

UNIQUELY HUMAN

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

This week's Parsha begins the story of Avraham and Sarah. Chazal identified Chesed - kindness as Avraham and Sarah's identifying characteristic. The reason for this is that they were the first to share their awareness of the Creator with others. The great individuals who preceded them, such as Shem the son of Noach and Ayver his great-grandson, taught monotheism to all those seekers of the truth who came knocking on the doors of their academy. However, only Avraham and Sarah went out to find students / converts and share with them their knowledge of G-d and their trust in His goodness.

Avraham and Sarah taught with love and by example. Open hospitality, emotional support, and patience were the tools of their trade; however, their love and kindness did far more than awaken a world to the belief in the Creator. Their Chesed instilled in the genetic make-up of their children and grandchildren the capacity to do Chesed on a level that is unique to the Jewish people.

When G-d said to His Heavenly Tribunal, "Naaseh Adam B'Tzalmeynu Kidmusaynu - Let Us make man in our form and likeness", He instilled into humanity the capacity to emulate G-d. "Ma-who Rachum Aff Atah Heyay Rachum", "Just as G-d is kind, compassionate giving and merciful so too can humans be kind, compassionate, giving and merciful."

In this regard humans are completely different than the rest of creation. The rest of creation expresses what appears to be compassion and concern because that is how the Creator designed them. The mother cat fearlessly defending her kittens from the snarling dog 10 times her size does so because that is the way that G-d designed mother cats. However, the same cat would not do the same in defense of another cat's kittens. However humans are completely different. They were given the freewill to choose to do Chesed. True, a human mother loves her children in a natural way that sometimes appears almost instinctive. However, that same mother who will fearlessly defend her own children in the face of overwhelming danger can also choose to do the same for someone else's child. This is unique to the human, and only the human.

This is what G-d meant when He said that we would be created "B'Tzalmaynu Kidmoosaynu - in His image." We, the human race, are like G-d. Just like G-d chooses to do Chesed so too we can emulate G-d by choosing to do Chesed. Avraham and Sarah chose to do Chesed. They willfully chose to share the knowledge of G-d's goodness with an otherwise ignorant and unsuspecting world.

The truth is that Chesed was supposed to be the hallmark of every human being, not just the Jewish

people. However, because we were given freewill to choose, either to be like G-d or not to be like G-d, it is possible for a human to give up his chance to be like G-d. Instead, the human can choose to be like all the other animals of the world, concerned only about himself, his own needs, his own desires, and his own survival.

What happens to a human when he chooses to be selfish? Well, what happens to any of our talents if we do not train them and use them? What happens to muscles when they are never used? They waste away and atrophy. The same muscles that can grow strong and carry a person for miles and miles can become too weak to even support their own weight.

Imagine that a person is in a coma for a long time and then regains consciousness. It takes months of specialized therapy and exercise for the body to rebuild its strength. It can even reach a point where a muscle becomes so atrophied that it can never be rehabilitated. It can never regain its strength. The same is true with the Neshama - soul. The same is true with our divine qualities such as the ability to do Chesed. If we do not exercise and train ourselves to do Chesed we can lose the capacity to do Chesed. In most instances a person can change and with specialized exercise and training regain their ability to do Chesed; however, there are many who can never do so.

The early generations that preceded Avraham and Sarah proved this. The pre-diluvian generations were entire generations that lost their ability to do Chesed. Only Noach and his family retained that divine capacity. Therefore, G-d had to start all over. The old "Chesedless" world had to be destroyed and a new one created.

It now makes perfect sense that during that long year of destruction and rebuilding the humans in the Tayvah - Ark worked 24 hours a day doing Chesed for all the other species. Noach and his family had to serve the animals, caring for their every need.

We can now understand the story of the lion hitting Noach because he was late one time in bringing his food. The Tayvah wasn't just a safe haven from the destructive forces of the Mabul. The Tayvah was a specialized training environment to retrain the human to emulate G-d and do Chesed. The eight survivors of Noach's family were going to give birth to a brave new world. Their training had to be the most rigorous and intense. There was no room for mistakes. Therefore, Noach was immediately punished for being late in feeding the lion.

