



# The Primacy of Hesed: What We Learn from Abraham

Parashat Va-yera, Genesis 18:1 - 22:24 | By Mark Greenspan

“Caring for the Needy” by Elliot Dorff (pp. 806) in *The Observant Life*

## Introduction

One can't say enough about the importance of *hesed*, or *g'milut basadim*, in Jewish life. This is the generic term for a whole variety of actions including hospitality, visiting the sick, dowering a bride, providing interest-free loans, redeeming captives, burying the dead, and comforting mourners. *G'milut basadim* is often translated as “Acts of loving-kindness.” While we tend to emphasize *tz'dakah* (righteous giving) in contemporary Jewish life, the rabbis clearly favored *hesed*. Overall, it refers to the ways that we help others in times of need. Elliot Dorff writes: “There are many reasons to care for others: to create a quid pro quo reason for others to care for us when we need help, to express our own humanitarian feelings...to contribute to establishing a society in which people care for each other, to live by the commandments...” (*The Observant Life*, pp. 829). Whatever our reason may be, these practices of “loving kindness” are essential in create a caring community. They are both individual as well as communal responsibilities, carefully defined in Jewish law.

Abraham exemplifies *hesed*, kindness, in Torah and in later Jewish literature. He welcomes wayfarers into his home, redeems captives, and shares his faith with others. From a rabbinic perspective, his love of God is only rivaled by his love of his fellow human beings. But Abraham is not the only one who performs acts of *hesed*, as we see in *Parashat Va-yera*. God makes a house call while Abraham is recuperating from circumcision. Abraham is circumcised at the end of last week's Torah portion; the sages assumed that he was in his tent rather than out gathering up guests for his dinner table because he was too sore to walk after this delicate operation. This would not have stopped Abraham, but God caused the day to be particularly hot to keep wayfarers away so our forefather could recuperate. In the end, Abraham wins. God pays him a visit and Abraham gets to play host. What can we learn from Abraham about *hesed*?

*The Lord appeared to Abraham by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance to greet them, and bowing to the ground, he said: My Lord, if it please you, do not go past your servant. Let water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. Let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourself...”*

- Genesis 18:1-4

## Sources and Resources

- a. *It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, to prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave, and bury the dead, and also to bring joy to a bride and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit. Although all these mitzvot are of Rabbinic origin, they are included in the Scriptural commandment Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself." That charge implies that whatever you would like other people to do for you, you should do for your comrade in the Torah and mitzvot...The reward one receives for accompanying guests is greater than all of the others. This is a statute which Abraham our Patriarch instituted and the path of kindness which he would follow. He would feed wayfarers, provide them with drink, and accompany them. Showing hospitality for guests surpasses receiving the Divine Presence as Genesis 18:3 states: "And he saw and behold there were three people."*

- Mishneh Torah, Laws of Mourning 14:1-2

- b. *Our Rabbis taught, in three respects g'milut hasadim (acts of kindness) are superior to tz'dakah (charity): Tz'dakah can be done only with one's money, but g'milut hasadim can be done with one's person and one's money. Tz'dakah can be given only to the poor, while g'milut hasadim can be done both for the rich and the poor. Tz'dakah can be given to the living only, while g'milut hasadim can be done both to the living and to the dead.*

- BT *Sukkah* 49b

- c. *"The Lord appeared to Abraham by the terebinths of Mamre:" (Genesis 18:1) What is meant by 'in the heat of the day?' Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina said: It was the third day after his circumcision and the Holy One came to enquire after Abraham's health. Also God drew the sun out of its sheath so that Abraham should not be troubled by wayfarers. Abraham sent Eliezer out to seek travelers, but he found none. Said he, 'I do not believe you!' ...so Abraham went out, and saw God standing at the door; thus it is written, "Pass not away, I pray thee, from your servant." (Genesis 18:2) On seeing him tying and untying his bandages God said, 'It is not appropriate that I stand here;' hence it is written, "And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and lo, three men stood by him, and when he saw them, he ran to meet them:" (Genesis 18:2) (If they were standing by him why did he have to run to them?) At first they came and stood over him, but when they saw him in pain, they said, 'It is not seemly to stand here.'*

- BT *Bava M'tzia* 86b

- d. *Rav Judah said in Rav's name: Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the Sh'chinah, for it is written, "And he said My Lord, if it please you, do not go past your servant." (Genesis 18:3) Rabbi Eleazar said: See how the conduct of the Holy One is not like that of mortals. The conduct of mortals is such that an inferior person cannot say to a greater man, Wait for me until I come to you; whereas in the case of the Holy One it is written, and "Abraham said, 'My Lord if it please you.' "*

- BT *Shabbat* 127a

- e. *Yose ben Yohanan of Jerusalem said: Let your house be opened wide, and let the poor be members of your household. (Pirkei Avot 1:5) 'Let your house be opened wide.' What does this mean? It means that a person's house should be opened to the north, south, east, and west, like Job, who provided his houses with four doors. Why did Job provide four doors for his house? In order that the poor should not be put to the distress of having to go around the house: One who came from the north could enter through the north, one who came from the south could enter through the south, and likewise from the other directions... When calamity befell Job, he pleaded with the Holy One, "Master of the universe, did I not feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and clothe the naked?" The Holy One answered Job, "Job, you have not yet reached half the measure of hospitality extended by Abraham. You sat in your house waiting for guests to come to you. To him who was accustomed to eat wheat bread, you gave wheat bread; to him who was accustomed to eat meat, you gave meat; and to him who was accustomed to drink wine, you gave wine. But Abraham did not act thus. He went out, getting about in the world. When he met prospective guests, he brought them home. Even to him who was not accustomed to eat wheat bread, he gave wheat bread; to him who was not accustomed to eat meat, he gave meat; and to him who was not accustomed to drink wine, he gave wine. Not only that, but he got busy and built spacious mansions along the highways, and stocked them with food and drink, so that whoever entered ate, drank, and blessed Heaven. Therefore, unusual satisfaction was given to Abraham, and whatever any person requested was to be found in his house."*

- *Avot D'Rebbe Natan*, Chapter 7

## Reflections

Dorff explains that the heart of Judaism's concern for people in need is the rhetorical question which Cain poses to God: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain seeks to cast off his responsibility for the brother whose freshly buried body lies in the ground beneath his feet. Abel's blood cries out to God for justice. In a sense,

the whole Torah and Judaism is an attempt to answer this question which he puts to God, affirmatively. We are our brother's/sister's keeper.

