

PARSHAS TOLDOS - THE NATURAL LAW OF CHESED

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The Natural Law of Chesed¹

Know that Hashem engineered a spiritual teva to work alongside the physical one. We cannot account for how it operates by referring to the rules that govern the natural world, but we are still certain of the existence of this spiritual order. One of its rules is that chesed will be rewarded in this world as surely as the sun rises in the east. No Divine finger will reach from the heavens to make this happen, but it will happen nonetheless. Without overt miracles, without fanfare, Divine Providence will see to it that chesed bears fruit.

Moreover, because this is a law of nature, even if on a spiritual plane, a person need not be righteous or even good to reap the benefits of this law. Physical laws do not discriminate on the basis of moral worth; neither does this one. Chesed will reward even the person who performs it without any reference to the Will of his Creator! Even when informed only by a person's own subjective moral code, or even if being a giving person is simply part of his nature, acts of chesed will pay off in this world^[2].

Ultimately, this is what "Olam chesed yibaneh" / "The world will be built through chesed^[3]" means: the power of chesed is part of the inner architecture of the universe. Noach made direct reference to this in his berachah to Yefes: Yaft Elokim le-Yefes^[4] / G-d will make things beautiful for Yefes. His morality will grow out of the application of rational thought - out of the attractiveness of logical appeal - and lead to moral behavior that is esthetically pleasing and appropriate, including acts of kindness to fellow humans. Those acts will be rewarded. When Chazal speak^[5] of twenty-six generations of mankind sustained by chesed before the Torah was given, they mean the same. Acts of chesed performed during those times fueled the Divine blessings through which people survived, even though they were not serving Hashem.

Yitzchok's intention was to maximize the effectiveness of the chesed factor in the lives of Esav and his offspring. Just as curses can be potent - but only where there is already cause for punishment^[6] - the beracha of the tzadik can intensify and expand the good that is already destined to come as a result of some good conduct. Yitzchok believed that Yaakov should not make use of the Natural Law of Chesed in his avodah. Yitzchok knew Yaakov to be capable of and suited for a more elevated form of service, in which all his conduct was expected to respond to Hashem's Will. He understood

that Yaakov would assume the role of one dedicated entirely to Torah and mitzvos, performed completely le-shem shomayim. His reward would come in the next world, not in ours. (Two factors supported Yitzchok's conclusion. He knew that Yaakov excelled in chesed, and thus could be held to a higher standard regarding it. Furthermore, Yitzchok's own midah was din, of responding to Hashem's expectations with exactitude and precision, and no room for error. He therefore expected Yaakov to "tough it out," in his avodah, without any special crutches.)

Yitzchok did not see Esav heading for the same kind of life. He did think that Esav was capable of appreciating and performing chesed on his own terms, even if those reasons would not be for the sake of Heaven. He wished that Esav could sustain himself through that chesed, and his berachah was intended to further empower the benefits of those acts of kindness.

Rivkah, in her love for Yaakov, saw things differently. She saw ample room for Yaakov putting the power of imperfect chesed to good use, especially when embellished by the berachah of the tzadik. She did not disagree with Yitzchok that Yaakov himself had no use for imperfect chesed. She realized, however, that the descendants of Yaakov would not all comport themselves like their noble progenitor. She saw evildoers in the future - even some heretics in many generations - who would do much chesed. They would be greatly assisted by reaping reward for their good works.

Hashgachah found a way that Yaakov would receive a berachah that, on the face of things, really did not belong to him. The Natural Law of Chesed was intended to assist the other nations of the world; it was not to be part of the assigned role of the Jewish people. Hashgachah, however, concurred with Rivkah's assessment that many Jews would have to rely upon it for their well-being, at least in this temporal life.

Yaakov's Aveirah Lishmah⁷

Go now to the flock and take from there two choice young goats.

"Good for you, and good for your children. Good for you, because through them you will take the berachah. Good for your children, because through them, they will find atonement on Yom Kippur." This medrash links the two kids that Yaakov slaughtered for his father's meal with the two goats of the Yom Kippur avodah, in which one is dedicated to Hashem and its blood brought into the Kodesh Kodashim, while the other is sent off to an inelegant death in the Azazel wilderness. How are we to understand the connection?

Hashem's creation was responsible for all existence. His creative role extends to things that are not immediately obvious. The significant incidence of flawed midos also has a place in His creation. As he told us, He "fashions light...and creates evil[8]." Evil character traits would not exist were there not some good purpose for them. Indeed, they resemble poisonous substances, which are ordinarily toxic, but can be effective in treating illness if they are carefully administered in small dosages. Personality characteristics that are usually responsible for evil deeds have a positive place at times.

In special circumstances, they need to be utilized for good purposes. When used, however, they require strict supervision by a Torah authority, so that they not exceed the required amounts.

We normally shun deception and trickery. Yaakov, however, had to put them to good use to obtain the berachah. Using them amounted to an aveirah lishmah, which Chazal tell us is considered the equivalent of a mitzvah - albeit only as good as a mitzvah performed not for the sake of Heaven.

The two Yom Kippur goats demonstrate this. One of them becomes the focus of a complex and elegant avodah performed on the holiest day of the year in the holiest place on earth. The treatment of the other goat is tainted. To the untrained eye, it looks like a form of pagan spirit-worship. Yet, it too becomes a mitzvah when Hashem commands that it be done. Part of the message is certainly that any seemingly ungodly forces, kochos of pollution and tumah, owe their existence entirely to His Will.

Rivkah meant to convey this point to Yaakov, according to our medrash. The "two" meant to underscore an essential duality in what she asked of her son, similar to the tension between the two goats of Yom Kippur. On the one hand, he would be performing a mitzvah of honoring his mother. On the other, he would be deceiving his father. Both would be necessary to attain the berachah.

We find[g] that Yaakov was punished for causing pain to his brother. Esav's "great and bitter cry[10]" inexorably led to the "great and bitter cry" by Yaakov's descendants in the days of Esther[11]. We do not see, however, that Yaakov was punished for the awful, great fright that he caused Yitzchok when he realized that he had been deceived. Why is Yaakov punished for the pain he inflicted upon Esav but not for the fright he caused his father?

We are told that we ought to perform mitzvos even shelo lishmah. On some level, a mitzvah always remains a positive accomplishment, regardless of the way it is done. Not so in regard to an aveirah. On those occasions when performing an aveirah can be justified, it must be done entirely lishmah. Any admixture of self-serving benefit remains an aveirah.

Yaakov's deception of his father was a justifiable aveirah. It immediately caused pain to two people. Yaakov could not be blamed for Yitzchok's fright. It was unavoidable; under the circumstances, Yaakov was considered as if acting beyond his control. Yaakov gained nothing from the pain he caused his father. To the contrary, we must assume that he himself was pained by it. Esav's cry was a different matter. While Yaakov was justified (and therefore not legally culpable) for causing it, bringing it about was not entirely lishmah. Yaakov was not unhappy about it. He took secret satisfaction in it.

For that, he was punished.

1. Based on Harchev Davar, Bereishis 27:1

2. But only this world. The Netziv writes that they will not be rewarded in the next, eternal world.
 3. Tehilim 89:3 (The plain meaning of the verse is that forever/ olam Your Kindness will be built.)
 4. Bereishis 9:27
 5. Pesachim 118A
 6. "A curse will not come without cause." (Mishlei 26:2)
 7. Based on Harchev Davar, Bereishis 27:9
 8. Yeshaya 45:7
 9. Bereishis Rabbah 67:4
 10. Bereishis 27:34
 11. Esther 3:1
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