

The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy

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THE THIRTEEN ATTRIBUTES AND THE MITZVAH OF CHESED

The essence of the Selichos service is the recitation of the “Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.” However, recitation is only the beginning. The attributes are expressed in response to G-d’s directive (*Rosh HaShanah* 17b) “Any time the Jews are sinning, they should perform before Me (*ye’asu lefanai*) in accordance with this arrangement, and I will forgive them.” This is modeled as a prayer, and indeed the attributes are incorporated in

that form. Still, as the Alshich notes (*Tehillim* 103:7), the command is not “*yomru lefanai*” - say before me, but “perform”; the ideal is that the Jews will not only speak these words, but will live them. Indeed, walking in the path of G-d is the mission of the Jew in this world, and there is no greater road map for that path than the Thirteen Attributes.¹ In fact, the imitation of G-d and the realization of kindness to others are intertwined, and, in a sense, one and the same.

The Sources for the Mitzvah of Chesed

The word “*chesed*” is often translated as “kindness,” but this rendition remains vague. *Chesed* describes an attitude, a demeanor, a sensitivity, and a worldview, as well as acts of kindness themselves.

The commandment to engage in acts of *chesed* is of undisputed importance; the *mishnah* identifies

In memory of Rabbi Hy Arbesfeld z"l, who was a guide, a mentor, a friend, and an inspiration. There was no greater exemplar of hakaras hatov, and its enormous potential, than Rabbi Hy Arbesfeld. He did far more than express it: he was a force of nature, committing himself fully to supporting the Yeshiva that nurtured him and making sure that its best version was realized so that others could benefit as he did. The positivity he embodied, the energy he harnessed, the good humor that he carried in his magnificent efforts to advance the Torah of the Yeshiva and its faculty was a wonder to encounter. Many a RIETS event was made memorable and impactful with his personality defining the experience. His legacy of hope, potential, and inspiration will continue to speak to us when we need it the most.

“*gemilut chasadim*,” performance of acts of kindness, as one of the three supporting pillars of the world.² The Talmud underscores this significance by pointing out that incidents of God’s *chesed* frame the Torah, which begins with God’s provision of clothes for Adam and Eve (*malbish arumim* – He clothes the unclothed) and concludes with His burial of Moses (*kover meitim* – He buries the dead).³ This is not merely a stylistic flourish; the fact that the Torah “begins and ends with *chesed*” is not simply a point of sequence and structure, but is a dramatic declaration of the underpinnings of the Torah in its totality. R. Yerucham Levovitz, the distinguished *mashgiach* of the Mirrer Yeshiva, noted that this language is meant to convey that *chesed* is not only the most important theme of the Torah, it is the theme of *everything*; all of Torah, and of Creation, flows from the value of *chesed*.⁴

Similarly, the *mishnah* teaches that “if there is no *derekh erez*, there is no Torah.”⁵ Rabbenu Yonah suggests that *derekh erez*, usually rendered as the possession of refined character traits, is necessary if the Torah’s values are to take root; without *derekh erez*, any Torah the individual studies “lacks a home.”⁶ Along these lines, it has been suggested that the prominent placement of *chesed* indicates that *chesed* is equally crucial; it is “the beginning and end” of the Torah personality, and no such personality can exist without it.⁷

Chesed as an expression of the Divine is so readily apparent that one lacking this attribute is compared to one who fails to recognize God.⁸ The Talmud, citing R. Chama ben R. Chanina, explains the verse, “After the Lord your God shall you walk” (Deut.

