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Chessed With The Unlikely

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Avraham Avinu Prays For Sodom: Finding The Good Amidst The Bad

In this week's *parshah*, Hashem destroys the city of Sodom for their wickedness. Avraham *Avinu davens* for the people of Sodom to be saved, pleading with Hashem to save the city if there will be 50 *tzaddikim*, or 45 *tzaddikim*, or 40, 30, or 20 *tzaddikim*, or at least 10 *tzaddikim* – and when Hashem tells him that that are not even 10 *tzaddikim* in the city, Avraham finally retreats.

The city of Sodom was a wicked place, the epitome of sin and wickedness on the world, yet Avraham *Avinu davened* to Hashem to save them, on the grounds that there might be some *tzaddikim* there. It appeared that Sodom was an entirely wicked place, but Avraham *Avinu* knew that nothing in Creation is totally evil; everything mixed with good and evil. There is always evil mixed with good, and there is always good mixed with evil. Even the most depraved place on earth, Sodom, had to have some good in it. Therefore, Avraham *Avinu* hoped that it could be saved, in the merit of some *tzaddikim* whom he hoped were living there.

True, in the end there were not even 10 *tzaddikim* to be found there, but there was still Lot, the nephew of Avraham, who had practiced hospitality with guests even as he dwelled in Sodom. So there was some degree of good to be found there. Therefore Avraham persisted in prayer to Hashem that the people of Sodom should be saved, because he knew that there must be some good to be found even amongst the bad.

Saving The Wicked

Avraham was praying to Hashem not only to save any righteous men who are living there, but to save even the wicked. In asking Hashem to find any righteous people that are living there, he wanted the wicked to be saved in their merit. This is in spite of the fact that the wicked people of Sodom were a constant source of spiritual impurity on the world.

Had Hashem let them live, perhaps Avraham would have taught them how to repent or make converts from them, as he did with all others in the world. But when Avraham was asking Hashem to spare the wicked, it was a loftier kind of prayer. It was not like praying for the recovery of an ill person, whom we hope will continue to live and be healed from illness. The wicked people of Sodom, if they were allowed to continue living, would only cause ruination to the world. Their continued existence would not bring any good, and they would have only worsened. True, there was a possibility that they could always repent. After all, Hashem awaits each person's *teshuvah* until the

¹ שיחת השבוע 008 יירא – חסד דייקא למי שמתנגד אליו 1

day of his death, no matter how wicked he acts. But this was highly unlikely with the people of Sodom, who were very entrenched in spiritual impurity, for they were very consistent with their evil.

So when Avraham was praying for their survival, this was a very high level of prayer, for their continued existence would likely further their evil, and even so, Avraham wanted them to live and he prayed to Hashem to spare them.

Praying To Save Those Who Oppose You

Even more so – and this is the main point here - it wasn't by chance that the people of Sodom lived in Avraham's generation. His nephew Lot who went to live there had gone his own separate ways from Avraham's family, so he was regarded as the impure seed of Avraham's family; and even so, Avraham prayed for his survival.

Avraham and the people of Sodom were total opposites of each other, and even so, Avraham prayed for their survival. Avraham was entirely kind and compassionate, whereas the people of Sodom despised kindness and compassion. They hated the very idea of hospitality with others, as Chazal describe at length. Lot's wife didn't even want to give salt to the guests. In contrast to the kind and giving person that was Avraham *Avinu*, who revealed G-dliness on the world, Sodom was the total antithesis to whatever Avraham represented. They were opposed to kindness, giving, and revealing any G-dliness on the world. Sodom was a terrible and impure place that concealed any light of G-dliness. It was the root of impurity on the world, which stood to conceal the reality of the Creator from the world.

