



Chayei Sarah: True Kindness

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

The world stands on three things, on Torah, on Avoda (sacrificial service and prayer) and on Gemilus Chasadim (kindness and the performance of charitable acts)." Ethics of our Fathers Chapter 1 Mishna 2

Among the many important events that unfold in this week's Parsha we find Avraham dispatching Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak. Avraham provides the parameters – the young woman must come from his ancestral homeland and from his extended family. Eliezer sets out, arrives in Aram Naharaim and devises the following plan:

And he said, "O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, please cause to happen to me today, and perform loving kindness with my master, Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the water fountain, and the daughters of the people of the city are coming out to draw water. And it will be, [that] the maiden to whom I will say, 'Lower your pitcher and I will drink,' and she will say, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels,' her have You designated for Your servant, for Isaac, and through her may I know that You have performed loving kindness with my master (Bereishis 24:12-14)."

Although Avraham never tells Eliezer what qualities to look for, Eliezer intuitively understands that the next matriarch must possess the attribute of *chessed*, kindness. And so, if she is so kind that she responds to the request of a stranger for a drink and then offers to water the entire flock of camels – she is indeed righteous and kind enough to be the wife of Yitzchak and join the Abrahamitic dynasty.

We know that *chessed* is exceptionally important. As stated above, it is one of the pillars upon which the world rests. But would this value of *chessed* require a young woman to water a flock of camels? Let's assume Eliezer brought with him at least 3 camels, a camel can drink up to 20 gallons at a time (thank you google ☺) that would be 60 gallons. This would have required Rivkah to run back and forth to the well multiple times – was this a fair expectation? Even in the realm of *chessed* we find limitations. We are obligated to be charitable, yet, one is not permitted to give away more than 1/5 of one's wealth for fear of impoverishing one's self. There are limitations even on kindness. Furthermore, the text never records that Rivkah actually performed this incredibly selfless act of watering the flock? How are we to understand this strange "test" devised by Eliezer?

The Beis HaLevi (Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik 1820-1892) explains that Eliezer was not only looking for a *Baalas Chessed*, he was looking for someone who would perform *chessed* with wisdom. In life, it is not enough to do the right thing – one must do the right thing in the right way. When Eliezer approached Rivka and asked her for a drink, he wanted to see what she would do with the remainder of the water. To take the rest of the water home to her family would be irresponsible (after all she did not know the identity of this stranger) but to spill out the remaining water would be an affront to this stranger. How did Rivka manage this situation? After she offered Eliezer to drink, she then offered the remainder of the water to his camels (she did not offer to water the entire flock – just the remainder that was in her pitcher). This was the "test" devised by Eliezer and it was this test that Rivkah passed with flying colors. Rivkah knew how to do "*Chessed with Chochma, kindness with wisdom.*"

There are times when we try to help another but forget to be sensitive to the needs of the other. *Chessed* doesn't simply mean the performance of good deeds – rather, it means the performance of good deeds in a sensitive fashion. There are times when people need help but feel awkward accepting it. There are times when people need assistance but can't ask and sometimes can't acknowledge it when it is received.

People are complex, we are complex and when helping another we must think not only of the act of *chessed*, but how the act can be packaged in order to preserve the dignity of self-respect of the other.