

And the souls they made in Charan. (12:5)

Avraham Avinu was the *amud ha'chesed*, pillar of kindness. What was his greatest kindness? It was reaching out to people and teaching them about Hashem. To save a person from the clutches of idol worship and inculcate him with belief in monotheism is the greatest act of kindness, because this person has been saved – not only spiritually, but physically as well. We involve ourselves in all forms of *chesed* projects, but the most basic act of reaching out to our estranged brethren seems to elude us. This is especially true if the subject is in an environment that is foreign to us or does not sit well with our sensitivities. People that are in restricted environments; those who are unwell and infirm; those who are victims of various forms of abuse and addiction: are at the bottom of the list of those whom we are prepared to help. When our acts of *chesed* are prefixed with dollar signs, a preference criteria of whom we will help and when – our *chesed* is really self-focused and not worth very much. Avraham Avinu set the standards for *chesed*; he had no criteria and no preferences. He reached out to everyone, whenever, and wherever and whomever needed him.

Why is it that many observant, good people, who are well-meaning and sensitive, shy away from acts of *chesed* to those who just do not fit in their comfort zones? For some reason, we Jews have the ability to live a life filled with contradictions. Some will call this modern or centrist, when, in fact, it is a life of contradictions. We will go out of our way to perform acts of kindness, but, if the beneficiary does not fit into our guidelines for humanity, we will defer to others – at times, those who are not observant.

I read about the funeral arrangements for Cardinal Jean-Marie Listiger, the long-time Archbishop of France. He was a confidante of Pope John Paul II and had risen to a pinnacle in the Catholic Church, a level which is attained by only a select few. So what was so special about this? People work diligently and remain focused on achieving a specific goal; is it that strange if they make it? This would be true had Cardinal Listiger been born a devout Catholic. He was, however, born a Jew! As a fourteen year-old boy, he hid in a convent in France while his mother was murdered in Auschwitz. It is well-known that he kept his parents' *yahrzeits* and even recited *Kaddish* for them. He asked that the *Kaddish* be recited for him at his funeral in front of Notre Dame! Now, that is a contradiction! Was he the first to live a life of contradiction? Certainly not, and, sad to say, he was not the last.

Chesed is founded upon the principle of care, sensitivity, empathy; its basic foundation does not allow for the "convenience" of contradiction. Yet, there are those whose attitude toward *chesed* is filled with contradictions. If they are following the standard set forth by our Patriarch, then they had better check their GPS. Our Patriarch was *yashar*, straight, and did not sway or wane in his commitment. Why do we?

At times, the most difficult question can be elucidated with a simple answer. I think the greatest *chesed* that we can perform for someone is to attempt to figure out what makes him tick, what drives him to act in a different manner. In other words, are we prepared to understand and accept

another person's situation? True, he may act in a weird manner, but he might have a good reason for his strange behavior. The fellow that has been locked away for various felonies, both moral and ethical, which might make us cringe (and they should!) or infringe upon our sensibilities, has a criminal history and pathology that have brought him to this stage. Perhaps if we try to comprehend his situation, we might understand his mindset. This, I think is the greatest act of *chesed*. This is empathy at its apex. While this might be the author's personal perspective, it has been inspired by an incredible story.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski relates the following incident which took place when he was the resident psychiatrist in a large

state hospital. This hospital catered primarily to hundreds of mentally-challenged patients. At times, medical students came to see and study cases, which, although they may have been discussed in psychiatric literature, were to be found only in such a resident facility. He took the group to the chronic care building, where they housed the most difficult cases, ie, the patients who were hardest to reach. He introduced them to the unit's senior resident, a man who had spent the last 52 years in the hospital. He was presently 69 years old.

The patient, whom we will call "Sam," had not spoken a word in 52 years. Other than his daily routine, which consisted of a weird practice, he seemed docile and harmless. Every day, following breakfast, he would walk to a corner of the community room and assume a strange position on the floor, his body erect and his hands directed upward. It almost looked as if he were holding up something invisible. He remained in this position until lunch, after which he would return until dinner and thereafter until bedtime. This had gone on every day for the last 52 years. No therapy, medication or innovative electric shock treatment had succeeded in altering his behavior. No amount of convincing could get him to sit down on a chair in a normal manner – except for meals.

During the visit, one of the medical students asked for permission to speak to the patient. Although he wondered what impact the student's conversation could have on the patient, if decades of variegated psychiatric treatment had proven fruitless, nonetheless, Rabbi Twerski said, "Certainly, go for it."

The student went over to the patient, smiled, and said, "Why don't you sit down for a bit? I will take over." The man looked at the student with his blank look – no words, no smile, no recognition. The student then assumed the same contorted position of the patient, perfectly paralleling his posture, and repeated, "Why not sit down now? I will take over for you." Without a word, for the first time in fifty-two years, the patient left his position and sat down in a chair!

What happened? First and foremost, there is no rationale to explain the behavior of one who is mentally challenged. We do not know for certain what is going on in his mind. Rabbi Twerski concluded, however, that, quite possibly, this man believed that the world was going to fall and he alone was able to support it. Clearly, when one carries such an awesome responsibility on his

shoulders, no entreaty will move him to let go – until someone else relieves him. The fact that he took meal breaks and sleeping time off – well, I said there is no rhyme or reason to the actions of such a person.

For fifty-two years, this man was dismissed as insane. No one ever bothered getting into his mind, attempting to reach out and give him some consideration. He was labeled as strange and left to rot for half a century. It took the compassion and sensitivity of the medical student to make the attempt to get into the patient's mind in order to try to understand what made him tick – differently. Furthermore, finally, a connection was established between a mind that had wavered off, that was no longer cogent, and one that was rational. Sadly, it was five decades too late.

Let us take this one step further. There is a gap between *frum*, observant, and non-observant. Gaps exist within the observant camp with some who seek to modernize, revolutionize the hallowed traditions and *halachos* to which we have adhered throughout the millennia. A gap exists between young and old, “off the *derech*” teens and mainstream *yeshivishe*, *chassidish*, young people. While in no way shall we shift one iota from our beliefs, we might attempt to use compassion and common sense to peer into their minds, understand the pathologies, environment, and backgrounds from which they hail, or where they have regrettably made their home, in order to see that our differences are not necessarily ideological in nature, but rather, the result of insecurity, lack of self-esteem for various reasons, abuse and simply a lack of education.

Chesed begins at home. If we were to delve into the home and background of those with whom we differ, we might be surprised to discover that there is a “method to their madness.”