They were precisely placed in Avraham's generation, because the forces of impurity are always challenging the forces of holiness, for that is a rule which Hashem has designed the world with [in order to allow free will]. Similarly, when we had a Moshe Rabbeinu who took us out of Egypt, there was also the "*Erev Rav*" who came out with us, who stood to oppose the side of holiness. Avraham was on one side of the world, and Sodom was at the opposite end. Avraham was building the world by spreading holiness and knowledge of the Creator into it, whereas Sodom was the root that was causing destruction to the world.

We can now understand that Avraham's prayer to save Sodom was not only a prayer to save wicked people, but to save the very people in the world who were opposing everything that he stood for. He was praying that his very opposite should be saved!

The Connection Between Chessed and Tefillah

This was the great *chedsed* that Avraham *Avinu* epitomized. It was not only a *tefillah* to save them, but an act of *chedsed* on its deepest level.

We learn in the beginning of this *parshah* of the *chessed* of Avraham Avinu, which he showed towards his guests. But from Avraham's prayer for Sodom, we see even more depth of his *chessed*.

Avraham also enacted the *tefillah* of *Shacharis*, according to one of the opinions in the Sages.² Avraham is therefore the pillar of both *tefillah* and *chessed*; his *tefillah* stemmed from *chessed*. He was the first to ingrain *tefillah* into his descendants, *Klal Yisrael*, as a part of his trait of *chessed* that he exemplified. *Tefillah* is therefore a branch of the *chessed* of Avraham.

For this reason, a person's *tefillah* is only answered when he *davens* for others, and not if he is self-focused. It is because *tefillah* must flow from *chessed*, and without a desire for *chessed* for others, without *davening* for others' needs, a person's *tefillah* is self-absorbed and his *tefillah* does not have its power. One must not only *daven* for his own family; he must *daven* even for others as well, and for his others relatives, and even more so, for those whom he doesn't even know.

But the depth of how *chessed* empowers *tefillah* can be seen from Avraham's prayer to save the people of Sodom, who totally opposed his essence. He had told Lot to separate from him, when he saw that Lot wanted to live in Sodom, and yet he was now *davening* for Lot, and even for the people of Sodom, who were totally wicked. He was *davening* for those who totally opposed all that he stood for, and this is the depth of his *chessed*.

Chazal say that "Prayer accomplishes half." Just as man and woman are each half-completed without each other until they marry, so is prayer a necessary half that one needs, in order to get anywhere. Just as a wife is a "helpmate" to her husband if he merits it, and she opposes him when he is not meritorious, so is there a concept in prayer, to pray for one who opposes you. Prayer is not so much about praying for yourself. It is mainly meant to pray for others, and as we are explaining here, it is mainly meant as a means to join with others, even with those who oppose our very essence.

The Depth of Avraham Avinu's Kindness

We can see this concept reflected as well from the beginning of the *parshah*, where Avraham shows hospitality to guests who were far from his taste. They looked like lowlife wanderers, who worshipped the dust on their feet. Avraham told them to wash their feet from the dirt that they worshipped, so he knew that they were idol-worshippers, and even so, he was hospitable to them, although they totally opposed all that he stood for. Avraham Avinu was the one who fought against all of the idol worship of his father Terach, and there was no one more opposed to idol worship than he. But when it came to being hospitable to others, he was kind even to those who totally opposed all of his ideals, even to those who served the dust on their feet, who didn't serve Hashem.

Avraham *davened* for those who opposed him, and he did actual *chessed* with those who opposed him. These two aspects show us the depth of his trait of *chessed*. Unlike the bird "*chassidah*" [the stork] which is only kind to its fellow birds and not to other birds, the *chessed* of Avraham Avinu was that he did *chessed* even with those who were his opposite.

² *Berachos 26b*

Furthermore, Avraham *davened* for the survival of Yishmael, whom he knew very well was a “wild man” that is dangerous to others, the very opposite of his benevolent nature. Unlike the simple understanding, which is that he was a father simply praying for his child, his prayer for Yishmael’s survival was really a great act of kindness, for he was *davening* for the survival of a child whom he was in complete opposition with. In contrast to Yitzchok *Avinu*, who loved Esav because Esav had fooled him by always trying to please him, Avraham’s prayer for Yishmael was entirely an act of kindness, to save a person who totally opposed his being.

