

## Chayei Sara

### Avraham: *Chesed* Tempered by *Din*

#### A. Where Avraham Came From – the Midrash

*Sara died in Kiryat Arba, which is Chevron, in the Land of Canaan. Avraham came to eulogize Sara and to weep for her. (Breishis 23:2)*

The midrash asks, where did Avraham come from? The midrash records two opinions. Rebbe Levi said that he came from the funeral of his father Terach. Terach at the time lived in Charan, which was very far away. On the other hand, Rebbe Yosi said Avraham came from Har haMoriah. We see from this midrash that Chazal see significance in the place and activity from which Avraham Avinu came to attend Sara's funeral. Ramban says *vayavo* doesn't necessarily mean he came from another place. It merely means that he got involved, and likely he had been there already. But the midrash says that Avraham did come from somewhere else. What is the significance of where Avraham came from?

#### B. The Well Rounded Personality – *Chesed* and *Din*

The Shem Mishmuel's father, the first Sochachover Rebbe, author of Eglei Tal, says the midrash is explaining something about Avraham. Avraham had the ability to move from one personality structure to another, from one *mida* to another *mida*.

Avraham is the epitome of *chesed*, loving others and wanting to help them. But life is not that simple. We would like the world just to be all about loving kindness. After all, this is the beautiful side of life. There is, however, a harsher side of life, the side of restrictions and rules. In Hebrew this is called *din*. Sara characterized *din*. So did Yitzchak, unlike Avraham, who was pure *chesed*.

The world has to have a balance between kindness and generosity on one side and, on the other side, structure, law and limits. Without limits, love will be perverted and applied inappropriately. Hashem saw that the world needed two pillars. On the one hand the world needs kindness, goodness, generosity and love, *chesed*. On the other hand, the world needs justice, fairness, correctness, doing what's right, *din*.

As Klal Yisrael was being formed in its initial stages with its first fathers, Avraham was the pillar of *chesed*. This is the foundation of the world. God created the world with amazing generosity. The world is very complicated and sophisticated in order to support life. All of the geological, meteorological and astronomical systems are here to support human life. At the same time, Hashem also made the world with unforgiving natural systems. Gravity, for example, has no *chesed*. If a person steps out of a window he will fall and get hurt or die. We thus see that the world as a whole functions on two levels, *chesed* and *din*.

In the original formation of the Jewish people, Hashem wanted the first person to be a man of *chesed*. Avraham looked for goodness in everything. Avraham even prayed for the people of Sdom, who were

perverts, criminals and scoundrels. My personal theory is that Avraham sanctioned Lot's move to Sdom because he thought that Lot had a chance of reaching and teaching its citizens. Avraham saw goodness in every person, even in Sdom.

This is a strong element of *chassidic* thought. The Baal Shem Tov and later Reb Levy Yitzchak of Berditchev believed that beneath the surface of every Jew is a pure core. The essence of a Jewish person is only good. You can find it, develop it, and bring it out. *Chassidus* is fundamentally a movement of *chesed*, in line with the personality and belief of the original founder of the Jewish people, Avraham.

But there is also Torah law. It is immutable. The *aseres ha'dibros*, the first public communication of God's commands, were engraved in stone. This symbolized the permanence of the Torah. Why is the law so important? Human nature has weaknesses, and law addresses those weaknesses. Law elevates man and purifies him. The teachings of the Torah therefore are totally intertwined with the *halacha*, the laws of the Torah.

Avraham, *chesed*, has to be balanced by Yitzchak, *din*. After these two opposing poles were developed by Avraham and Yitzchak, Yaakov came and synthesized the two. He is called Yisrael Saba, the grandfather whose children all stayed loyal to the family goals. Yaakov's *mida* is known as *rachamim* or *tiferes*, which denote the balance of *chesed* and *din*, of generosity and truth.

### **C. Avraham Successfully Integrated *Din* Into His Life**

Even though Avraham embodied *chesed*, Hashem saw that even Avraham had to be touched by *din*. He needed an experience of *din*. If Avraham only espoused kindness, he would be too one-sided. There is another side of life that he needed to experience deeply. This was the purpose of *akeidas* Yitzchak. Hashem asked him to kill his son for no apparent reason. This was the antithesis of *chesed*. God challenged Avraham to obey His will no matter what, even if he didn't understand it.

