

THANKS, BUT NO THANKS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

In Parshas Chaye Sarah, the Torah describes the search for a wife for Yitzchak; Avraham entrusts his faithful servant Eliezer with the task of finding a worthy successor to Sarah. Eliezer asks Hashem for a sign (24:12-14):

And he said, "Hashem, G-d of my master Avraham, may You arrange it for me today, and do kindness with my master Avraham. Behold, I stand here by the water well, and the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw. Let it be that the girl to whom I say, 'Please tip over your jug so that I may drink,' and she replies, 'Drink, and I will even water you camels!' - her You will have made clear [as a wife] for your servant, for Yitzchak."

Amazingly, even before having ended his prayer, Rivkah arrives at the well. The ensuing encounter between Eliezer and Rivkah goes almost exactly as described, with one noteworthy difference. When Eliezer asks Rivkah for a drink, she responds (v. 18), "Drink, my master," without offering to give his camels to drink. It is only after he finishes drinking that she offers to water his camels as well. This is seemingly in contradiction to Eliezer's sign, in which he specifies that the maiden responds to his request for water by saying, "Drink, and I will even water your camels!"

Or HaChaim explains that Rivkah did not want to tell Eliezer yet that she planned to water his camels, because she feared that had he known, he might drink too quickly or too little, in concern for her efforts. Therefore she let him think that all she planned to do was give him a bit of water, so that he would satisfy himself, and only then did she inform him of her intentions to water the camels as well.

Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l also makes note of this discrepancy (Sha'alos ve-Teshuvos Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim II, 52). He also notes that it seemingly would have been more considerate of Rivkah to inform Eliezer immediately of her intentions to water the camels, so that he would be able to fully enjoy his own drink, knowing that his animals would also be taken care of. Why, he asks, did she decline to tell him of her intentions?

Rav Moshe's younger son, R' Reuven, recalled that as a young boy of five, he would regularly help an elderly neighbor carry her firewood up the stairs to her tenement apartment. "As far as I remember," he once remarked, "nobody ever told me to do so. It was just something I knew I should do. Indeed, as children, we were never taught to perform chessed (kindness). It was simply the natural thing to do - chessed was a matter of course in our household. It wasn't something you

made a big deal about." [Artscroll History Series, Reb Moshe, p. 176]

We think, explains R' Moshe, that Rivkah refrained from telling Eliezer of her plans. No! It's just that it never occurred to her that any other option existed. Chessed was such an integral part of her personality that it "went without saying" that she would do anything and everything she could to assist someone else, no matter how difficult. Mefarshim (commentators) note that in their first drink, ten camels would likely consume in excess of 140 gallons of water! Rivkah was in the middle of her "work day" - there were things to do, and matters to take care of. For most of us, such an undertaking would, at the very least, be considered an act of supreme self-sacrifice. For Rivkah it was a matter of course.

Most ba'alei chessed, notes R' Moshe, take a certain measure of pride in the chessed they perform. This is natural: Just as the gardener takes pride in a well-manicured lawn, and the tailor in a well-made suit, so does the ba'al chessed recognize the great value of his kindness to others. But the true ba'al chessed takes no pride. It's not that they're humble and unassuming, but rather that caring for the needs of others is so much a part of their being that they fail to see anything noteworthy or remarkable about what they do.

In English, when someone says, "Thank you," we respond with, "You're welcome." In Yiddish, we say, "S'nisht du far-vuss - there's no need for thanks!" To be honest, I was always bothered by this comeback, so much so that even when speaking Yiddish, I would often revert to the English version. How can we say s'nisht du far- vuss? Of course s'iz du far-vuss! After all, if there was no reason, they wouldn't be thanking me, would they? "You're welcome" always seemed to me to be the more gracious response.

I guess I'm so far removed from Rivkah's level of chessed that I never realized that there are those for whom performing kindness for others is so natural and innate, that they honestly fail to understand why one would even thank and recognize them for what they've done! It's mind boggling.

Of course, when we are the recipients of the chessed of others, it behooves us to acknowledge their kindness and thank them for it. But as the doers of chessed, we must strive to integrate the trait of chessed into our character until it becomes a natural and inseparable part of our being - just as we live and breathe.

Have a good Shabbos.

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