

Make the Ark with compartments. (6:14)

The simple explanation of this *pasuk* is that the Ark was built with various compartments to house its many “travelers.” *Chazal* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 31:9) interpret *kinnim* as being derived from *ken*, a nest, referring to the birds which are offered by the *metzora*, spiritual leper, as penance for the sins that catalyzed the contraction of his disease. They comment, “As the *ken metzora* purifies the leper, so, too, does the *Teivah*, Ark, purify its passengers.” This is a reference to its human cargo, Noach and his family. *Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl*, explains that the purification of the *Teivah* refers to its serving as a place of refuge for its passengers. Noach and his family were spared from harm as a result of the protection provided by the *Teivah*. Ostensibly, it was not the actual Ark that saved them, but the merit of their being there and what they did during their entire trip that served as a *z’chus*, merit, on their behalf. What was this *z’chus*?

The *Midrash* teaches that Avraham *Avinu* asked Malki Tzedek (Shem) what merit did his family have to survive the raging waters of the Flood? Malki Tzedek replied that it was the result of their considerable acts of *chesed* in feeding the many animals. They could not sleep, because the feeding schedule of each individual animal varied. They suffered greatly in order to carry out their wonderful acts of *chesed*. *Chazal* conclude that when Avraham heard of the wonderful reward one garners for carrying out acts of *chesed*, kindness, he conjectured to himself, “If this is the reward that one receives from performing *chesed* with animals, how much more so will one receive for acts of human kindness?” This inspired him to open up his famous *eishal*, rest stop, to provide sustenance to travelers.

Horav Dov Yoffe, zl (spoken during his *hesped*, eulogy, for the Slabodka *Rosh Yeshivah*, *Horav Mordechai Shulman, zl*), observed that *Klal Yisrael* is noted for its commitment to the *middah* of *chesed*, attribute of loving-kindness. We exemplify the performance of acts of kindness. It is part of our DNA, heralding back to our Patriarch, Avraham *Avinu*, the *Amud HaChesed*, Pillar of Kindness. Avraham derived its importance from Noach, who, together with his family, devoted themselves 24/7 to the care and maintenance of all the creatures traveling on the Ark. In other words, Avraham reached the pinnacle of human perfection due to his outstanding performance of – and commitment to – each and every *middah*, attribute/character trait. Every succeeding generation looks to him as the symbol of greatness, whom we should emulate and follow. The absolute crown of his work in *middos tovos*, positive character traits, was *middas hachesed*, performance of acts of kindness, which he inferred from Noach’s devotion to the animals. That is where it all comes from – understanding that kindness is not simply something that we do; it is a part of our psyche. We are inherently kind. [Thus, there is no difference between human being and creature.] We are kind. We do not distinguish between creations.

A well-known incident that took place during the Holocaust demonstrates the innate sense of kindness possessed by Jews – towards all creatures. As the Slovakian farmer, victim of the Nazi terror, Yitzchak Rosenberg, was being herded into the cattle cars enroute to Auschwitz, he cried out to his neighbors, “But who will attend to my chickens?” Kindness courses through Jewish

veins, the result of the Patriarchal bequest from Avraham.

We should, however, never forget that as critical as the *middah* of *chesed* is, it begins at home. A person who is constantly reaching out to others at the expense of his home/family is not a *baal chesed* – he is an *achzar*, cruel person! *Horav Simchah Cohen, Shlita*, spoke before a traditional/modern audience in a secular *kibbutz*, extolling to them the outstanding acts of *chesed* performed by the *chareidi* Jews of Bnei Brak. He related the many *gmachs* that are run by devoted men and women who leave their comfort zones to help the Jews of their community.

The *Rav* went on to describe the extraordinary acts of *chesed* performed by a specific couple. The man is far from rich, but he is deeply committed to, and generous in, responding to the needs of a certain family. It has been going on twelve years that he apportions most of his weekly paycheck to sustain them. The story does not end there. The man's wife is not to be overlooked in her acts of *chesed*. Her acts of *chesed* are not monetary, but physical. She also helps out in that man's home. Apparently, the mother in that family is very weak and sickly.

Our heroine rises early every day, wakes up the woman's children and sees to it that they are properly dressed for school. She then provides them with sandwiches and drives them to school. At the end of the school day, she is there to pick them up, take them home, where she has snacks waiting for them. She does homework with them before giving them supper and getting them ready for bed. During the day, she even cleans up the house, so that at night they will come home to a clean home. This is carried out day in and day out.

As soon as *Rav* Cohen concluded his speech, one of the listeners rose up and said, "*Kavod Horav*, I do not believe this story. I understand that you want to demonstrate the wonderful acts of kindness performed by the religious community of Bnei Brak, but this is ludicrous! Nobody acts in this manner. They have to have a life!"

Rav Cohen countered, "If I give you their names and the address of their home, will you then believe me? You want to know who this wonderful generous man is, and the name of his extraordinary wife? It is you and your wife! Do you not spend your paycheck for the needs of your family? Does your wife not do all of these wonderful acts of kindness for your children? Do you think that this is not *chesed*? My dear friend – *chesed* begins at home! Everything that you do is a *mitzvah*. It is *chesed*!"

I would like to add that the husband and wife who do not take their familial responsibilities seriously – or worse, those who unintentionally, due to their many other obligations, neglect their families – are transgressing *mitzvos*. Their children are no less important than the children of others – whom they claim to be helping. The following story underscores this idea.

One of the *avreichim*, *kollel* fellows, in Yerushalayim was rushing one early morning to *kollel*. His *chavrusa*, study partner, was waiting for him, and he did not want to be late. As he hurried down

the street, he noticed a woman in front of him walking very slowly, because she was carrying two heavy shopping bags filled with groceries. The poor woman was trudging along, weighed down by the weight of these bags. He was behind her, so he was unable to see her face. It was also not yet light outside.

He felt bad for this woman, but what should he do? He did not want to be late for *kollel*. On the other hand, what kind of person allows a woman to *shlep* such heavy bags without offering his assistance? But then, he is a G-d-fearing *ben Torah*; there is the idea of *tznius*, moral modesty. After all, this is a strange woman. He really should not be looking at or conversing with her. But to walk by her and not help is pure cruelty. So, as a true *ben Torah*, he bent down his head and offered to carry the bags.

The woman was just as devout as he. She said *todah*, thank you, placed the bags on the ground for him. He asked, "Where shall I take them?" (He was not prepared to walk down the street with her.) She did not reply. He asked again, "*Giveret*, where should I deliver these bags?" The woman looked up at him and asked, "Moshe, what is with you? Do you no longer recognize your wife?" He took one look, realized that it was his wife, and said, "Malkah, I did not know it was you. Listen, I am late for *kollel*. I must rush. I will see you later." He left the bags on the ground and departed!

I will allow the reading audience to digest the story (which is true) and to ask themselves: "Have I ever been guilty of such insensitive, narcissistic behavior?" We are quick to help others, but often forget that *chesed* begins at home. The child you save might be your own; the family you assist might be your own; the marriage you save might be your own.