

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

Our Patriarch spent his entire adult life devoted to outreach. Wherever they traveled, and when they finally settled, Avraham and Sarah were fountains of *chesed* and lovingkindness in a world beset with paganism and hedonism.

Avraham *Avinu* is referred to as the *amud hachessed*, pillar of kindness, and rightfully so, having spent his entire life reaching out to a pagan world, both materially and spiritually. *Chesed* is a wonderful and vital character trait. Our world functions on *chesed*, both in the religious and secular communities. It is the one character trait upon which everyone seems to agree. We have all developed diverse individual approaches toward carrying out many acts of *chesed*, but they are all focused (or should be) on helping those in need. Why, then, is Avraham, our Patriarch, so lauded for his acts of lovingkindness? If an entire secular world understands the need for social services, it is obvious that we must all incorporate *chesed* into our lifestyles.

At first glance, we may suggest that our Patriarch earned this appellation because he was the first person to recognize that people had spiritual needs. Saving them from moral and spiritual extinction is one of the greatest acts of *chesed*. Furthermore, Avraham's entire life was devoted to *chesed* of all sorts. Unlike his predecessor Noach, who spent an entire year on the *Teivah*, Ark, doling out *chesed* 24/7, Avraham acted on his own, without Divine imperative instructing him to do so. Avraham recognized a need and acted on it. I think that while all of the above are true, Avraham's *chesed* was unique; and taught us, his descendants, the true meaning of *chesed*.

Some people get involved in acts of *chesed* due to a personal need. They are looking for *z'chusim*, merits. They have a personal challenge in their lives which they feel their own acts of kindness to others might alleviate. Avraham *Avinu* acted because he was *korei b'shem Hashem*, called out in the Name of Hashem. It bothered him that people were wasting their lives as pagans, ignoring the only Source of spirituality: Hashem. He felt their need, their aimless lives, their pain. This is *chesed*. Praying for another Jew in need is *chesed*. Praying for another Jew in need when one is personally experiencing this very same challenge has outstanding efficacy. This is because, when one truly feels another Jew's pain (which he now does, as he himself is experiencing a similar situation), it is true *chesed*. Identifying with another Jew's plight catalyzes ultimate *chesed*.

A well-known story inspires this idea. A woman who had been married for a number of years without being blessed with a child asked a *Rav* in *Eretz Yisrael* to keep her in mind and pray on her behalf. The *Rav* replied that surely other *rabbanim* whose "*tzaddik* status" was greater than his would be more effective. The woman insisted that she wanted his prayer. She had an instinctive feeling that her salvation would be catalyzed through his prayer.

The *Rav* commented, "Veritably, I understand your pain. My own daughter has been married for some time, and she, too, has yet to be blessed with a child. You know, *Chazal* (*Bava Kamma* 92a) teach that if someone has a need and he prays for someone else who is suffering for that very

same problem, then his prayers are answered first. I suggest that you pray for my daughter while I pray for you.”

The woman agreed. Years passed, and the *Rav* adhered to his end of the deal, praying regularly for the woman from whom he never heard again. His daughter eventually adopted a child. A short while later, he was informed of the exciting news that his daughter was expecting her first biological child. A few months later, on the very same day that he was celebrating the birth of his grandchild, he received a call from the original woman who had asked him to pray for her, inviting him to the *bris* of her son! Yes, the two infants were born within the same hour!

This concept – different people, different circumstances – has repeated itself numerous times, because when one person feels someone else’s pain, when he identifies with his challenge, his *chesed* attains a different status.

Horav Nissim Yagen, zl, relates a story that provides a powerful insight into the *chesed* process. I think this story and its accompanying lesson can be used as a springboard to illuminate another aspect of Avraham *Avinu*’s outlook on *chesed*. An elderly Jew in Yerushalayim was an extremely righteous and G-d-fearing man. His kindness to others knew no bounds. His generosity sadly did, as he was extremely poor. He gave whatever he could, and he was saddened that he could not give more. Jobs were not so plentiful, thus his family was relegated to sustain itself from the *chalukah*, charity, funds that were received from overseas. These funds barely covered his daily needs.

One day, the *Old Yishuv*’s *tzedakah* collectors came by and asked for his assistance in marrying off an orphan couple. (This was, sadly, not uncommon. Poverty was a way of life in those days, and charity was the only means for navigating through its challenges.) He told the collectors that, at that moment, he had nothing to give. If they could return the next day, he would do his best to provide them with a sizable sum of money.

Indeed, when the men returned the next morning, the *tzaddik* handed them a considerable wad of cash. These collectors were well aware of the *tzaddik*’s financial situation. He certainly did not have this much money. “Where did you get all of this money?” they asked.

The pious man explained, “I decided that it is not necessary for me to recite *Kiddush* on *Shabbos* over wine anymore. According to the Torah, *challah* is sufficient for fulfilling the obligation. I calculated that, over a period of two years (if I use *challah* in place of wine), I will save approximately 288 *lira/shekel*. I then borrowed that amount, and this is what I gave you. The young couple’s wedding is far more important than my wine on *Shabbos*. They will get married, and I will pay back my debt over the next two years with the money that I have saved.”

The lesson to be derived from this story, explains *Rav Yagen*, is that *chesed*/charity takes precedence even over the many *hiddurim*, stringencies, that we have accepted upon ourselves.

Does Hashem want us to extend singing *Shalom Aleichem* prior to *Kiddush* on Friday night, while our guests' stomachs are growling to eat? We all know the many things that we rightfully do, but we should not do them at the expense of *chesed*. We must ask ourselves: What does Hashem want from us? If we apply our *seichel*, common sense, to the issue at hand, we might discover that what He wants is that we reach out and lend a hand to those in need.

We return to Avraham *Avinu* and his brand of *chesed*. He could have said, "I will reach out only to those who are interested in learning about Hashem. I will not concern myself with heathens whose sole intention is to fill their stomachs with my food and who have no real interest in spiritual growth." He had many justifications and excuses, but he did not use them, because *chesed* is blind; *chesed* is for all; *chesed* is broad-spectrum kindness.