13:5) as a command to imitate the Godly attributes of active kindness referred to above.⁹ It is impossible to physically walk in the “footsteps” of the transcendent fire of the Divine presence; we “walk in God’s ways” through involvement in loving-kindness:

אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה מה הוא מלביש ערומים דכתיב (בראשית ג, כא) ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם אף אתה הלבש ערומים הקב"ה ביקר חולים דכתיב (בראשית יח, א) וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא אף אתה בקר חולים הקב"ה ניחם אבלים דכתיב (בראשית כה, יא) והי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו אף אתה נחם אבלים הקב"ה קבר מתים דכתיב (דברים לז, ו) ויקבר אותו בגיא אף אתה קבור מתים:

Rather, [the meaning is] to “walk after” the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of leather, and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21), so should you clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written: “And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre” (Gen. 18:1), so should you visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written: “And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son” (Gen. 25:11) so should you comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written: “And He buried him in the valley” (Deut. 34:6), so should you bury the dead.

This mandate to emulate God, “*imitatio Dei*,” is a core mission of Judaism. R. Yisrael Meir Kagan, the “*Chafetz Chaim*,” observes that the commandment appears in one form or another no less than eight times in the Torah.¹⁰ As presented by the Talmud, the fulfillment of this imperative is manifested in the assumption of

a character of active kindness and mercy.¹¹

The Talmud, in the name of R. Yosef, cites another verse as a source for the imperative to perform acts of *chesed*: “And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and shall show them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do” (Ex. 18:20).¹² This verse, a portion of Yitro’s advice to his son-in-law Moses, is interpreted by the Sages:

והודעת להם זה בית חייהם את הדרך זו גמילות חסדים ילכו זה ביקור חולים בה זו קבורה ואת המעשה זה הדין אשר יעשון זו לפנים משורת הדין:

“[And you] shall show them” - this refers to their house of life;¹³ “the way” - this means the practice of loving deeds; “they must walk” - to visit the sick; “wherein” - to burial; “and the work” - the letter of the law; “that they must do” - [acts] beyond the requirements of the law.

The Talmud further locates an imperative for *chesed* in the declaration of the Jewish people upon the splitting of the Red Sea: “This is my God, *ve-anveihu*” (Ex. 15:2).¹⁴ Rabbinic sources offer many interpretations for the last word of this sentence; one possibility is that the word should be read as a contraction of the phrase “*ani ve-hu*,” or, “I and Him.” Thus, suggests Abba Shaul in the Talmud, the intent is, “Be like Him: Just as He is merciful and compassionate, so you must be merciful and compassionate.”

The multiplicity of sources from the Talmud may give the impression of redundancy, as we are told three times that we are to imitate God through the pursuit of compassion. R. Moshe Troyesh, in his ethical guide *Orach Meisharim*, explains the necessity for this repeated instruction.¹⁵ Each of the three sources addresses a distinct commitment to acts of kindness.

Abba Shaul's source, based on the declaration at the Red Sea, teaches that the Jewish people devoted themselves, in an expression of their own free will, to emulate the God who redeemed them from slavery, and in so doing transmitted this legacy to their descendants.¹⁶ R. Yosef derives his lesson from Yitro, who was speaking neither as a prophet nor as a messenger of God. By necessity, then, his advocacy of *chesed* stemmed from an instinctive ethical morality, and Moses's acceptance of his message arose from agreement with that instinct and sensitivity.¹⁷ Finally, R. Chama ben R. Chanina teaches that the mandate of *chesed* is not only a voluntary commandment accepted by the Jewish people or an ethical necessity of social responsibility, but an actual binding Biblical commandment.

In addition, acts of *chesed* are commanded by another famous source of central importance. Maimonides asserts that all acts of *chesed* are mandated by the verse "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18).¹⁸ Just as we would desire others to extend kindness in our favor, we are bidden to perform *chesed* for others.

A Multi-Tiered Imperative

Many commentators observe that the different sources for the commandment of *chesed* create a dual-leveled *mitzvah*.¹⁹ On the one hand, we are obligated to be involved in acts of kindness, to be *gomlei chasadim*, in order to imitate God, thus fulfilling a requirement in the relationship between Man and God, a *mitzvah bein adam la-Makom*. On the other hand, *chesed* stems from the command to "Love your neighbor," a duty between

one human and another, a *mitzvah bein adam le-chaveiro*.

