

Chayei Sarah 5785
November 23, 2024
Responding to Annie Barkan

Annie, I love that you focused your d'var Torah on Chesed. There could be no more perfect message for this time.

You talk about how Eliezer, Abraham's servant, creates a test to find the right match for his master's son Isaac. And that the test wasn't just for someone who would share their water with a thirsty stranger, which is already kind, but who would, as you say, go above and beyond. Specifically, who would offer to provide water to the camels as well. I don't think we really understand how above and beyond this offer was. Eliezer had ten camels. Probably few Brooklyn residents know that a single thirsty camel needs 53 gallons of water to rehydrate, and can drink that amount in three minutes. So we're looking at 530 gallons of water drawn from a well. That's an exceptionally kind offer for someone you've just met.

In the Torah, more attention is given to the patriarchs than to the matriarchs. We know a lot more about Abraham than we do about Sarah, Isaac more than Rebecca, Jacob more than either Rachel or Leah. Often, the women are left out entirely and we talk about our ancestors only as men – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But there's an alternative perspective that you can find in the tradition, which is that we ought not think of the three primary characters as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but as Abraham, Rebecca and Jacob. In fact, some commentators think of Rebecca as Abraham's true successor.

They have some good evidence to go by. As we know, we meet Abraham two Torah portions ago when he is called by God to leave the home of his family and go to a land he does not know. Now, a generation later, Rebecca is living in the land where Abraham grew up and is similarly called to go on a journey to a new land that she does not know. Like Abraham, she bravely leaves her family and consents to go, saying in her own voice "Elech, I will go," which has a resonance with God's call to Abraham, Lech Lecha. It's almost a call and response spanning three Torah portions: God says "Lech Lecha, Go forth." Rebecca says "Elech. I will go."

Also like Abraham, Rebecca receives a blessing that she'll have many offspring. Abraham is told that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Rebecca's family blesses her: "O sister may you grown into thousands of myriads."

But the most important similarity between Abraham and Rebecca is in relation to Chesed. One of the most famous and paradigmatic moments of Abraham's life is when he is approached by three strangers. He rushes to care for them, offering them food and water, shade and a place to wash their feet. For this, he becomes known as the model of Chesed for our people. When the Rabbis speak of the patriarchs, they understand Abraham to represent the quality of Chesed, lovingkindness.

His true heir in this regard is not Isaac or Jacob, but Rebecca. As seen in this parasha, she is characterized by extraordinary chesed. Like Abraham, she is put to the test with a weary and thirsty stranger. Like Abraham, she goes out of her way to be generous and thoughtful, compassionate and caring. Like Abraham and like our tradition makes clear over and over again, Rebecca demonstrates that chesed is an expression not of weakness but of strength, as Rabbi Kolin taught last night. If you doubt it, you try lifting 530 gallons of water out of a well.

Like Abraham, Rebecca is the only one of the matriarchs who hears directly from God. Like Abraham, she does what needs to be done to ensure the lineage of God's covenant, circumventing Isaac to get the covenant blessing to Jacob.

Through Abraham and Rebecca, we see that Chesed is *the* signature quality of the founders of the Jewish people. It is meant to be *our* core characteristic.

The reason this matters so much right now is that we are living in a time when just about 50% of the American electorate, 77 million people, have chosen a government, a movement, that actively celebrates cruelty. We know that many of our fellow Americans made that choice not because they sought to be cruel. Many made the choice despite the cruelty and callousness on display. But a vote for Donald Trump was a choice to tolerate cruelty at very least, and it was a choice that is unleashing a climate of cruelty upon our nation. The NY Times reported yesterday that there were a number of hate incidents this week by white supremacists. 750 such incidents have taken place since 2020, with more than half of them in the last 18 months. These groups spread messages of hate against Jews, Black people, immigrants, and LGBT people.

We know that human beings are social creatures and we copy what we see. Our environment and the kinds of activities that are in our news feed affect us. So there's a real danger is that we become more tolerant of cruelty, dehumanization and hatred, that these become normal to us. That we ourselves become numb or hardened as bystanders and witnesses to cruelty, that in an attempt to protect our hearts we close them. There's also a danger is that we become wary of chesed. When it seems that the world is hardening around us, when softness is mocked, it's easy to think that kindness is naive, that love is foolish, that openheartedness is weak.