In light of the above, the *chessed* of Avraham *Avinu* shows us what *chessed* really is: *chessed* is mainly about being kind to those who oppose you.

Becoming A Giver & Expanding The Quality of Your Chessed

Let us bring out this concept in sharper terms.

When a person is a child, he is mainly concerned for himself, and the center of his life is one’s own “I”. If something is not “me”, it feels like a contradiction to one’s self (to be specific, it challenges one’s lower self, which is the *nefesh habehaimis*, the “animal soul”). Everyone is born like this, with a tendency to be self-focused. But there are some people who are born with a nature that completely does not want to be kind to others. It is a pitiful situation when one is born with such a nature, but there are many people like this.

A person with a very self-focused nature doesn’t like to do *chessed*, and every act of *chessed* feels like a contradiction to his personality. This kind of person lives entirely for himself, and everything must revolve around him and suit his own needs; everything he comes into contact with must serve some kind of self-gain for him. He hates the very idea of *chessed*.

But the souls of *Klal Yisrael* are blessed with a benevolent nature, in addition to being compassionate and shameful, traits which were all inherited from Avraham *Avinu*. Thus there is a nature ingrained in every Jew’s soul to be kind to others. It is not always clearly revealed, because the “animal soul” can conceal this nature from coming to the fore, either totally or for the most part.

The Sages make a distinction between the *chessed* practiced by *Klal Yisrael*, with the *chessed* that other nations perform. A gentile can only act kind to others if it will involve some kind of self-gain, but a member of Yisrael has a very nature ingrained in his *neshamah* to do *chessed*, which was inherited from the *Avos*. But it is very possible that the “animal soul” conceals the nature. If one is born with a nature that is totally opposed to doing *chessed*, he has an *avodah* to get back his long lost nature of *chessed*. After traversing that stage, or if he is already born with a liking towards *chessed*, the *avodah* of a person is to deepen the quality of his *chessed*.

Avraham *Avinu* kept his tent open in all four directions so any passerby from any of the directions could come. This was not just another attempt to do more *chessed*. It was rather an expression of his *chessed* that was open to all of the directions – to do *chessed* in any possible manner.

In Summary

To review and summarize, the first step is to become aware of the nature to do *chessed*. One must start with doing *chessed* with at least those who are closest to him, so that he is at least like the *chassidab* bird, which does *chessed* exclusively to its friends and to no one else.

But after one has gotten used to doing *chessed* with those who deserve his *chessed* the most, the next step is not simply to do more acts of *chessed* (that is certainly praiseworthy, but it is not the point here), but to expand the quality of his *chessed*, by doing *chessed* even with those whom he does not feel an affinity for. It can be an actual act of *chessed* to the person whom he doesn't like, and if a person cannot find this opportunity, one should *daven* for another person who is very much his opposite.

The point is not to *daven* to get rid of the opposition he has with others and to make peace with them (that is a separate topic). The point is to *daven* for the welfare of others, who are taking a direction in life, who live differently than you.

When one *davens* this way, it is as if he is opening up his own 'tent' in all four directions, as Avraham *Avinu* did. If one can only be kind to certain types of people, though, but he cannot be kind to other kinds of people, his 'tent' is not open to all four directions. Avraham *Avinu*'s tent was open to all four directions not only because his *chessed* spanned all of the directions of the world, but because his *chessed* extended even to those who were going in an opposite direction than he. It was even towards Lot, who had gone separate ways than he.

Avraham *Avinu* *davened* for those who opposed his way of life – the people of Sodom, and for his nephew Lot. He was hospitable to people who were idol-worshippers, who were in total contradiction to all that he stood for. He went to save Lot in war, even though Lot had gone separate ways. All of these acts were examples of the depth of Avraham *Avinu*'s *chessed*: to be kind to even those who were totally opposite than he.