Avraham Avinu needed to succeed, and he did. He acted with alacrity and willingness to obey because of his great love of God. He proved his ability to switch modes from *chesed* to *din* just because Hashem had commanded him. Avraham bowed his head and submitted himself to the divine command even though it was against his fundamental philosophy. He had something he felt even more fundamental than his *chesed* – his love for God, *ahavas* Hashem. He did God's will with speed and love even though it was against his own basic philosophy. He then bridged *chesed* and *din*.

### **D. Where Avraham Came From – The Significance**

Now we can understand what the Torah means when it says “*vayavo* Avraham,” Avraham came to Sara's funeral from the *akeida*. A funeral is an act of *chesed*. The dead person cannot reciprocate the kindness that people do for her. Her life has ended. Avraham performed pure *chesed* by caring for Sara's funeral and burial. Avraham convinced the people to sell him the burial cave and he paid a huge amount of money for it. But where did he come from? He came from the *akeida*, from a mode of *din*. He was able to move himself spiritually, to shift his personality from the *din* of the *akeida* to the *chesed* of the burial of Sara.

The other opinion in the midrash maintains that Avraham came from Terach's funeral. When Avraham

buried his father Terach, he went through a similar transition. He felt obligated to act due to the law, *din*. He had to make the trip to Charan. Avraham and Terach disagreed ideologically. Even though there are sources that say Terach had done *teshuva*, most likely he was still an idol worshiper when he died. Nonetheless, Avraham traveled to the funeral in Charan because the *din* of *kibud av* demanded this.

### E. Applications for Our Own Lives

All of us have our own particular emphasis on *chesed* or *din*. Some of us bend to *chesed* and some of us bend towards *din*. However, sometimes we have to take on a *mida* other than the one we are used to. Even a *baal chesed* sometimes has to be strict. A teacher needs to fail certain students, and to give others a low grade. These would be expressions of *midas hadin*.

In every area of life that involves human relationships we operate with *din* and *chesed*.

1) An example is the workplace. The employer sets rules and expects productivity from his employees. This is *din*. He must also show kindness and appreciation to his employees. He must give them encouragement and support. This is *chesed*.

At the same time, the employee must live up to his responsibilities. This is *din*. But a good employee, especially a *tzadik*, does much more than fulfill his legal obligations. He does whatever he can so that his employer's endeavor should succeed. This is *chesed*.

2) Generally, in friendships, we must also involve *chesed* and *din*. Of course, we should be loving, kind and generous to our friends. But sometimes we have to say “no” to a friend who needs some limits set. This is *din*.

3) This point also applies to raising children. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became popular for parents to use the *mida* of *chesed*. Parents were kind, generous, giving, and loving. This was probably a reaction to earlier ideas of child raising that tended towards the side of *din*, including strict discipline, responsibility, and enforcement of rules. There was a rebellion of sorts against the old school of hard knocks.

Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we look back and see the blessings of that *chesed* – better inter-generational communication. In some places though it went too far. Children grew up without any sense of responsibility and law. An explosion of crime erupted. Then came a counter-reaction. Our prisons are now packed with people who were raised on *chesed* without *din*. It is like feeding a child only ice cream all day long. He will get sick. He needs some bread and meat.

In *chassidus*, milk is a food of *chesed* and meat is *din*. Milk is white, the color of kindness and generosity. The mother produces it from her own body to nurture the child. Meat is *din*. It is produced through the taking of a life. It is red, the color of justice. Everyone likes ice cream. Not everyone likes to eat meat and some people have to watch their cholesterol. For a balanced and healthy diet we need to have both, some dairy and some meat products.

We need to be able to use the different personae of *chesed* and of *din*. Sometimes we have to be soft and sometimes we have to be hard. When raising children with rules, we also need to be able to bend and even break a law of the house in order for the child to feel good. The child who grows up in an

oppressive house will rebel, unless he or she is given sufficient love and *chesed*, together with the right amount of *din*.

### **F. *Chesed* and *Din* in Marriage**

In marriage too, we need a mix of *chesed* and *din*. In the marriages of our *avos* and *imahos*, the couples exhibited this mixture. Avraham was *chesed*, while Sara was *din*. In the next generation, Yitzchak embodied *din*, while Rivka personified *chesed*. Marriage is a combination of *chesed* and *din*. The *chesed* of marriage requires being gentle and loving towards your spouse, and interpreting his or her behavior as stemming from good intentions. *Din* is also a necessary aspect of marriage. Each spouse has halachic responsibilities. These include financial as well as domestic obligations.