Instead, we have the ability right now to be cleareyed about who we are, what we stand for and what we have the power to do together. The first and most obvious thing we have the power to do is to simply live our values. As demonstrated by Abraham and Rebecca, we are a people founded in chesed, a people established for the purpose of loving kindness. For our ancestors, this wasn't just an emotion. It wasn't an internal state only. It was action.

This is what I'd like to suggest is the single best way for each of us to go through the years ahead, starting today. We do not have to wait. In fact, it is important that we not wait. Instead what if right now we became people characterized by kindness, not through sentiment but through action. What if we challenged ourselves to do a single act of kindness each day—for someone in our family or someone in our neighborhood or someone at work or school or

someone you don't know. It could be putting a little note in a child's lunch box, or getting a cup of coffee for the person behind you in line. It could be picking up a couple of extra things at the store for a neighbor or taking a moment to smile and make eye contact with someone on the street who seems to be having a hard day. That's the daily challenge. Start there.

Next, the weekly challenge is to schedule something in our week, a regular thing, when we do a bigger act of kindness. Maybe you make sandwiches for refugees living in your neighborhood through a program like the one our refugee task force does. It could be signing up for the CBE Chesed team and making soup for people who are sick. Anything like that. That's the weekly challenge. Identify it, put it in the calendar. Once you set it up you will be so glad you did.

And then, once you've got those two going, there's the yearly kindness challenge. Identify a big ongoing act of kindness you can be part of to care for someone who is vulnerable. Maybe that's joining one of the circles that have formed here to house and adopt a migrant family. Maybe it's continuing to raise funds and support the organization of your mitzvah project, Annie, in a significant way. It does not matter what it is, but find something that becomes your ongoing, yearly big lift of Chesed.

If we do these three things we will have changed the pattern of our lives to infuse them with Chesed.

Now a note about missing the mark. Everything has the potential of doing more harm than good if we miss the mark, even kindness. If we are kind in a way that makes us feel that we are better than the person we're helping, and involves pity or judgment, that can do more harm than good. If we're kind in a way that's smug or shows off what a good person we are, that can do more harm than good.

Our kindness should come from deep humility. We should recognize that we are doing these acts for our own sake as much as anyone else's, that this is medicine for our souls, that we need to be kind as much as anyone needs to receive our kindness. It should come from a low place, a tender place of seeing another human being as a fellow traveler and offering something that might bring them a smile or a little less pain. It can even be anonymous sometimes. If there's time or the conditions are right, it can be based in listening and finding out what a person needs and wants.

These daily, weekly, and yearly projects of Chesed are entirely doable no matter what your age. And they will make us feel so much better. We are not powerless; we are immensely powerful. We have the power to define who we are. No one else gets to do that for us.

Eight years ago we organized a resistance that involved a flurry of public activity. This time, though public action will sometimes be necessary and important, this time the most important resistance is within. It's the resistance of the soul. It's the resistance of character. There was a question during this election about how much character matters. Character is everything.

Imagine what our community, our neighborhood, our city, our country would look like if this is how everyone responded to the cruelty of this time. Caring for each other with acts of kindness every day. Helping vulnerable people know they are not alone. Weaving a web of mutual aid and mutual concern which is what we want our society to look like anyway, and is who we want to be anyway.

Our tradition understands that we are what we do. Not just what we think or what we feel, but what we do. That's why the emphasis is on mitzvot, hundreds of small actions that become the pattern of who we are.

We don't want to be cruel people. We don't want to be defined by public displays of cruelty or by cruel policies over which we have no control. We don't want to be silent or passive when cruelty occurs. We want to be like Abraham and Rebecca, defined by Chesed. Now is the time to make that real. Once our lives are defined by kindness, not just as sentiment but as a pattern of our living, no one can take it away from us. Not ever. No matter what.

Shabbat Shalom.