The Torah tells us little about Abraham's beliefs but it has a lot to say about what Abraham does. When Lot is taken captive during a raid on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham leads a posse to redeem him as well as the other people of the two cities. He refuses to take booty following his successful campaign. Abraham sits in his tent watching for wayfarers who he can welcome into his home. He personally sees to their needs, bringing water so they can wash their feet, seeing to the preparation of their meal, and then waiting on his guests. The Torah is not clear about who Abraham is entertaining. The *midrash* attempts to reconcile the seemingly contradictory details in this story. First the Torah says, "God appeared to Abraham," but goes on to say, "Looking up he saw three men standing nearby..." If the wayfarers are nearby, why does Abraham run to greet them? Finally, the Hebrew, "My Lord, if it please you..." but can also be read "My lords, if it please you..." Is he speaking to God or to the three strangers? Hospitality becomes a moment of revelation for our forefather.

Abraham becomes an exemplar of acts of loving-kindness. Visiting the sick, hospitality, redeeming captives and other acts of *hesed* are not explicitly listed among the 613 commandments in the Torah but are learned by example. The rabbis declared these acts rabbinic commandments. Maimonides suggests that these acts are the fulfillment of the commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Moses Maimonides, Joseph Caro and others included these acts within the legal tradition and devoted space in their codes describing how and when to perform these acts. Visiting the sick, as Dorff points out, is more than a nice sentiment. There is a right way to visit the sick, a right time, and a Jewish agenda that should determine what we do once we arrive. These *mitzvot* are defined as *tzor'kei tzibbur*, the needs of the community. We have a responsibility to provide institutions that provide not just for the poor and destitute but for any person in need. In our Shabbat liturgy we recite a prayer for the congregation: "May God bless this entire congregation ... along with those who give funds for heat and light, wine for *kiddush* and *havdalah*, bread for the wayfarer, charity for the poor, and all who devotedly involve themselves with *tzor'kei tzibbur*, the needs of the community." Hospitality is both a communal and a personal responsibility. There are times when all of us are in need of compassionate care and support from the people around us.

These acts demand more than good intentions. They take self-discipline and forethought. Of course, there is a human dimension to how we carry out these acts of *hesed*. Tradition offers us insights into the right way to act at times that often leave us uncomfortable and uneasy. There is a Jewish way and a Jewish conversation which precedes and follows acts as simple as visiting the sick and as complicated as redeeming captives held by Israel's neighbors.

### **Halakhah L'ma-aseh**

- a) *Because we are indeed guardians for other human beings, the Torah demands not only that we refrain from harming others, including non-Israelites but also that we exert ourselves to protect and aid them...More broadly the Torah demands, "Do not stand over the blood of another" (Leviticus 23:4-5) which the Talmud understands to mean "Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow."*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 806
- b) **Visiting the Sick:** *The commandment to visit the sick is a requirement of every Jew, not just rabbis, doctors, or nurses, regardless of the relative social station of the patient and the potential visitor.*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 807

- c) **Providing Health Care:** *It is certainly the case that Jewish sources do not require socialism as the basis of government or distributing goods. It is nevertheless intolerable dereliction of society's moral duty for health care to be provided only for those who are well off enough to pay for it or to purchase insurance to pay for it.*  
 - *The Observant Life*, pp. 817
- d) **Redeeming Captives:** *Because Jews regularly redeemed their captives, kidnappers saw them as a prime target. To deter future kidnappings, Jewish communities established limits on redemption prices. They nevertheless routinely went beyond those limits, if necessary to redeem current captives...the modern State of Israel has several times followed suit.*  
 - *The Observant Life*, pp. 817
- e) **Treatment of the Incarcerated:** *Living in modern times, we have duty to do everything we can to ensure that trials are fair and that those justly imprisoned are treated reasonably.*  
 - *The Observant Life*, pp. 819
- f) **Hospitality:** *The rabbis extended this duty further, calling it *hakhnasat or'him*, "bringing in guests." It was considered a great *mitzvah*, more important than prayer, an expression of *g'milut hasadim* and the equivalent of receiving the divine presence into one's midst.*  
 - *The Observant Life*, pp. 820

### Questions to Ponder

1. Abraham defends the condemned, welcomes wayfarers into his tent and protects those who are taken captive, and yet he is completely silent when God commands him to offer his son on the altar. How can we reconcile these two sides of our forefather?
2. Why did the rabbis consider acts of kindness greater than acts of *tz'dakah*? Do you agree with this statement?
3. If you were going to adopt one of the commandments in this chapter of *The Observant Life* as a year-long personal *mitzvah*, which one would you choose? How would you go about actualizing this *mitzvah* as part of your daily life?
4. In what ways is hospitality not quite as practical a practice today as it might have been in earlier generations? Why aren't Conservative Jews as amenable to the practice of hospitality as are members of the Orthodox community?
5. How do the commandments in Dorff's chapter help us to build community? How can we more effectively build community in today's congregations?

*Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan*