

Parashat Behar

Brothers in Arms and Alms

Two terms appear throughout the Torah to refer to a fellow Jew: *re'a* (רֵעַ) and *ach* (אָח). The first is a general term for one's fellow man or friend. The second most narrowly refers to a biological brother, and more broadly refers to kin.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik firmly believed that the Torah's diction is precise. In passages concerning civil or criminal law, the Torah uses *re'a*. "You shall not covet your fellow's house (בֵּית רֵעֶךָ)" (Exodus 20:14) and "You shall not pull back your neighbor's landmark (גְּבוּל רֵעֶךָ)" (Deuteronomy 19:14). The Torah chooses a more impersonal term here because one must respect the rights, space, and property of one's fellow man.

It is specifically in contexts that are meant to evoke our fraternity that the Torah selects *ach* over *re'a*. In a loose sense the Jewish people are all related, but the use of the term is intended to remind us that we should treat each other like brothers. We are not only neighbors who happen to have bought houses on the same block and share a border, but close family. This powerful reminder is necessary, for example, in contexts of *tzedakah*, where the Torah consistently uses *ach*. In *Parashat Behar*, we read: "If your fellow (אָחִיר) becomes destitute and his hand falters beside you, you shall support him..." (Leviticus 25:35).¹ To appeal to our neighborliness or acquaintanceship would not rouse us to do what needs doing. If charity begins at home, then our nuclear family ought to include more brothers and sisters.²

In addition, *Parashat Behar* has the line "that your brother (אָחִיר) might live with you" (Leviticus 25:36), which is used by Rabbi Akiva as a proof-text in the following case. If two men are stranded in the desert and only one has a canteen with enough water for himself, what should he do? Ben Petura said better to share it so that neither has to see the other die of thirst. Rabbi Akiva opined that the owner should drink it and save his own life. Why? Because your brother should live *with* you. You need not help him at the cost of your own life.³ The Rav emphasized the choice of *ach* here. Although Rabbi Akiva says that you should save yourself, you should bear in mind that this person is like your brother and feel what he is going through.⁴

True Friends

The Rav and the renowned philanthropist Joseph Gruss were close confidants. Mr. Gruss became one of the greatest supporters of Yeshiva University and pledged to build a campus in Yerushalayim. The pledge had a rider, however: the Rav would have to commit to

¹ See also Deuteronomy 15:7.

² Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership*, 155.

³ *Bava Metzia* 62a.

⁴ Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed*, 146.

teach there in its inaugural year. In the end, the Rav decided that he would not be able to honor such a commitment.⁵

Following this episode, the two ended up on a dais at a major dinner. When the Rav rose to speak, he prefaced his formal talk with some remarks on friendship. He said that in Biblical Hebrew two different words can refer to a friend. One is *re'a*, the word for one's fellow man, and the second is *yedid*. He noted that the first is noncommittal with regard to the long-term. The *re'a* can be a fair-weather friend, or, worse, can stab you in the back: "If a man shall act intentionally against his fellow (רֵעֵהוּ) to murder him with guile..." (Exodus 21:14), the Torah says. The *yedid*, on the other hand, is a true friend whose friendship does not sour with age. "Joseph Gruss and I are true *yedidim*," declared the Rav.⁶

A More Perfect Society

In 1943, the Rav delivered his second *yahrzeit* lecture for his father, Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik. In the course of the lecture, he analyzed the difference between two terms for groups in the Torah that both appear in Numbers 10: *machaneh* and *edah*. The *machaneh*, he explained, is a shared encampment. People band together to protect themselves from the elements, animals, and other bellicose human beings. Animals do much the same, instinctively seeking safety in numbers. The *edah*, on the other hand, congregates not out of fear, anxiety, or weakness, but for a common constructive goal. "An *edah* is founded on a shared tradition and legacy with roots in antiquity and branches reaching forward to the end of days."⁷ The Rav challenged those assembled not merely to unite in times of fear and uncertainty as a *machaneh*, but to make common cause and transform into a spiritual *edah*.

Perhaps these two insights of the Rav can be correlated. In a *machaneh*, the pragmatic arrangement means that individuals treat one another as a *re'a*, as partners and allies for a time. When the danger or shared need passes, the community disintegrates. In an *edah*, the members are so aligned that they care for one another like an *ach*, like family.

The Torah expects us to be an *edah* and act like family. We are enjoined to help our fellow if his animal is struggling under a burden (Exodus 23:5), in order to alleviate any pain the animal is experiencing. We need not head out to the country to observe this mitzvah, exclaimed the Rav, as it is even more applicable when a fellow Jew is struggling under a burden!⁸ The burden need not even be physical; an emotional burden can be much more

⁵ Mr. Gruss eventually built the campus anyway. It is known today as the Gruss Institute and houses a rabbinical seminary.

