

GIVING FOR A GOOD CAUSE

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

Parshas Acharei Mos - Kedoshim

Giving for a Good Cause

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Chapter 18 of Vayikra/Leviticus contains a lengthy series of forbidden personal relationships and chapter 20 designates the penalties meted out against those who engage in them. "A man who shall take his sister...it is a disgrace and they shall be cut off in the eyes of the people of their nation." (20:17) The Hebrew word used for "disgrace" in this verse is "chesed", a word that usually carries the positive connotation of a charitable act of kindness. How is it appropriate for this context?

Rashi, Nachmanides and other early commentators explain that the word "chesed" does have an alternative connotation of "shame" and that is the context in which it is used here. Also quoted is the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 58b) that explains the verse in Tehillim/Psalms (89:3) "Kindness (chesed) will build a world," that G-d's kindness in allowing Cain to marry his sister allowed the world to be built and populated. Thus, as much as such a relationship is inherently disgraceful, there is a facet of kindness in it.

An alternative understanding is offered by Michtav MeEliyahu (collected writings and discourses of Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, 1891-1954, of London and Bnei Brak, one of the outstanding thinkers of the Mussar movement). "Chesed" of holiness, chesed as we usually think of it, is giving of ourselves completely for the benefit of others out of our love for G-d and our desire to emulate His holy attributes. In contrast, profane "chesed", the unthinkable acts discussed in our Parsha, are rooted in an absolute commitment to depravity and our desire to fulfill our base urges.

In essence, Rabbi Dessler defines "chesed" as self-nullification out of love and devotion to a cause. Our life's challenge is consistently choosing the cause to which we channel our energy: do we indulge in mundane self-gratification or invest in the sanctification of the world around us?

Have a good Shabbos!

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