

Shabbat Kodesh: A Weekly Reader from Kodesh Press

Parshat Chayei Sarah: November 19, 2022 | 25 Marcheshvan 5783

Smart Chesed

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

We tend to associate kindness with both emotions and behaviors. Yet there is an essential element to *chesed* that often gets overlooked: thinking. Dr. Nancy Eisenberg, a psychologist who studies the importance of prosocial behavior (what we might call *chesed*), argues that helping others requires several essential cognitive processes. She contends, the action of prosocial behavior first requires perception, reasoning, problem-solving, and decision-making.

It should come as no surprise that when looking for a wife for Yitzchak, Avraham's servant, whom Chazal identify as Eliezer, focuses his test on the trait of *chesed*. Malbim highlights that Eliezer doesn't just ask Rivka to give him water: he asks that she tip the jug for him, as opposed to him taking the jug from her and drinking himself. She could have angrily responded, "Take it yourself, I am not going to pour it into your mouth!"

She thinks to herself: Why is he asking me to pour for him? Perhaps there is something wrong with his hands so he is not able to draw water for himself. And if he can't draw water for himself, he must not be able to draw water for his camels either! That is why she responds positively to his request and goes above and beyond what he asks for and provides for the camels as well. She is able to dig deeper and hypothesize about the potential problem. Eliezer's test isn't just about *chesed*, it's about smart *chesed*.

The Beit HaLevi argues that the test was not whether she would give him water, since it would not be so special to help a thirsty traveler. Rather, the test was what she would do with the water left in the jug after he drinks his fill. The first option would be to take the water back to her house and give it to her family, as she had originally planned before he asked her for it. The problem with this is that to Rivka, this person is a random nomad. It would not be sanitary to allow him to drink from the barrel and then have her family drink the rest. The second option was to spill the leftover water out. The problem with this option is that it may insult the person she was helping. Stuck with two bad options, she comes up with a third option

– to give the water to the camels! This way nobody drinks tainted water, nobody gets insulted, the camels get to drink, and she eases the workload of the nomad. She demonstrates that she likes to help others, in a way that is healthy, sensitive, and smart. *Chesed* isn't just about doing something, but about doing things intelligently.

In order to make sound and sensitive decisions, we must first think through the various options and potential consequences. This may include knowing the right times to visit or call people, inquiring and accommodating special dietary needs, or thinking through how to be discreet so that helping others doesn't become embarrassing.

Adapted from Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman, Psyched for Torah

Uncommon Decency

Rabbi Ari D. Kahn

When the time arrives to find a bride for Yitzchak, Avraham sends his most trusted servant on a quest to find a suitable spouse. Avraham's servant, identified as Eliezer, creates a test; the first woman to pass it will be deemed suitable.

The test he puts in place is one of kindness and generosity: Will she offer water not only to a wayward traveler but to his parched camel as well? This is surely no arbitrary test: This servant of Avraham, raised in Avraham's holy tent, was privy to the inner workings of Avraham's mind, and he knew the significance of kindness within the hierarchy of his master's value system. Someone stingy or misanthropic could not be a part of Avraham's camp, certainly could not take on a leadership role, nor transmit Avraham's values to the next generation.

While in no way wishing to minimize the importance of decency and generosity, there seems to be a glaring omission

Onkelos Corner

Rabbi Jack Abramowitz

She lowered herself from the camel. (Genesis 24:64)

The Torah says *va-tippol*, meaning she fell off the camel.

Onkelos translates as "she lowered herself," ostensibly from the mere sight of Yitzchak. — *Adapted from The Complete Targum Onkelos*

from this test: What of her beliefs? What if the person who passed the test was a good-hearted polytheist? Surely the nascent Jewish nation would need at its very core good deeds, generosity, sharing and giving, but if we know nothing else about Jewish thought, we know that all of these traits are seen as outgrowths of a highly developed sense of monotheism: The recognition that there is but one all-powerful God who has no needs leads to the realization that Creation was not designed to solve a problem or fulfill some need within God, but rather was an act of absolute altruism. Because God lacks nothing and is not affected by human behavior, because there is nothing humans can do for God, all we can do is attempt to emulate God and mimic His kindness. This realization was Avraham's contribution to the world, what set him apart from the society into which he was born, what informed his behavior and gave form and content to his life's work.

Did Eliezer see kindness as an expression of monotheism? Rabbenu Nissim suggested that he was in fact not at all concerned with the religious beliefs of the prospective bride. In fact, we may surmise that this aspect of her biography was not on the checklist at all: By sending an emissary back to his homeland, Avraham almost guaranteed that any bride Eliezer might find would be the product of an upbringing steeped in the idolatry that was standard fare in Mesopotamia. What, then, was Avraham's strategy in sending his servant there, of all places, and what was Eliezer thinking when he created his test?

Rabbenu Nissim suggests that when beliefs are compared with personality traits, the former are far easier to change than the latter. Presumably, as Avraham's "right-hand man," Eliezer had seen people come and go. He saw how quickly and easily people changed their belief system, especially under Avraham's tutelage, yet he also saw how difficult it was for people to change personality traits. Even among Avraham's flesh and blood, poor character traits overshadowed religious belief; Lot and Yishmael both parted ways with Avraham's camp over differences that were not "religious" in nature.

According to Rabbenu Nissim, Eliezer was confident that after spending time with Avraham, any idolater would become enlightened, would be liberated from polytheistic beliefs—but changing their character would be far more difficult. Simply put, teaching decency is far more difficult than teaching theology. This is not to say that is impossible for people to change their ways. Quite the opposite: this may be mankind's most important task—to change and elevate character traits. Yet

when looking for a fitting spouse for Yitzchak, Eliezer chose decency over doctrine. In our generation, when common sense has become uncommon and common decency increasingly rare, the poignancy of this lesson should not be overlooked.

Rebecca's First Encounter with Isaac

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

In only seven verses, the Torah describes the meeting of Rebecca and Isaac. Rebecca rides, looks, falls, and enters the tent of Isaac's mother, Sarah. "Raising her eyes, Rebecca saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel and said to the servant, 'Who is that man walking in the field toward us?' And the servant said, 'That is my master.' So she took her veil and covered herself" (24:64–65).

Many commentators understand the Hebrew *va-tippol* to mean that she alighted from her camel. However, the term *va-tippol* also can mean "she fell," and Netziv explains that Rebecca literally fell off the camel.

Isaac had been praying. The spiritual grandeur of Isaac's personality at that moment was so overwhelming, that Rebecca was unable to maintain her equilibrium. She was intimidated and felt unworthy to marry him.

With this analysis, Netziv explains the nature of the subsequent relationship between Rebecca and Isaac, and why it is different from those of Abraham-Sarah and Jacob-Rachel. Rebecca is not a meek or passive person. She chooses to uproot herself from her family to marry an unknown husband. When she has problems in pregnancy, she herself goes to inquire of God (25:22), rather than complain to her husband as Rachel did (30:1).

Most importantly, when she thinks her husband is making a mistake in choosing Esau, she manipulates his blindness to ensure that her choice is preferred. Why does she not simply tell Isaac directly that he was wrong?

Netziv explains that first impressions are powerful. After Rebecca met Isaac the way she did, she had a difficult time confronting him directly. It is not that she accepted that "Isaac knows best." On the contrary, she is sure that she knows better than he.

When addressing him directly, however, Rebecca returns to the young girl who catches sight of her husband-to-be with the presence of God resting on him. Hence, she has to work behind his back, not hesitating to manipulate him, but unable to confront him directly.