

AVODAH: CHESED AS VOCATION

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Chesed as Vocation¹

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Doing *chesed* is wonderful, but is qualitatively different from becoming a *chesed* personality.

One who performs *chesed* responds compassionately to anyone in need of it. He does not, however, seek out new situations to which he can bring his *chesed*. The person whose core is suffused with *chesed* will chase after *tzedakah* and *chesed*. He stands ready to sacrifice the material - and even the spiritual - in order to do *chesed* to others.

A medrash [2] has HKBH chiding Eyov. "You sit comfortably in your house, and guests come to you. You have not achieved half the measure of Avraham! He goes about seeking out guests." The Torah depicts the *chesed* of Avraham in its full blossom. Weak and in pain three days after circumcision at an advanced age, he was free of any obligation to toil in the service of others. Concerned for his comfort, HKBH created a heat wave that would protect him from intrusive bother. Instead, Avraham was pained because he could not serve guests, and sat expectantly, waiting for their arrival. The presence of the Shechinah, and the opportunity to converse with the Divine Presence, was not sufficient to keep Avraham from his guests. He left the Shechinah behind, as it were, and ran to greet his guests, forever teaching us that offering proper hospitality to guests is more important than receiving the Divine Presence. Avraham paid no attention to the identities of the recipients of his largesse. It made no difference to him if they were righteous people or lowly idolatrous Arabs. This is because no external factor, no perceived need aroused his need to give. That propensity for *chesed* presented itself constantly, at all times. Avraham directed it even towards those who opposed what he stood for; he fervently prayed for the evildoers of the city of Sodom.[3]

Acting kindly to someone who needs assistance very often unwittingly causes some pain or discomfort to the recipient. Within our nature is a sense of shame in taking what we have not earned or deserved. As much as we think we enjoy something for nothing, it meets with deep resentment within us. Avraham's *chesed* avoided this pitfall. Notice how many times he spoke to his guests as if they were doing him a favor by joining him: "Please, if I have found favor in your eyes; please do not pass by your servant." [4] He turned to the travelers, fatigued and thirsty in the brutal heat, and spoke to them as if they would be performing an act of kindness by joining him. He inverted the roles of

benefactor and beneficiary, making himself the recipient and his guests the givers.

Eliezer's spring-side test of a potential match for Yitzchok made use of this distinction between doing *chesed* and the *chesed* personality. He would not be satisfied by an offer to provide him with water. A compassionate person might very well volunteer such assistance. The reaction of the *chesed* personality takes over at precisely this point. Eliezer's request to Rivka implied that he needed water and nothing else, that he would be quite comfortable after that. The *chesed* personality is unperturbed by the lack of need, and finds other places to direct the quest to give.

Chesed opportunities envelop every aspect of a person's life - his property, his body, his house, and his soul. *chesed* with one's property includes *tzedakah* to the poor, extending support to one who has come upon hard times, and lending money to one in need. One who refrains from lending money - even in the face of the cancellation of the debt through the approaching Shemittah year - is called a "base"[5] deed. The Torah warns against performing these monetary mitzvos with imperfect intent. "Do not find it evil in your heart when you give." [6] It wants us to give from the fullness of our hearts.

Chesed with our bodies concerns us in two discrete ways. On the one hand, we are commanded to bodily perform a variety of mitzvos: visiting the sick, burying the dead, unloading and loading distressed animals, returning lost property, etc. Within these commandments, however, we discern another level of *chesed*. We should ready our bodies in anticipation of acts of *chesed*, that they should be ready to jump into service, eager to perform as if they were collecting rare treasure.

Chesed with our homes affords us the opportunity to turn them entirely into mitzvah objects, sanctifying them entirely to Hashem. Offering hospitality allows us to do *chesed* to rich and poor alike, in addition to *tzedakah* which by definition must restrict itself to the poor.

Hachnosas orchim, Chazal tell us, is greater than receiving the Shechinah. A simple analogy explains this. Imagine a good friend appearing on your door step, unannounced. If he is a dear friend, you will react with unrestrained joy in seeing him, and lavish all kinds of attention upon him. Could anything demonstrate warmth and closeness more than such a reception?

Yes, indeed. Imagine the son of your friend arriving in a similar manner. Moreover, you have never met him before. There is no relationship between you. If you receive him with the same enthusiasm and alacrity as you would his father, you have made a powerful statement. He returns to his father and relates the happiness that greeted him when people learned that he was the son of their dear friend, and treated him royally. The father's satisfaction is even greater when this unknown and unrecognized son of his is so graciously received, simply because he is the son of his father.

Every Jew is a prince, the son of the King. When a Jew welcomes some unknown and unrecognized son of the King, he brings great satisfaction to the Father. We should be prepared to wait upon them and serve them ourselves, as did Avraham, despite being much greater than his guests and us. We multiply the value of the gracious reception when the guests are Torah scholars

or people who have done great deeds, who continue their holy work from within our homes. When we do so, we mix *chesed* and avodas Hashem.

The greatest form of *chesed* is performed with our inner selves. When a friend is broken and in anguish, we can not only show that we take part in his pain, but bear it as an equal partner. We can identify with the pain so completely, that we experience it as our own. There is no greater support we can offer another as taking on his pain as an equal. Sharper than any physical pain or financial loss is the mental pain, and the loneliness in feeling that no one understands his situation or stands with him. The true *chesed* personality will find a way to demonstrate his solidarity at such a time, showing himself to be a caring brother, encouraging him and supporting him, breathing into him new life of belief that Hashem will care for him, and that there will be an end to the darkness.

This kind of *chesed* is a fulfillment of two mitzvos. We are commanded to "walk in His ways,"[7] to imitate His *midos* of *chesed* and rachamim. It follows that we are obligated to commiserate with a person in pain, even when he will not respond or will not even know the depth of our feeling. We must do it to attach ourselves to Hashem's trait of compassion. Additionally, part of the basic level of loving another as ourselves [8] is to resist and fight any pain to another. We cannot do that without first understanding it, and only then battle against it.

Doing so is the highest form of *chesed* there can be.

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1. Based on Nesivos Shalom, vol. 1, pgs 100-101
 2. Avos de-Rebbi Noson chap. 7 s.v veyihyu aniyim
 3. According to Chazal, they not only were evil, but part of their evil was a rejection of *chesed*! They thus legislated against the performance of acts of kindness to strangers.
 4. Bereishis 18:3
 5. Devarim 15:9
 6. Devarim 15:10
 7. Devarim 28:9
 8. Vayikra 19:18

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