

Why You Should Perhaps do Less Chesed-Giving

You've probably heard inspiring speeches, based on the life of Avraham, that were meant to encourage you to be a good person and do kindness to others. These messages are important and, when I was a synagogue rabbi, I did not refrain from encouraging my congregants to do kind acts and support others, in my weekly speeches. The Talmud (Bava Metzia) and other sources derive from the incident of Avraham's welcoming of three divine guests (Gen. 18) that we are commanded and encourages to help others, when they are in need.

I would like to add two more layers of meaning to this story, which bring out additional deeper and perhaps more sophisticated lessons in giving. First off all, the way in which Avraham cares for his guests seems to deviate from the way in which he is normally portrayed. Avraham doesn't bring the guests into his house (v. 4) and he makes them wash their feet before they settle on his property (Ibid.). It is the in midrash, relaying parts of Avraham's life that occurred *before* this incident, that tells of Avraham's famous tent, which was open on all sides, and his welcoming indiscriminately any and all people-not here. And why would Avraham mind if their feet are dusty?

Rashi brings down that Avraham made his guests wash their feet, due to the fact that the dust on their feet may have been worshipped, and rendered idolatrous. This may sounds a bit outlandish, but I think Rashi is highlighting several of these types of subtleties in the text, that I have been pointing out. These subtleties have to do with being discerning about whom one should bring into his or her home. Though I do not have enough space here to explain every inference, I think the idea matches up quite nicely with the progression of Avraham's life, as paralleled by the sefirot in the Torah.

Avraham having his tent open and indiscriminately welcoming guests is the *chesed-chesed* stage of this *chesed* giving. When you match up the rest of his life with his 49 sefirot, this incident of welcoming guests is in the

chesed-gevurah stage! This seems quite odd, as *gevurah* is a middah/attribute that is focused on the self. However, it matches up with the idea that we are bringing to the table: *chesed* needs to be done in a way that protects the giver and her or his family.

Not every person who has a different philosophy of life should be welcomed into your home; not every person is a safe person that you should have spend the night in your house; not all times are proper for giving, such as when the giver has limited resources. This is the deeper message behind the scriptural subtleties.

In addition, *chesed-gevurah* teaches that you must assertively go and do *chesed*-giving, when the situation calls for it. Avraham *runs* (v. 2) to do the *chesed*, flagging down the guests, convincing them to turn from the path to visit his home. There must be *gevurah* within *chesed* – *chesed-gevurah* is read “*gevurah chebchesed*” “the *gevurah* **within** *chesed*”— in order for it to work properly. This means that that, in order to go proper, more advanced forms of giving, we have to bring some assertiveness to the table; we have to *go out* and act, not simply wait for the need to come to us.

The Beautiful Lesson

We can derive meaning from many different levels of the Torah. The same story can be used as a simple, positive message for children, law cases or examples of morality for more advanced students. From the standpoint of Talmudic expoundations, these sentences are helpful scriptural sources on which to attach Biblical commandments; they are not the actual source for the commandments, but excellent examples of *chesed* with which we should involve ourselves. For the added layer that we provide with *The Seven Ways* book and system, subtle messages are embedded in the subtext “*sitrei Torah*” (the hidden components of the Torah, i.e. true kabbalah) for us to derive. Simultaneously, the very same words can present for both the layman and scholar.

May you fulfill the technical precept as well as find the level and message that speaks to you personally.

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