The generation that built the Tower of Babel was another example. They were far better than the Generation of the Mabul because they at least showed the willingness to work together in order to attain what they each wanted. However, it was a limited and selfish kind of Chesed. "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." It was not the kind of Chesed that G-d intended for His world. G-d wanted people to be able to care about someone else even when they do not personally benefit. Therefore, their punishment, their Tikun - rehabilitation, was forced separation from each other. Once separated and apart from each other they would have the opportunity of seeing each other as separate and unique and to learn how to be concerned about each other, even without personal

gain. Even when it is not, "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

Just think for a moment. In most instances, family members care about each other. Yet, at the very same time they take each other for granted. Because we take each other for granted, we often do not show the same respect and concern for a close family member as we would to a complete stranger. You go to a friend's home for dinner and you of course thank your host for dinner. That is proper. That shows appreciation. That is also a Chesed, you make someone else feel appreciated and good about themselves. However, how many of us do the same to our own parents or siblings? How often do we thank them for their concern and caring? Unfortunately, we take them for granted and do not feel the need to extend the same Chesed. In truth, we are so used to taking each other for granted that we no longer expect to hear "thank you" from those who are closest to us. On the other hand, think of the importance of training ourselves to not take each other for granted! How much more special those "Thank You's" would be.

So too with the generation that built the Tower of Bavel. By separating them and making them "strangers" to each other G-d granted them the opportunity of learning to care for more than themselves and emulate G-d by doing true Chesed.

However, even after the destruction of the Tower of Bavel, humanity did not learn their lesson. It was definitely better than before but still the world was not exercising their divine ability to do Chesed. It was into this world that Avraham and Sarah were born. It was within the shadow of the Tower of Bavel that they began their ministry.

When Avraham and Sarah began to teach monotheism to anyone they could entice to listen, they stood out as being different. As the verse in this week's Parsha says, "Es Hanefesh Asher Asoo B'Charan - the soul that they made in Charan." What an unusual expression! Did they make souls or did they teach students? Why are the students called, Nefashos - souls? The answer is, because Avraham and Sarah awoke in their students the divine qualities that G-d had instilled in the human race. They taught their students how to emulate Him. They taught their students how to care for more than themselves. They taught them how to do Chesed! Therefore, G-d rewarded Avraham and Sarah by giving their children a life style of Torah and Mitzvos that trains them to do even greater Chesed. Of course, the hope is that each and every child will be raised to do Chesed from the very start so that by the time they become Bar and Bat Mitzvah their spiritual muscles will be strong and able!

The Gemara says, "Chesed Olam Yibaneh - the world is founded upon Chesed." The Gemara points out that "Tichilaso B'Chesed V'Sof B'Chesed - the Torah begins with G-d doing an act of Chesed and the Torah ends with G-d doing an act of Chesed." Following the sin of Adam and Chava, after G-d expelled them from Gan Eden, He could have said to them, "OK you're on your own! I want nothing more to do with you. Don't complain to Me when you're hungry and don't ask Me to help when you are cold." But that is not what G-d did. Instead, the verse says that G-d made them "Kosnos Ohr

VaYalbeeshaim - G-d clothed them in leathergarments." He showed them special care and concern. He extended to Adam and Chava a special Chesed.

At the end of the Torah the verse records that it was G-d who personally buried Moshe Rabbeinu. As you all know, burying the dead is called "Chesed Shel Emes - a true Chesed" because the recipient of the Chesed cannot repay the Chesed being done to him. It's truly a one-sided Chesed. So we see that the Torah starts with an act of Chesed and ends with an act of Chesed.

The Maharal points out that when an author begins his text he usually writes a Hakdamah - introduction. The Hakdamah explains to the reader what the author intends to accomplish by writing his book. If the book is about Sholom Bayis (Peace of the Household - proper family dynamics) then his Hakdamah says so. If it about the laws of Shabbos, the introduction will say so. When G-d sat down to write His book, the Torah, He also wrote a Hakdamah. G-d's introduction stated, "My book is going to be about Chesed." As the Gemara says, "Techilaso B'Chesed - It starts with G-d doing an act of Chesed." However, more so than that is "Sofa B'Chesed - it ends with G-d doing an act of Chesed." G-d considered Chesed to be so important that not only did He introduce the Torah with Chesed, but at the end He reviewed why He wrote the Torah. Why? To teach us to do Chesed!

Shlomo Carlbach Ob'M relates the following story. The Piazetzna Rebbe, Rav Klumunus Kalman, was one of the great Rebbes who died in the Warsaw Ghetto. The Piazetzna was one of the great Tzadikim (righteous people) of that generation whose whole focus was on children. He was known as the children's Rebbe.

On Friday nights the Piazetzna would conduct a special reception which was attended by hundreds of children and adults who gathered to be in his presence. Although most of his followers and students died with him in the holocaust, a few children managed to survive. They relate that the great Rebbe would deliver discourses on various Torah topics at different times during the Shabbos meal. However, there was one statement that the Rebbe would say over and over again until it became engraved in the minds and hearts of his young students. "Der Gresta Zach Is Far a Yid Tsu Ton a Toyvah Far an Andera - the greatest thing is for a Jew to do a favor, a Chesed, for another person."

As the children of Avraham and Sarah our greatest ability is to do Chesed. May we all merit to follow in the footsteps of Avraham and Sarah and make the most of our opportunities to do "for others".

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