This distinction is evident from the classification of the commandment in R. Elazar Azkiri's presentation of the *mitzvah* in his *Sefer Charedim*. The obligation to perform acts of kindness as a function of *imitatio Dei* is classified with "Positive *mitzvot* dependent on the heart", even though it appears to call for physical action.²⁰ As R. Shimon ben Chamu notes, this is because *chesed* activities are the means to an end, the goal of creating a Godly personality.²¹ *Chesed*, then, is a necessary part of each individual's religious development, regardless of its actual effect on others; one is obligated to incorporate it into one's natural personality. In general, the approach of Maimonides is that it is necessary to internalize the themes of *mitzvot* whose rationales are basically understood; accordingly, the disposition towards *chesed* must become inherent and instinctual.²²

Developing such an attitude requires actively pursuing areas of practice, rather than merely passively awaiting opportunities. The *midrash* comments to this effect on the statement of Avimelech, King of Gerar, to Abraham: "God is with you in all that you do" (Gen. 21:22).²³ According to one suggestion in the *midrash*, this assessment was made after Abraham relocated his tent, following the destruction of Sodom, to Gerar, where opportunities for hospitality would be more plentiful. R. Henoah Leibowitz observes that although Avimelech was aware of Abraham's many acts of kindness up to this point, it was only once he noticed the extent of Abraham's actual searching for opportunities to engage in *chesed* (in this case, hospitality) that Avimelech

realized that God was actually with Abraham.²⁴ Many commentaries note the fact that Abraham's internalization of the quality of *chesed*, to the extent that he suffered anguish when deprived of the opportunity to provide hospitality,²⁵ is emblematic of the soul that strives to emulate God's *chesed* as a defining trait.²⁶

Abraham's efforts created an attitude transmitted to his descendants. In the silent prayer (*Amidah*) recited every day, we request: "Bless us, our Father... for with the light of Your countenance You gave us... the Torah of life and a love of *chesed*." This, explains the Alter of Slobodka, is a reference to the innate inclination of the Jewish soul toward loving-kindness, which is reflected and enhanced by active practice.²⁷

The Unique Quality of Divine Chesed

Another aspect of *chesed* is elucidated through careful attention to the details of a specific *mitzvah* of *chesed*, that of comforting mourners, *nichum avelim*. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik identified a particular goal of this *mitzvah* that impacts on its performance; a vital part of comforting the mourner, he maintains, is to convince the bereaved that his suffering is temporary, that it is a small part of a masterplan of yet unrevealed nature and scope, one that will ultimately lead to clarity and happiness.²⁸

This perspective adds an important element to this *mitzvah*. The founding Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, R. Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, notes that there is a fundamental difference between the ability of a human to give comfort and that of God.²⁹ Humans, limited in

their vision, can only offer palliative comments and vague statements of support and encouragement. God, however, cognizant of the past, present, and future, and of all their significance, is capable of expressing with absolute credibility that “all that God does is for the best.”³⁰

Accordingly, notes the *Sefat Emet*, God is labeled “*Ba'al Ha-Nechamot*,” the “Master of Comforts.”³¹

Thus, there may be another element to acts of kindness rooted in the command of *imitatio Dei*. We are bidden to imitate God’s qualities on two levels – first, by acting with kindness and mercy as He does, and further, by performing kindness in a manner that in itself strives to emulate the Divine, incorporating into its performance aspects particular to God. We tend to the needs of others as an expression of “Love your neighbor,” but beyond that, we aim to fulfill *imitatio Dei* by addressing these needs in a style influenced by the Divine.

Once again, this aspect is particularly highlighted in the context of *nichum avelim*. This *mitzvah* tends to the needs of the deceased as much as those of the living, and is thus comparable to the *chesed* of burial. The *midrash* states that Abraham was praised as having attained the qualities of God when he buried his wife Sarah.³² This is striking; Abraham, who performed so much kindness in his lifetime, receives singular commendation for an act that any relative, certainly any husband, would be expected to perform.

