

CHAYEI SARA  
AVRAHAM:  
CHESED TEMPERED BY DIN

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**Where Avraham Came From**

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The second *pasuk* of Parshas Chayei Sara tells us, “Sara died in Kiryas Arba, which is Chevron, in the Land of Canaan. Avraham came to eulogize Sara and to weep for her” (Bereishis 23:2).

The Midrash (Bereishis Rabba 57:5) asks: Where did Avraham come from? The Midrash records two opinions. Rabbi Levi says that he came from the funeral of his father, Terach, who had lived in Charan, very far from Chevron. Rabbi Yossi, on the other hand, says Avraham came from Har Hamoria. The Ramban suggests a third possibility: perhaps *vayavo* doesn’t necessarily mean Avraham came from another place, merely that he got involved. Probably, Ramban posits, Avraham was already in Chevron. But we see from the Midrash that Chazal see significance in the place and activity from which Avraham came to attend Sara’s funeral. What is this significance?

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## The Well-Rounded Personality— *Chesed and Din*

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The Shem Mishmuel's father, the first Sochachover Rebbe, says the Midrash is explaining something about Avraham. Avraham had the ability to move from one personality structure to another, from one *midda* to a different *midda*.

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

Hashem saw that the world needed two pillars, a balance between kindness and generosity on one side and structure, law, and limits on the other. Without limits, love will be perverted and applied inappropriately. The world needs kindness, goodness, generosity and love, but it also needs justice, fairness, correctness, and doing what's right.

In the initial stages of the formation of Klal Yisrael by its forefathers, Avraham was the pillar of *chesed*. *Chesed* is the foundation of the world (Tehillim 89:3). God created the world with amazing generosity. The world is very complicated and sophisticated, calibrated just so 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. The world as a whole thus functions on two levels: *chesed* and *din*.

In the original formation of the Jewish People, Hashem wanted the first Jew to be a man of *chesed*. Avraham looked for goodness in everything. He even prayed for and saw goodness

in the people of Sedom, who were criminals and scoundrels. It is possible that Avraham sanctioned Lot's move to Sedom because he thought that Lot had a chance of reaching out to and teaching its citizens. Avraham saw goodness in every person.

This is a strong element of Chassidic thought. The Baal Shem Tov—and later, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev—believed that beneath the surface of every Jew is a pure core. The essence of a Jewish person is only good. One 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 immutable Torah law. The Aseres Hadibros, the first public communication of God's commandments, were engraved in stone. This symbolizes 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 moral teachings of the Torah therefore are totally intertwined with *halacha*, the laws of the Torah.

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

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### **Avraham Successfully Integrated *Din* into His Life**

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Even though Avraham embodied *chesed*, Hashem saw that Avraham also had to be touched by *din*. If Avraham espoused only 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 Avraham to kill his son for no apparent reason, the antithesis of *chesed*. God challenged Avraham to obey His will no matter what, even if he didn't understand it.

Avraham succeeded, acting with alacrity and willingness because of his great love of God. He proved his ability to switch modes from *chesed* to *din* just because Hashem had commanded him to do so. Because his love of God was even more fundamental than his *chesed*, Avraham bowed his head and submitted himself to the Divine command even though it was against his essential personal philosophy. By doing so, he bridged *chesed* and *din*.

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### The Significance of Where Avraham Came From

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Now we can understand what the Torah means when it says “*vayavo Avraham*.” Avraham came to Sarah's funeral from the Akeida. A funeral is an act of pure *chesed*. After all, the dead person cannot reciprocate the kindness that people do for him as his life has ended. Avraham performed pure *chesed* by caring for Sara's funeral and burial. Avraham convinced the children of Cheis to sell him the burial plot, 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 Sarah.

The other opinion in the Midrash maintains that Avraham came from Terach's funeral. When Avraham buried Terach, he went through a similar transition. He felt obligated to act due to the law of respect for one's parent, *din*. Avraham had to make the trip to Charan even though he and Terach disagreed ideologically.

Even though there are sources that say Terach did *teshuva* (see Rashi to Bereishis 15:15), others say that he still was an idolater when he died. Nonetheless, Avraham traveled to the funeral in Charan because the *din of kibud av* demanded it of him.

