

Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and observed their burdens. (2:11)

Moshe *Rabbeinu* grew up. What was his act of “growing up”? How did he manifest his maturity? He went out to his brethren and observed their burdens. In other words, Moshe’s act of maturation was his identification with his people. How did he identify with them? He did not just wear a “yellow star” as an armband; he intended to see their suffering and grieve with them. It is easy to identify with the Jewish People when they are riding high. What about when they are bent over, suffering from back-breaking labor, ridiculed for being different, disdained and debased as the cause of all of the Egyptian woes? Are we willing to hold our collective heads up high and proudly declare, “I am a Jew!” This is what Moshe did on his first “outing” from the palace. *Vayeitzei el echav*, “He went out to his brethren.” He made no secret about his biological connection with the Jews. He was one of them. These were his brothers. Moshe not only acted kindly, but he did so as a Jew.

Our people are essentially kind. After all, even the most alienated Jew considers *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, the very foundation – and probably the most definitive – *mitzvah* of Judaism. *Shabbos*, *kashrus*, morality, ethics, all stand far removed from *tikkun olam*. Sad, but true. Nonetheless, *chesed*, acts of lovingkindness, definitely course through the veins of the Jewish People. Acts of lovingkindness are a vital part of our DNA. Jews throughout the world stand at the forefront of every major act of *chesed*. Yet, how many are prepared to underscore that they are executing these wonderful acts of kindness specifically because they are Jewish? It is not about us; it is about glorifying Hashem’s Name. There is much more to Judaism than *tikkun olam*; rather, it is about *kavod Shomayim*, glorifying Heaven, and teaching the world that there is a *Ribbono Shel Olam*.

Moshe did not just leave the shelter of the palace; he went out as a Jew, to do what Jews do best: to carry out acts of lovingkindness; to shoulder the pain and misery with others, with his brethren. I was inspired with this idea from an article I read about an amazing Jewish woman, whose simple act of kindness inspired a gentile author to respect Jews and Judaism. I loosely quote from a book entitled *Civility: Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy*, by Stephen Carter, a professor of Law at Yale University.

“In the summer of 1966, my parents and their five children moved to large house in Cleveland Park, a neighborhood in the middle of Northwest Washington, D.C. – at that time, a lily-white enclave. [Obviously, the Carter family were African Americans]... My first impression (of the neighborhood) was of block upon block of grim, forbidding old homes, each of which seemed to feature a massive dog and spoiled children in the uniforms of various private schools. My two brothers and two sisters and I sat on the front steps, missing our playmates, as the movers carried in our furniture. Cars passed what was now our house, slowing for a look, as did people on foot. We waited (longingly) for somebody to say hello, to welcome us. Nobody did.

“... I watched the strange new people passing us, and, wordlessly, I watched back. I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here. I knew...”

“And all at once, a white woman arriving home from work at the house across the street from ours turned and smiled with obvious delight, waved and called out, ‘Welcome!’ in a booming, confident voice I would come to love. She bustled into her house, only to emerge minutes later with a huge tray of cream cheese and jelly sandwiches, which she carried to our porch and offered around with her ready smile, simultaneously feeding and greeting the children of a family she had never met – and a black family at that – with nothing to gain for herself except perhaps the knowledge that she had done the right thing. We were strangers, black strangers, and she went out of her way to make us feel welcome. This woman’s name was Sara Kestenbaum. Sara died much too soon, but she remains in my experience one of the great exemplars of all that is best about civility.”

The author, Stephen Carter, was twelve years old when his first encounter with civility, by way of a Jewish woman, took place. Three decades later, that encounter remained a vivid memory that inspired his 1999 book. Obviously, a number of important lessons can be derived – lessons which could have been derived from a host of other, but similar, stories.