During the search for a spouse, we look to develop a *chesed* relationship. We want to give the impression of generosity and kindness, of *chesed*. This is appropriate at the early stage of dating. But in marriage, *din* dictates that each spouse will have many responsibilities to take care of. These responsibilities are clearly legislated by Jewish law, halacha. When the halacha is clear, it is easy to implement. Many other areas, though, are less rigorously legislated. We must always search for the right balance, to be kind and good to our spouse, and to take our marital responsibilities seriously.

Hashem used *chesed* and *din* as fundamental modes in creating the world. He still uses both methods to run the world. *Chesed* and *din* are also fundamental to human relationships, and to human personalities. Our challenge is to strike the right balance between the two.

### **G. *Chesed* to Others, *Din* for Ourselves**

One way to combine the two is the following notion. Look for goodness and see goodness in everybody. When interacting with someone else, deal with them with *chesed*. However, when thinking about yourself include some *din*. Realize your own strict and legal *halachic* responsibilities. This strategy is central to the *chassidic* philosophy of life.

### **H. How Avraham Dealt With Sara's Funeral**

When Avraham was dealing with the funeral and burial of his spouse Sara, he must have felt an amazing loss. They had been married for at least 52 years, probably for even more than 70. At her death, she was 127. She gave birth to her only baby when she was 90, and at 75 years old she came to Israel. She was his wife and partner in all of his projects. She brought God's message to the women, while Avraham shared that message with the men.

After her death and burial, the Torah says that Avraham was old, he had become an old man. But he was already old when she died, he was 137 years old. Up until then, though, the Torah never said that he was old, because he was spiritually young and energetic. As long as Sara was alive, he felt youthful. However, when she died, old age caught up with him. He lost his youthfulness, vitality, and energy. This is common among men who have been married for a long time to one woman. They deteriorate after their wife dies.

When Avraham came to eulogize Sara, he could have spoken about his loss, about his feelings of emptiness without her. But Avraham did not focus upon himself. Instead, he focused on who she was,

and on the loss to the world. That is why the Hebrew word to weep, *v'livkosa*, has a tiny *chaf*. Avraham took himself out of the picture. This is another reason why the midrash relates the burial of Sara to *akeidas Yitzchak*. *Akeidas Yitzchak* was an amazing act of self-denial, when Avraham made decisions without taking into account his own interests. It was God's will, so Avraham ignored his own interests for the sake of performing God's will. He also behaved in a similar fashion at Sara's funeral.

### **I. How to Care for our Self Interest with *Chesed* and *Din***

This is a lesson for us. We are human; we have self interests. Self interest can cloud our judgment and make us do irrational and impulsive things. Practically, the Torah instructs us to take care of our self interest, but to do so in the Torah way. We are responsible for ourselves. But we have to watch out for the element of gain that ego and selfishness draw us to. Ironically, in order for us to do what is right for us, we must sometimes forget about ourselves. We have to look at our situation as an objective observer, and then decide what is best for ourselves *and* the world. With ourselves we must also use *chesed* and *din*. Yes, we should be kind to ourselves, but we must also be objective and fair.

We can't expect everyone to be like Avraham. We can, though, look up to him. We can learn from his actions and be inspired by them. We can move along the path of true giving to the person who is in need. We should give without allowing our needs to get in the way. With Hashem's help, we can combine *chesed* with *din*, just as Avraham Avinu did.

#### **Questions**

1. When did Avraham twice perform *din*?
2. Give two examples of Avraham performing *chesed*.
3. Give two examples of pure *chesed* you have done in your life.
4. Give two examples of pure *din* that you have done in your life.
5. Give two examples of when you combined *chesed* with *din*.

#### **Exercises**

1. For one day, keep a log of your acts of *chesed*, acts of *din*, and acts that combine both *chesed* and *din*.
2. Describe a situation in which you had a conflict between *chesed* and *din*. What did you decide to do? Do you think everyone in the world should do what you did had they been in the same situation? Why?
3. If your friend is failing a course and is looking at your paper during a test, what would you do? What would be the right thing to do? Answer honestly. .
4. If someone wants to develop the trait of *chesed*, what would you recommend as an exercise?
5. What is a good exercise to develop the trait of *din*?