

THE STUFF ON WHICH THE WORLD STANDS

by Rabbi Label Lam

From these shall you abominate from among the birds, they may not be eaten- they are an abomination...the racham (mercy); the chassidah (kindliness)...(Vayaikra 11:13-19)

Even though these birds have certain signs of purity they are still impure and are therefore mentioned here. (Lekach Tov)

Shimon HaTzadik was from the remnant of the Men of the Great Assembly and he used to say: "On three things the world stands on Torah, Service (Avodah), and Acts of Kindliness (Gemilas Chassadim)." (Chapters of the Fathers)

What is "Gemilas Chassadim"? How is it different from just plain "Chassadim"? A brief analysis may lead us to the answer to another question about the birds mentioned in this week's portion. "What's so abominable about birds with such lovely seeming names such as "racham"- mercy and "chassidah"- kindness?" To understand "gemilas chassadim" we need to know what the word "gemilas" adds to the equation.

The root word is "Gimel", "Mem" and "Lamed". Almost all words beginning with "Gimal" have to do with growing great in size or number, quantity or quality. The first time a word in Torah begins with the letter "Gimel" is in reference to the "ha-tanninim gadolim" - the great sea monsters.

The Talmud in Tractate Shabbos tells us that "gimel" means giving, like giving to the "Dalim"-Poor that is juxtaposed to it in the Hebrew "Aleph Beis". The Gimel is constructed inclined to the poor "Dalet".

The word "Gimal" is made of the same consonants that spell "Gamal"- a camel. What is the specialty of a camel? We all know that a camel, although not a desert creature, is best suited to travel across arid lands because he can drink and store large amounts of water and remain for long periods of time removed from his source.

The word "Mal" means to cut as we use in reference to the procedure of the circumcision. "Gemal" mean to wean away as we find by Isaac when he stopped nursing a great party was made in celebration by his father Abraham who was the living paradigm of kindness. "Mem" means from a source as it is used as a prefix in Hebrew. "Lamed" means to learn or to go to with direction as we find with the letter "Lamed" applied as a prefix! Together they mean from some place to some place with purpose or direction.

What does "gimel"- "mem"- "lamed" conceptually add up to or spell? ": Giving and growing with the intention of weaning away to give independence and direction." A tree holds its fruit no longer than is necessary. When it is ripe and ready to reproduce it is released. This perhaps is the model of "gemilas chassadim"

Similarly a parent and a teacher hope that the child will one day walk on their own passing on what they have received. It is neither a business deal with a quid pro quo nor a power play to hold others in a position of permanent dependency. Gemilas Chassadim is a complete program to bring another to maturity with the ability to give in kind. We take with the hope to give and give in order to create a generation of givers.

This kind of relationship of "Gemilas Chassadim" is worlds apart from other types that are either meant to make another beholden or may be only in response to the brief emotion of mercy. They might share some symptoms of purity superficially but they can also be woefully insufficient and subject to abuse and are therefore not of the stuff on which the world stands. Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).