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### Applications for Our Own Lives

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All of us have our own personal emphasis on *chesed* or *din*. Some of us lean towards *chesed* and some towards *din*. Sometimes, however, we have to take on a *midda* other than the one we are used to. Even a *ba'al chesed* must sometimes be strict. A teacher needs to fail certain students and to give others a low grade. These are expressions of *middas hadin*.

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

One example is the workplace. The employer sets rules and expects productivity from his employees. This is *din*. But he must also show kindness and appreciation to his employees, giving 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 *tzaddik*, does much more than fulfill his legal obligations. He does whatever he can so that his employer's endeavors should succeed. This is *chesed*.

In friendships, as well, we must 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. This is *din*.

This point applies to raising children also. In the latter half of the 20th century, it became popular for parents to use the *midda* of *chesed*. Parents were kind, generous, and loving, probably as a reaction to earlier ideas of child-rearing 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 21st 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 healthy, nutritious food to stay balanced.

In Chassidus, milk is a food of *chesed*, while meat is representative of *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 taking a life. It is red, the color symbolizing justice. While both dairy and meat are delicious, eating only one or the other will cause dangerously high 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 lenient, and sometimes we have to be strict. 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*.

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### ***Chesed and Din in Marriage***

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In marriage, too, we need a combination of *chesed* and *din*. The marriages of our *avos* and *imahos* exhibited this mixture. Avraham was *chesed*, while Sara was *din*. In the next generation, Yitzchak

embodied *din*, while Rivka personified *chesed*. The *chesed* of marriage requires being gentle and loving towards one's spouse and interpreting his or her behavior as stemming from good intentions. Yet *din* is also a necessary aspect of marriage. Each spouse has *halachic* responsibilities, including financial as well as domestic obligations.

During the search for a spouse, we look to develop a *chesed*-based relationship. We want to give the impression of generosity and kindness. 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 *halacha*. When the *halacha* is clear, it is relatively easy to implement. Many areas of our lives, however, are not explicitly legislated in the Shulchan Aruch or other works of *halacha*. We must 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 tools in creating the world, and He still uses both methods to run it. *Chesed* and *din* are fundamental to human relationships personalities. Our challenge is to strike the right balance between the two.

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### How Avraham Dealt with Sara's Funeral

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When Avraham was dealing with the funeral and burial of Sara, he must have felt an incredible sense of loss. They had been married for at least fifty-two years, probably for even more than seventy. At her death, she was 127. She gave birth to their only child when she was ninety, and at sixty-five years old she came to Israel with Avraham. She was Avraham's 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 Sara's death and burial, the Torah says that Avraham

was old (Bereishis 24:1). But he was already old before her death—he was 137! Up until her death, however, the Torah never says that he was old, because he was spiritually young and energetic. As long as Sara was alive, he felt youthful. But 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 to one woman for a long time. 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 on himself. Instead, he focused on who she was and on the world's loss. That is why the Hebrew word *v'livkosa*, meaning to weep, is written in the Torah with a small *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 considering his own interests. It was God's will, so Avraham ignored his own interests. He behaved in a similar fashion at Sara's funeral.

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### **How to Care for Ourselves with *Chesed* and *Din***

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Avraham's actions are a lesson for us. We are human, and 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 ourselves but to do so in the Torah way. We are responsible for our well-being. But we have to watch out for the element of greed that ego and selfishness encourage. Ironically, in order to do what is right for us, we sometimes must 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. Yes,



we should be kind to ourselves, but we also must be objective and fair.

We can't expect everyone to be like Avraham. But we can 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.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. When did Avraham twice perform *din*?
2. Give two examples of Avraham performing *chesed*.

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## PERSONAL QUESTIONS

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1. Give two examples of pure *chesed* you have done in your life.
2. Give two examples of pure *din* that you have done in your life.
3. Give two examples where you combined *chesed* with *din*.

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## EXERCISES

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1. For one week, keep a log of your acts of *chesed*, acts of *din*, and acts that combine both.
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 given the 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*?

*Answers and Exercises*

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# *Answers and Exercises*

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