov was intimating a profound message to his grandsons and ensuing progeny: Avraham's *mitzvah* of *chesed* is great; Yitzchak's *mitzvah* of *avodas Hashem* is profound; unless they are held up to the Torah represented by Yaakov, however, they are invalid. Our idea of *chesed* and *avodah* is defined by the Torah – not by contemporary society. This is the principle which Yaakov sought to convey in his final moments.

In what proved to be his final *shmuess*, ethical discourse, to his *talmidim*, students, my *Rosh Yeshivah*, **Horav Chaim Mordechai Katz, zl**, made a similar statement. He quoted the *Mishnah* in *Shabbos* 127a, "These are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in This World but whose principal remains intact for him in the World to Come." The *Mishnah* goes on to provide an impressive list of social welfare precepts which run the gamut from acts of lovingkindness to daily timely *shul* attendance, etc. The *Mishnah* concludes with the phrase *v'talmud Torah k'neged*

kulam, “And the study of Torah is equivalent to them all.”

The *Rosh Yeshivah* questioned the use of the word *k'neged* which is normally translated as opposite/in opposition. Had the *Mishnah* merely wanted to teach that Torah is superior to all other activities, it would have said *v'talmud Torah oleh al kulam*, “and the study supersedes them all.” Why does it use the word *k'neged*? He explained that, with regard to each of these activities, they must stand up opposite the Torah and questions must be answered: How does the Torah view this activity? Is it appropriate? Is it valid? Is it proper? Once the answers have been given in the affirmative, one can move on with the activity.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* was delivering his final message to his beloved students. Whatever you do in life, it must stand up to Torah perspective. The Torah must rule accordingly: Is this activity sanctioned by the Torah – or not? If it is not, it loses its *chesed/avodah* status.