

THE VALUE INHERENT IN KINDNESS

by Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig

Pirkei Avos/The Ethics of the Fathers (1:2) conveys the precept that the world stands on three pillars: Torah, the service of G-d (prayer) and expressions of kindness. Expressions of kindness often need to be evaluated with profundity. Deeds that appear unkind can prove to be most beneficial while actions that appear kind can yield poisonous fruits. A child who runs into the street will not be rewarded with candy. It may be kind to give a child candy, but in this circumstance it encourages dangerous behavior, so it is actually cruel. A severe reprimand would be the most appropriate and kind response in this situation.

The Midrash identifies incidences throughout the Torah where G-d's kindness is manifest in a profound way, not superficially. This week's Torah portion contains such an example. Jewish women are commanded not to marry men from the nations of Ammon and Moav until ten generations after they convert because the Ammonites and Moavites did not offer the Nation of Israel bread and water when Israel passed the lands of Ammon and Moav at the end of the forty year trek in the desert. On the surface, "kindness" would mandate allowing marriage to these converts, thus insuring their feelings of comfort and acceptance in the Jewish nation whom they have chosen to join. There are multiple references in the Torah to our obligation to treat converts with the same kindness due any other member of the Jewish nation, specifically to insure they feel accepted. We are even forbidden to remind a convert of his original family or nation, as it would cause the convert feelings of incomplete acceptance. So why are Ammon and Moav the exceptions to the rule? Ammon and Moav are nations that descend from Lot. Lot lived and traveled with his uncle, Avraham, for decades and witnessed the unparalleled acts of kindness Avraham performed. Avraham's kindness was his trademark and a significant part of his legacy to the Jewish people. Most significantly, Lot was impacted by the generosity shown him by Avraham, who gave Lot free reign to choose the area of Canaan he wished to settle (Genesis 13:8-11) and the ultimate kindness of Avraham, who saved Lot's life during the War of the Four Kings versus the Five Kings (Genesis 14:13-16). The Torah does not tolerate ingratitude. G-d is displaying kindness to the children of Israel, preventing the ingrained selfishness and mean-spirited traits of Ammon and Moav from infecting the Jewish people.

But why are these nations held accountable for not offering help to the Jews in the desert? For forty years in the barren wilderness the Jewish people survived without their help. G-d provided Manna from the sky and sustained the children of Israel. If Israel did not need food from them why should they have offered it? The Torah is teaching a fundamental lesson about kindness. As vital and

valuable as it is to assist those who lack, there is a separate responsibility to assist everyone. If an affluent individual visits a city, his hosts must still offer him hospitality, even though he could certainly afford nicer accommodations than they can themselves provide. Perhaps he prefers the warmth and personality of a private home to an impersonal hotel room. In Genesis (18:4-8), shortly following his circumcision, Avraham met three strangers. These strangers were actually Malachim (celestial beings) sent by G-d. Avraham troubled himself greatly to provide these strangers with an extravagant feast. In actuality, celestial beings do not need food and gained nothing from his efforts. Nevertheless, his act of kindness merited Avraham's descendants being provided with the Manna and a traveling well of water for forty years in the desert. We see G-d's focus on the effort of the provider rather than the results provided. Obviously, we must genuinely attempt to achieve tangible results; nevertheless, we must appreciate the inherent value of the effort, no matter the result.

We have the obligation to be kind to all people at all times. Through the study of the Torah's examples we develop the ability to appreciate this obligation and apply it in our own circumstances. Let us learn from Avraham, and not the Ammonites and Moavites, to indiscriminately help others, make the world a profoundly better place and sanctify Hashem's name.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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