

CHARITY WITH JUSTICE: NOT YOUR TYPICAL KNEE-JERK LIBERALISM

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 391, The Mitzvah of Nichum Aveilim [Consoling Mourners]. Good Shabbos!

Charity With Justice: Not Your Typical Knee-Jerk Liberalism

In this week's parsha, G-d decided to destroy the cities of Sodom and Amorah. The way the Torah narrates the story, G-d, as it were, debated with Himself whether He should tell Avraham about this decision. He knew that Avraham would be a protagonist in behalf of Sodom. Nevertheless, G-d concluded that he cannot withhold this information from Avraham: "For I have loved him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem doing charity and justice..." [Bereshis 18:19].

The Ramban explains G-d's "rationale". "If mitigating circumstances can be found to exonerate Sodom and Amorah, by virtue of the attributes of charity and justice, then maybe I will exonerate them. Let Avraham find such legitimate arguments, if such exist, and pray to Me on their behalf that they merit being spared, and I might change my mind. But if they are not worthy to be saved, then Avraham too will acquiesce in their judgment. Therefore it is appropriate that he be brought into this Divine secret."

Rav Simcha Zissel Broide, the head of the Chevron Yeshiva, asks on this Ramban: Avraham was the paradigm of Chessed [kindness]. Our normal expectation would be that there is no way Avraham would acquiesce and agree to the destruction of Sodom. Rav Simcha Zissel says that this Ramban teaches us that perhaps we need to re-adjust our understanding of the paradigm of Chessed represented by Avraham. It is not true that the definition of Chessed means that one gives and gives and gives despite the fact that the recipient is not worthy and is not impacted at all by his benefactor's generosity. Even within the Baal Chessed [master of kindness], there exists the idea that Chessed must be tempered with Mishpat [justice]. If the Baal Chessed sees that giving another chance is hopeless, then he will take his kindness elsewhere.

The modern concept of Chessed is a knee-jerk concept of blindly giving, without investigating the ultimate impact and benefit of the beneficence. This is not the classic Jewish approach to Chessed as portrayed by the Ramban. Even Avraham was prepared to sign on to the destruction of Sodom, when he saw the utter corruption of their society. If they are not worthy, we do not just keep showering them with kindness and extra chances. That type of Chessed is destructive and yields bitter fruit. This was most emphatically not the kind of Chessed practiced by Avraham Avinu.

Chessed Involves More Than Filling A Person's Stomach

There is a puzzling Tosfos Shantz in Tractate Sotah. The Torah says that Avraham planted an 'Eishel' in Beer Sheva [Bereshis 21:33]. Our Sages explain that this was a type of hotel. Eishel (spelled Aleph-Shin-Lamed) is an acronym for Eating (Achilah), Drinking (Shtiyah), and Lodging (Linah). Avraham always wanted guests. Tosfos Shantz quotes a Medrash: Avraham Avinu (in lieu of giving his guests a bill) would ask them to bless G-d as an expression of recognition and gratitude for all they were given. The Medrash says that there were guests who refused to offer Thanksgiving to G-d. It was against their 'religious beliefs'. In these cases, Avraham Avinu did write them a bill, and charged them a hefty price.

Avraham was not gouging. He charged the going rates. It was not inexpensive to get water and all the delicacies that Avraham provided at his Eishel in the middle of the desert! After presenting them with this very large bill he gave them a second chance: Either pay the bill or bentch [recite Grace after meals] -- which will it be? Invariably, the response at this point was "we'll bentch". What is the meaning of the Medrash? Was Avraham acting like a highway robber? Was he a con man?

The Shemen HaTov explains that this Medrash illustrates that Avraham was not interested in the travelers' money. However, there are two types of people in this world -- people who appreciate and people who do not appreciate. People who appreciate life and appreciate favors do not need to be banged over the head to realize that they have been done a favor. But there are other people who do not realize the kindness and favors that have been done for them unless it is banged over their heads. Until Avraham showed them the 'itemized bill' of what was involved in providing food, drink, and lodging for them in the middle of the desert, they took it for granted. They took G-d, who ultimately provided them with all their needs, for granted.

Avraham was the ultimate Baal Chessed. But the biggest kindness that anyone can do for another person is not necessarily feeding them. Rather, the biggest kindness is bringing them closer to G-d. This was the type of Chessed in which Avraham was constantly engaged. If what it required to communicate to certain types of people that there is a Creator in the world was to stick them with a big bill, that was what Avraham would do. He was not interested in the money. He did whatever it would take to perform the ultimate Chessed -- drawing people closer to G-d. The biggest Chessed in the world is not filling a person's stomach -- it is doing something for a person's soul.

Avraham was known for two primary attributes -- he was the archetype Baal Chessed and he was

the first person in the world to be involved in Kiruv [spiritual outreach]. However, these are not two distinct professions. His Kiruv profession was part of his Chessed profession. The Baal Chessed that is concerned about a person's stomach, is the same Baal Chessed that is concerned about a person's soul.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Vayeira are provided below:

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