



For crying out loud

True KINDNESS

Giving someone what he lacks and cannot obtain for himself

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



EACH TIME WE DAVEN SHEMONEH ESREI (AKA the Amidah, or standing prayer), we say in the very first bracha that Hashem “recalls the *chasdei Avos* (the kindnesses of the Patriarchs)”.

What kindnesses are we talking about? And to whom?

Our Sages teach that Avraham’s defining characteristic was *chesed* (kindness), Yitzchak’s was *din* (judgment), and Yaakov’s was *emes* (truth). While the Torah is replete with episodes of Avraham’s *chesed*, as well as how Hashem tested him regarding that trait, the *chesed* of Yitzchak and of Yaakov is less obvious. So, what does the “*chasdei Avos*” (the kindnesses of the Patriarchs) actually refer to?

Hashem famously commanded Avraham to “*lech lecha*” – to “go for yourself”. Rashi explains why Hashem didn’t just say “go”, but added the words “for yourself”, because Hashem’s

commandment to Avraham was for Avraham’s own benefit, for his own good. When a man does an act of *chesed*, such as giving a coin to a poor person, we find expressed in his action two different aspects: an aspect of building the world (ie. making it a better place) and an aspect of building the person who did the action, making him into a *ba’al chesed* (a kind person).

We can ask: which is the more important of these two parts, building the world or building the person?

This is what the verse “*lech lecha*” (go for yourself) is coming to teach us. What’s important to Hashem is what you do with yourself – the fact that you improve and fix yourself up in accordance with His commandments.

Why is this so?

Avraham Avinu was an *ish chesed*, a man of kindness. One who does *chesed* is called a *chasid* and our Sages teach,

“Who is a *chasid*? One who does *chesed* with his Creator.” True *chesed* is *chesed* that is done, so to speak, with Hashem. But how do we do “*chesed*” with Hashem, who is perfect and lacks nothing? What could He possibly “need” from us? True *chesed* means giving to someone something that he does not have and which he also has no possibility of obtaining for himself. If I give you a sweet and, at that same time, you already have in your pocket an entire package of sweets, this is indeed a “*chesed*”, but it’s not the peak of *chesed*. But, on the other hand, if you don’t have any sweets and also you don’t have any ability to obtain any sweets and, at this very moment, you desire a sweet and I give you a sweet, this is true *chesed*.

Our Sages ask, “Who is a *chasid*?” How is it possible to do *chesed* in the world? It’s only possible to do *chesed* with Hashem! By Hashem, there is one thing, so to speak, that He does not “have” and which He cannot obtain – and which only a man is able to give to Him. What is it? The perfection that a person creates within himself by choosing to do good things over and over again – by doing what Hashem wants and commands him to do. When a man works on himself, when he fixes himself up and he perfects himself, he makes himself better.

This is something that Hashem from His side is not able to do, because if Hashem made me a good person (rather than me doing it myself), I will not, in truth, be a good person – because I’ll no longer be a person at all. In such a case, where Hashem “makes” me a good person, maybe you could say I was a robot – or an angel, but if Hashem has made me into a good person, by forcing me to choose the things that I choose and to act the way that I act without me my-

self choosing to do those things and to act that way, then you could hardly call me a man anymore because my free will to choose would be gone.

My choosing to improve myself, to perfect myself, to become a better person by subjecting my will to Hashem's will – this is the single thing that Hashem does not have and which only I am able to give Him.

This "*lech lecha*" – the commandment to Avraham that he was to go – the desire of Hashem was that Avraham would build himself, this is what Hashem was interested in. Apart from this, Hashem doesn't need a thing. To cause the world to return to Him in *teshuva* (repentance) – Hashem can make this happen without anyone's assistance. To offer hospitality and to care for guests – Hashem can supply everyone with homes and food so that they won't wander around in the streets and require hospitality from Avraham or anyone else.

The intention is not, G-d forbid, that Avraham did not need to do all of the good things that he did because certainly, without doing them, he would not have built himself up. But the thing that, in particular, Hashem desires is for Avraham to build himself. In other words, the main focus is not what you do, but what "what you do" does to you over time, building yourself into a better person.

Why was the first man called "Adam" after the earth, *adamah*, from which he was formed, ie the physical part of him, and not after the spiritual part that's in him, which Hashem Himself breathed into him, and which, our Sages say, refers to the fact that Hashem blessed man with the abilities to know and to speak – and, therefore, he could have been called something more noble like "knower" or "speaker", rather than "earth"? Man's purpose in the creation, and the challenge for him in this world, is specifically to change his nature –

choosing to elevate his spiritual nature above his coarse physical nature rooted in the earth from which he was formed.

To put it another way: Hashem wants us to become *ba'alei chesed* (kind people). That's the goal – for us to work on ourselves and change ourselves into kind people. How do we accomplish that goal? By accustoming ourselves to doing *chesed*. *Chesed* is the means by which we accomplish the goal of becoming kind people. And choosing to do what Hashem commands us to do is the greatest *chesed* there is.

When we say in our davening that Hashem "recalls the kindnesses of the Patriarchs", what we mean is that Hashem recalls the *chesed* that our Forefathers did with Him – how they followed His every command and instruction as they perfected themselves, thereby building the world as a result.

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