

THE CHASIDA - FOWL PLAY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Shemini contains a description of the laws of kashrus - the animals we may and may not eat. One of the types of prohibited birds is called the Chasida - the righteous bird, thus called, says Rashi, because this bird deals kindly with her peers (chavrose'ha), and helps them sustain themselves with food.

One would assume that an animal's kashrus or lack thereof would have some connection with the behaviour and characteristics of the animal. Yet if so, why is the aptly-named chasida counted among the fowl of which we may not partake?

The Chidushei Ha-Rim, R' Yitzchak Meir of Gur zt"l, explains that the chasida's fault is that she performs kindness only with chavrose'ha - her friends, to the exclusion of others. Do you remember the kid on the block who generously shared with everyone else - except you? The birthday party from which you were left out? Would you have counted these "friends" among the great "doers of kindness?" Exclusive kindness and peer-favouritism does not a righteous-bird make.

The Ibn Ezra explains that the chasida only appears during certain months of the year. Likewise, there are individuals who, when it suits them, will drop everything and do anything they can to help a friend. But at other times they don't even bother to ask. Being a ba'al chessed (doer of kindness) means consistent concern about the wellbeing of others, not impulsive binges of extreme kindness followed by thoughtlessness and blissful ignorance.

(This doesn't mean that even the most seasoned and dedicated ba'al chessed doesn't ever deserve a break. But treating others kindly and taking care of friends and family is not something to be done on impulsive whims; it should be a constant matter of concern.)

Consider this: Two sons and an elderly mother. One son is a wealthy doctor with a busy practice and a very respectable golf-handicap who hobnobs with high-echelon acquaintances. The other son is a tailor; he ekes out a meagre living, but is happy and content with his life.

Once a month, the wealthy son makes his pilgrimage (up to the 14th floor) to pay his respects to his aging matriarch. Seeing as how he has, once again, forgotten to call her in the interim, he stops by the local mall and stocks up on some expensive goodies to appease her. Then, he makes a hasty trip to the grocery store and stacks up his cart with all kinds of foods and snacks - "after all, mom needs to eat, doesn't she?"

(Brings to mind the following story: Phone rings. "Hi mom, how are you?" "(Heavy Yiddish accent) Terrible." "Why, mom - what's the matter?" "I haven't eaten for 26 days. I'm starving." "Mom, that's awful! Why haven't you eaten for so long?" "Because I didn't want to have food in my mouth when you called me!")

Laden with bags and boxes, he hastily enters his mother's spotless apartment and dumps his presents and groceries on the floor. "Hi mom! Brought you some stuff - I figured you might need some groceries."

Gracious mother that she is, she thanks her son, eyeing the pile of bags and parcels, most of which she thinks she will have to give away (what on earth is she going to do with a Game Boy?). Just as they sit down to a glass of tea and begin catching-up, the son's Palm Pilot starts beeping, and he apologetically makes a hasty retreat, mumbling something about a very important meeting.

The tailor calls mom every day before leaving work. "Anything you need, mom?" More often than not, there is. One day he picks up carrots, another a bag of sugar, and when there's nothing to get, he just stops by to spend some time. He's there when the window needs fixing ("I can't stand the draft"), and he's there for her when she needs help getting to the doctor. Which son is the ba'al chessed?

The defining characteristic of chessed - says the Ibn Ezra - is consistency and dedication. And it is in this measure that the chasida fails.

Rav Sternbuch Shlita (Ta'am Ve-Da'as) explains the fault of the chasida as follows: Each person is born with a natural inclination to be kind and righteous towards others in given circumstances. While this is good, it must be moulded. We need to attune our natural sensitivity towards others to the laws and guidance of the Torah, and not rely on what our heart tells us is good or kind.

For example, when dealing with our children, our love for them would dictate that we spoil them with unrelenting kindness, overlooking their faults and forgiving all their wrongdoings. "Spare the rod, and you hate your child," says Shlomo HaMelech. I.e. there are times when the "kind" and "righteous" thing to do is not what feels kind and right in our hearts.

Sometimes the opposite can be true. There are times when it may feel right to us to not be kind, yet the Torah demands we do so. A child having to deal with a difficult parent goes through this. Some people have a hard time giving away money ("teach a man to fish... but I'm not going to encourage this lazy good-for-nothing to keep on begging"), yet to give tzedakah is a positive, obligatory commandment. The chasida is thus named because she performs kindness with her friends according to her natural tendencies, which for a bird is okay. But a Jew has to know that the Torah has its own definition of chessed, and we have to be careful not to let our natural inclination interfere with the demands and guidelines of the Torah. To drive home this point, the Torah disallowed the chasida's consumption.

To be or not to be... In the case of the chasida, we learn how not to be. Interesting that a non-kosher animal can have such a beautiful and inspiring name. Perhaps that's precisely because her beauty is only on the outside; from within she's a treifah animal, no more kosher than a pig or horse. Understanding and observing the Torah is not something given to superficiality and cosmetic veneer; it is a deep process of study and discovery which must reach to the very root of all issues.

Have a good Shabbos.

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