I chose this one, which was based upon the observations of a gentile, because he was moved, not only by the act of kindness, but by the individual who performed it (in his words): “An observant Jew, whose family was deeply religious.” I do not know their level of observance, but, unquestionably, they did not hide who they were and to what religion they adhered, to the point that the gentile assumed that this was the act of an observant Jewess. In the words of the gentile author, who learned a powerful lesson from this woman (a lesson that every young Jewish child knows), “Civility creates not merely a negative duty not to do harm, but an affirmative duty to do good.” This is how we perform *chesed*. It is a requirement to perform acts of *chesed*. It is also important not to conceal the fact that the act of kindness permanently shaped the image of Jews in the mind of a young African American boy – an image that would remain with him throughout his life. Who does not remember the countless acts of *chesed* by *Hatzalah* following the 9/11 bombings? Or the outpouring of generosity and kindness proffered by the *Satmar Chassidim* of Williamsburg? When we act in the manner that we should, we declare, “This is the way Jews act.” When we, regrettably, do not act in an appropriate manner, we allow them to say, “Well, that is the way Jews act.”

Some acts of *chesed* are simple to carry out. Writing a check, if the money is in the bank, does not – for the most part – make difficult demands upon a person – unless he is the type of person who would easier “part with his life than with his money.” At times, acts of *chesed* demand that we go to places that are not *geshmack*, pleasant, or deal with individuals who not only do not appreciate our efforts, but often spurn them. *Chesed* often demands *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice and dedication, to an inherently Jewish ideal, which is one of the pillars of our faith. Imagine that the *baal/baalas chesed* is ill and the manifold acts of *chesed*, which were demanding, to say the least, when he/she

was healthy, are now overwhelming. This is when *mesiras nefesh* kicks in, since there is probably no one who either can -- or is willing-to do the job with the same finesse and modesty. The following *dvar Torah* addresses such an issue.

The *Divrei Chaim*, *Horav Chaim Halberstam*, *zl*, of Sanz, refused to give his *haskamah*, approbation, on an *halachic sefer*. Many *Talmudic* scholars had approached him with their publications hoping to garner his written approbation – to no avail. He did, however, give one *haskamah*, indeed, a very strong approval on a *sefer*, because it explained a very difficult *Talmudic* passage. While this was certainly not the first volume of Torah expositions to render brilliant explanations, it was the first and only *sefer* that received the *Sanzer's* approbation. Apparently, there was a *pshat*, exposition, given by the author that so impressed the *Sanzer Rav* that he said, "This *pshat* could only have been written by an individual whose *mesiras nefesh*, devotion to the point of self-sacrifice to Hashem, and his incredible *middos*, character traits, are exemplary."

The exposition in question is concerning the *pasuk* in *Tehillim* 42:2, *K'ayol taarog al afikei mayim*, "As the hart longs for water streams (so does my love for you)." An *ayol* is a male specie of hart; *taarog*, longs, is in the feminine gender. It should have either written *yaarog* (male gender) or *ayalah*, female hart. It cannot be both. The author quotes *Chazal* that an *ayalah* (female) has a very narrow womb. When she prepares to give birth, she bends down and she screams seventy times, a number equivalent to seventy words which comprise *Tehillim* 20 (*Yaancha Hashem b'yom tzarah*, "May Hashem hear you on the day of trouble." At that point Hashem dispatches a specie of serpent which strikes the hart on the womb, tearing it, thus allowing the fetus to emerge. Hashem guards over the hart when she gives birth.

Chazal teach us another characteristic of the *ayalah*. She has incredible compassion. When there is a drought due to lack of rain, all of the *chayos*, beasts, come before it and ask that she pray for rain. The *ayalah* cries out to Hashem and the Almighty responds, preparing for her a spring of floating water, so that the animals can satiate their thirst.

Two wonderful characteristics, but what happens, asks the author, if both opportunities for crying out happen to present themselves at the same time? Which one takes precedence: the *ayalah's* terrible birth pains; or the animals need for water? The author replies that when presented with the needs of others, the *ayalah* (female) "forgets" (disregards) that she is female, and becomes (like) an *ayal*, male hart (that does not give birth), and she prays for water. Thus, the *ayalah* becomes an *ayal* – when necessary to help others with her *chesed*.

The *Divrei Chaim* was greatly impressed by this very thoughtful and inspiring exposition. He added, "When one seeks to achieve the ultimate in *middos*, he must expunge from himself any vestiges of personal interest, so that his entire focus will be on the act of *chesed* for others. Only when a person thinks only of others can he properly execute the act of *chesed*."