Emulating The Chessed of Avraham Avinu

When a person wonders “When will my actions reach those of my forefathers?” and he wants to emulate the *chessed* of our Avos, how indeed can he begin to perform true *chessed*?

The first step, as we explained, is to do acts of *chessed* in order to counter the nature of the ego, which tends to be self-focused. The second step is to do *chessed* even with those who are not to your liking, who oppose your way of living.

This is the meaning of the verse, “*The world is built on kindness.*” What is it that destroys the world? When two forces contradict each other, they cause destruction to something. Kindness not only prevents the destruction of the world, it builds the world. Instead of war, opposition, hatred, and dissension, there can be kindness that builds the world. One can build the world, in the place of doing things that demolish the world.

If a person only does *chessed* with others who are to his liking, he is not performing *chessed* with those who are opposite than him, and such *chessed* is not emulating the *chessed* of Avraham Avinu. Only when a person actually does *chessed* with others who are not to his liking – whether he does kind deeds for them, or whether he prays for their welfare – only then is he connecting himself to the *chessed* of Avraham Avinu.

Elevating Our Chessed

The physical body and the “animal soul” connected to it are in total contradiction with the *neshamah*. When a person can only do *chessed* with others whom he finds it easy to do *chessed* with, his *chessed* is on the level of the “animal soul”, and it is like the *chessed* that the *chasidah* bird performs, which only does *chessed* for its friends.

But when a person does *chessed* with those who are oppose him, who are not to his liking, such *chessed* will break his natural character traits, and it rectifies the “animal soul”, which is at first in an imperfect state. After a person gets used to doing *chessed* to even those who are opposite than he, and it becomes second nature to him, such *chessed* will reveal the light of his *neshamah*.

Chessed is therefore not just to perform kind deeds for others. The deed of kindness that one performs with another is but a vessel, which must be used to activate an inner light within.

As long as a person can only be kind with those who are to his liking, he does not access the light of his *neshamah*, and such *chessed* is on the level of the “animal soul”. But when a person does *chessed* with even those who are opposite than he, such *chessed* goes above the level of his animal soul, for the animal soul is not on the level to do this. It is breaking his nature, and it causes one to rectify his character traits, of hatred, anger, dissension, revenge and grudges on others.

After one has gotten used to doing *chessed* with those who are opposite than him, the light of the *neshamah* will become illuminated within him, and then he will be able to do truer and truer *chessed* with others, which will be enabled from the light of his *neshamah*. Such *chessed* will then be emanating from the depth of one’s *neshamah*, and such was the *chessed* of Avraham Avinu, who shined the light of *emunah* upon the world, who was the paradigm of *chessed* on this world.

In Conclusion

If one can work on these two steps – by first getting used to doing *chessed* for others [in order to counter the nature of one’s ego], and then to get used to doing *chessed* with even those that are not to one’s liking, which smashes the “animal soul” – after traversing these two steps, with the help of Hashem, one can then reach the third step, which is to do *chessed* that stems from the light of one’s *neshamah*. This is the main goal.

If one reaches it, a person merits the light of his *neshamah* to shine, and the *chessed* that he performs for others will be the kind of *chessed* that produced Yitzchok *Avinu* and Yaakov *Avinu* (who represents Torah) - the offspring of Avraham *Avinu* and the holy results of his great *chessed*. There is a path that leads from Torah to *chessed* (“Torah begins with kindness and ends with kindness”) and there is a path that leads from *chessed* to Torah, but the common denominator between these two paths is that they both bring a person to the light of the *neshamah*.

May we merit with the help of Hashem to connect to the *chessed* of Avraham *Avinu*, but not to the external acts of *chessed* which are on the level of the “animal soul”, but to the trait of *chessed* that Avraham *Avinu* exemplified, which was a nature of the *neshamah*. Through this, may we merit that the light of complete *emunah* be shined upon the world.