R. C.Y. Goldvicht suggests that the other services that Abraham provided to humanity were those for which one could expect reciprocity, and thus could be understood as part of a social

contract, recommended without necessarily being rooted in Divine influence.³³ Burial, however, an act of kindness to the departed, is a “*chesed shel emet*,” a pure, selfless act for which no reciprocity can be expected. Thus, it is a clear manifestation not of utilitarianism, but of Godliness.

Here, too, Divinity is evident not only in the performance of the act, but in the integration of a Godly perspective. To a human mind, life ends with death; no one remains to benefit from the kindness of a proper burial. However, to the Divine eye, there is a larger picture, and a wider world, wherein the departed continue to profit. Thus, it is specifically through such acts that God’s influence is manifest, guiding the hand of humanity and giving meaning and profundity to the human soul.

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Conclusion

The prophet Michah (6:8) declares that God asks three things of us: acting with justice, loving *chesed*, and walking humbly with God. This second task focuses on the love of *chesed* rather than the practice of *chesed*; we are bidden to absorb the principles of kindness and compassion, to make them breathe and speak and sing out to the world in a brilliant symphony of ever-increasing devotion and realization.³⁴ Loving *chesed* implies the realization that the degree to which one’s internal bond with the values of loving-kindness is strengthened is the measure of the Divine image within, and that that image becomes more defined and more realized with every gesture taken beyond oneself.

As we said when we began, *chesed* transcends a simple definition. It is a feeling to possess, an attitude to maintain, an action to perform, a personality to develop, a mindset to cultivate, a habit to acquire, a perspective to apply; it is mandatory and voluntary, basic and extraordinary, routine and outstanding all at once. It is a birthright and an inheritance, and yet it is actualized only through personal initiative and commitment. The Jewish mission is to bring this trait to life in all its manifestations, and to pursue every method and every opportunity to do so.

This essay was adapted from the introduction to this author’s *The Right and the Good: Halakhah and Human Relations*.

