

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Chayei Sara

In his introduction to Ahavas Chesed, the Chofetz Chaim (20th Century Poland) lists eight verses from the Book of Deuteronomy alone where the Torah instructs us about the mitzvah to “walk in the ways of G-d.” The Talmud (Sotah 14a) interprets one of these verses to mean that just as Hashem visits the sick, clothes the naked, comforts mourners, and buries the dead, so too we should be like Him and develop these benevolent habits. In Leviticus (19:18), the Torah tells us to love our friends as much as we love ourselves, and Maimonides cites this verse as another source for the general mitzvah of doing acts of chesed (kindness) to others. He comments that this verse teaches us the additional nuance that whatever one would want others to do to help him in his times of need, he should do for others in their difficult moments. These two positive commandments show us that doing something kind to another person is not merely a good idea, but that it is actually a Biblical obligation.

In the three Torah portions which focus on the life of Abraham, ending with Chayei Sara, we learn repeatedly about the various acts of kindness performed by Abraham. Engulfed in a society of idolaters, Abraham discovers G-d and sees it as his mission to teach others about His existence. He also mimics the Creator by walking in His ways and cultivating his own famous characteristic of chesed. Because of this desire to be like G-d, Abraham risks his life to save Lot in the war of the five kings, waits for the opportunity to host guests while still recuperating from his own circumcision, and prays to G-d to save the sinful inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this final parsha describing the highlights of Abraham’s life, we learn of his efforts to bury Sarah and to eulogize her, which are classified by Maimonides as acts of chesed to the dead. In the end of the parsha (25:9), the Torah notes that Isaac and Ishmael buried their father Abraham, performing the same selfless act that Abraham did for Sarah in the beginning of the parsha. In between the burials of Sarah and Abraham, the parsha goes at length to describe how Eliezer found the appropriate wife for Isaac. When he sees her selfless acts of giving to him and to the camels at the well, he knows that she is fit to enter the family of Abraham because she has his legendary attribute of kindness (see Rashi 24:12).

If we already have two clear mitzvot to do acts of kindness, namely walking in the ways of Hashem and loving people, why must the Torah relate so many episodes of Abraham’s kindness? The Talmud (Yevamot 79a) says the Jewish people are distinguished by their characteristic kindness, and then proves this from the verse (18:19) describing Abraham and his descendants as “keeping the way of G-d” which refers to imitating G-d by performing acts of kindness (see Maharsha). Since chesed is not simply another mitzvah like all others, but rather is a fundamental part of a Jew’s conscience, the Torah seeks to teach us many details about chesed through the stories of Abraham’s selflessness.

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We gain more insight into Abraham's attribute of kindness from the beginning of Chayei Sara, where the Torah tells how Abraham negotiates with Ephron to buy the burial place for Sarah. He offers money to buy it, Ephron counters he will give it to him as a gift, and Abraham insists he will not take it until Ephron accepts payment and sells it to him. Why do we need to know each part of the negotiation process? Perhaps the Torah wants us to know that Abraham was business savvy and wanted to legally own the field so that no one could make a claim to it later. But is it really important for us to know Abraham had good street smarts?

The answer lies in an analysis of a mishna in Chapter 5 of Pirkei Avot. It says if someone says 'Mine is yours and yours is mine,' then he is an 'am ha'aretz.' Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura (15th Century) explains the am ha'aretz (literally, 'the nation of the earth') reasons that sharing equally is the most sensible way for society to function, so each person ought to constantly give to others and receive from them as well. The mishna then says if one says 'Mine is yours and yours is yours,' then he is a 'chasisd.' The chasisd goes beyond the letter of the law, giving to others without any expectation of receiving from them. He does not even like to receive gifts, because he wants to be only a giver and not a taker. The root of the word 'chasisd' is chesed, suggesting the chasisd embodies the characteristic of kindness more than the attribute of strictly calculated justice. He functions with a value system in which he gives and expects nothing in return, while the am ha'aretz functions purely within a philosophy of balanced giving and taking from others.

Abraham is the chasisd par excellence. The Torah repeatedly tells us of his selflessness to others, which is fueled by his striving to be like G-d who is only a Giver and never needs to take from anyone. When the king of Sodom offers him the booty he won in battle, Abraham refuses and does not want to take even a shoelace. Here too, when Abraham seeks to acquire the land to bury Sarah, he only wants to buy it and not receive it as a gift. As the quintessential man of chesed, Abraham shuns gifts and wants to only be a giver and not a taker.

Similarly, Rashi tells us later in the parsha (24:11) that Abraham's camels were notably different than other camels, because they had muzzles on to prevent them from stealing from the fields of others. The general populace would not muzzle their animals, for with the mentality of 'mine is yours and yours is mine' it does not make a difference if my animal eats from your land because your animal also eats from my land. But Abraham strives to be a 'chasisd,' which means not only giving to others but also being ever so scrupulous not to be on the taking end, even if that might be commonplace.

Shabbat Shalom!