Endnotes

1. See R. Boruch Simon, *Imrei Boruch, Ki Tisa* #6.
2. *Avot* 1:2.
3. *Sotah* 14a.

4. *Da'at Torah*, Exodus, p. 297. Similarly, R. Natan Tzvi Finkel, the “Alter” of Slobodka, notes (*Or Ha-Tzafun* I, p. 107) that even though there are two other “supporting pillars” of the world, Torah and worship, the world was sustained before the Torah was given to the Jewish people and before the Temple was built. Apparently, the existence of *chesed* alone is enough to justify and sustain the world. See also *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, ch. 4.
5. *Avot* 3:17.
6. See also R. Shmuel Rozovsky, *Zikhron Shemuel, sichot*, p. 544 and R. Baruch Simon, *Imrei Barukh* to Exodus, introduction.
7. R. Yitzchak Isaac Breish, *Mi-Shemani Ha-Aretz, Sotah*, 69. For other interpretations of this passage, see *Shenei Luchot Ha-Brit, Pesachim, Ner Mitzvah*, 51 and R. Yehudah Lowe (Maharal) of Prague, *Netivot Olam, Netiv Gemilut Chasadim*, ch. 1. Concerning Maharal’s interpretation, see R. Elyakim Shlesinger, *Sichot Beit Av*, 66-67.
8. *Avodah Zarah* 17b. See *Netivot Olam*, *ibid.*, ch. 2.
9. *Sotah* 14a.
10. *Ahavat Chesed*, introduction. The sources he cites are Deut. 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 13:5; 19:9; 26:17; 28:9; and 30:16.
11. See also R. Herschel Schachter, *Nefesh Ha-Rav*, 59-71, for an exposition of the broad application of this mandate in the thought of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik.
12. *Bava Metziah* 30b.
13. According to *Rashi (Bava Kama 100a)*, this is a reference to Torah study; in his commentary to *Bava Metziah* 30b, he interprets this as a reference to learning the skills to earn a living.
14. *Shabbat* 133b.
15. *Orach Meisharim*, ch. 17, *Gemilut Chesed*, #1. See also ch. 3, *Ahavat Re'einu*, #7.
16. As R. Asher Anshel Katz notes, the Jews realized that they received compassion that they did not deserve during their salvation from Egypt, and they therefore committed themselves to extend similar compassion to those in comparable situations. *Va-Yaged Moshe*, Exodus, p. 165.
17. See R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, *He'arot Be-Massekhet Bava Metziah*, p. 123, who writes that Moshe’s acceptance of Yitro’s advice converted Yitro’s idea into a part of the Torah. Some *Rishonim* understand Yitro’s comments to be an expression of the commandment of *imitatio Dei*, rather than a separate source; see, for example, *Sefer Mitzvot Katan*, #47, who cites both verses as the source for the *mitzvah* of *chesed*.
18. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Aveil* 14:1. The notion that “Love your neighbor” creates a Biblical obligation of *chesed* is shared by other *Rishonim* as well, such as Rabbenu Yonah. See his commentary to *Berakhot* 3:2; see also *Tosefot Yom Tov*; R. Yerucham Fishel Perlow, *Biur to Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* of R. Sa’adiah Gaon, positive commandment 19; and *Arukh Ha-Shulchan, Choshen Mishpat* 426:3.
19. See, for example, R. Yitzchak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchak, Sukkot*, 21; R. Tzvi Shapiro, *Tziyyon Ha-Amudim to Sefer Mitzvot Katan*, 46; R. Yosef Roth, *Siach Yosef* III, 89; R. Chananyah Eizenbach, *Machaneh Yosef, Sotah*, #11; R. Mordechai Carlebach, *Chavatzelet Ha-Sharon al Ha-Torah*, Genesis, pp. 187-188 and 195-200. See also R. Yaakov Nisan Rosenthal, *Mishnat Ya’akov (Hilkhot De’ot 1:5-6)* and *Mishmanei Ha-Aretz to Sotah*, 68.
20. *Sefer Charedim, mitzvah* 18.
21. *Cherdat Kodesh on Sefer Charedim*, #74. One might question the necessity for this explanation by suggesting that the classification is appropriate because the *mitzvah* involves other aspects, in addition to action, that are clearly “heart dependent.” Note that *Cherdat Kodesh* cites *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol (Smag)*, 7, as stating that the directive of *imitatio Dei* mandates “to accomplish and to do;” this is apparently in disagreement with the above analysis.
22. *Shemonah Perakim* ch. 6. R. Yaakov Emden differs with Maimonides on this point (*Hagahot Ya’avetz on Shemonah Perakim*), as does the *Netziv*, specifically in this instance (*Herchev Davar, Gen. 27:1*).
23. *Gen. Rabbah* 54:2.
24. *Chiddushei Ha-Lev* on Genesis. See also *Or Ha-Nefesh*, cited in R. Moshe Avari, *Chokhmat Ha-Matzpun* (Genesis, vol. II, #314).
25. See *Rashi, Gen. 18:1*, citing *Bava Metziah* 86b.
26. See, for example, among many others, R. Eliyahu Meir Bloch, *Peninei Da’at*; R. David Kviat, *Sukkat David*; and R. Moshe Feinstein, *Darash Moshe*, all on Gen. 18:1.
27. *Or Ha-Tzafun* I, 234-236.
28. Quoted in the journal *Mesorah* V, 47.
29. *Asufat Ma’arakhot, Bereishit*, 47.
30. *Berakhot* 60b.
31. *Sefat Emet, Parshat Va-Yetze*, 5658.
32. *Gen. Rabbah*, 58:9.
33. *Asufat Ma’arakhot, Parshat Chayei Sarah*, pp. 287-290.
34. Accordingly, R. Yisrael Meir Ha-Kohen Kagan (1838-1933), known as the *Chafetz Chaim* (“He who desires life”) after the title of his well-known tract on the laws of prohibited speech, took the phrase *Ahavat Chesed* (“Love of *chesed*”) from the verse in *Michah* as the title of his work on the principles of acts of kindness.



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