⁶ Adler, *Seventy Conversations*, 118–121. The word *yedid* appears only once in the Torah, in Deuteronomy 33:12. The noun might perhaps be a reduplicative of *yad*, the word for hand, since one hand clasps the other in a close friendship.

⁷ Rabbi Basil Herring, "Rav Soloveitchik on the Proper Response to Resurgent Anti-Semitism," <https://www.torahmusings.com/2020/01/rav-soloveitchik-on-the-proper-response-to-resurgent-anti-semitism/> (accessed August 8, 2021).

⁸ The Rav pointed out that this is the only injunction in the Torah that is expressed in a rhetorical question. Is it possible that a Jew would be so insensitive as not to help? (*Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 2:209).

crushing. The Torah wants us to help shoulder every kind of burden borne by those around us.⁹

Building an Edah

The Rav is probably best known for his unparalleled brilliance and complete dedication to teaching Torah. One of his defining life achievements, though, was his founding, organizing, and running of the Maimonides school in Boston.¹⁰ He spent a significant portion of his time and energy on building a school for his community, so that children could be educated in an Orthodox setting when private day school was not a given.¹¹ This pursuit certainly required that he set aside his learning for the sake of providing for others. The Rav himself considered this so important that prior to undergoing a serious surgery, he called his children to his side and said that he felt he had secured his place in the next world in the merit of founding the school (and in the merit of studying Torah with his children and supporting a certain widow).¹²

The Rav's sense of reaching all our brothers and sisters went considerably beyond his immediate communities in Boston or New York City. In the early 1970s, Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis was planning an innovative, powerful outreach event at Madison Square Garden. She sought the blessings of three leaders of the generation: Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, and the Rav. The first two offered their warm blessings, but the third began by declaring that he did not generally dispense blessings. Instead, he formulated his words as advice rather than a blessing: "Nobody will be able to stop you." He then suggested that the open corridors of the large complex be lined with booths presenting various mitzvot—tefillin, mezuzah, Shabbat. Rebbetzin Jungreis loved the idea, and the Rav promised that his students would come help that night, which they did. Such was his sense of the extended *edah* that is the Jewish people.¹³

Exploring the Rav's Insight

Rabbi Aaron Adler, a close student of the Rav, heard that the Rav was donating sixty percent of his money to charity. This seems halachically questionable, as the Talmud

⁹ Holzer, *The Rav Thinking Aloud: Bereishis*, 69–71. See *Sefer ha-Chinuch*, §80, which similarly says that compassion is at the root of this mitzvah, and "it goes without saying that not only are we obligated to have compassion on anyone in physical pain, but even on someone in distress over financial loss."

¹⁰ Even before the school was established, he would join his father before Pesach to buy matzah for the Jewish children then attending public school, given the lack of available alternative (S1 EP5, the Rav: A Conversation with Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0LE6TOHIRM>).

¹¹ See Farber, *American Orthodox Dreamer*.

¹² Rabbi Daniel Fridman, "Philosophy of the Rav: 25th Yahrzeit," yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/894636/rabbi-daniel-fridman/philosophy-of-the-rav-majesty-and-humility/ (accessed August 8, 2021).

¹³ Seltzer, *The Rebbetzin*, 63–65.

indicates an upper limit of twenty percent.¹⁴ Rabbi Adler summoned the courage to ask the Rav if there was any truth to this rumor. The Rav wittily quoted a verse: “There is no righteous person on earth who does the right thing and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). He added, “I didn’t want to make Shlomo ha-Melech into a liar!” He then said that when he dies he will answer for the terrible charge of overspending on charity with a smile, entering the plea “guilty as charged”! He then explained that his expenses were minimal, and that he saw himself as an agent of God to help others in need.¹⁵

Chesed, the Rav believed, entails going to the extreme for others. This can be found in the word itself, which can’t always mean “lovingkindness” since incest is also described as *chesed* (Leviticus 20:17). Based on the Rambam, the Rav understood *chesed* to mean extreme behavior, whether for good or for ill.¹⁶

The Rav’s extraordinary generosity in looking out and after others partly came from his illustrious lineage. He told the following about his grandfather:

Rabbi Meir Berlin (1880–1949) once told me that he asked his grandfather, Rabbi Yechiel Michel ha-Levi Epstein (1829–1908), the author of the *Aruch ha-Shulchan*, what was the role of the rabbi. He answered, to decide questions of Jewish law. Rabbi Meir Berlin asked the same question of my grandfather Reb Chaim [Brisker]. He said that for guidance in Jewish law, one may go to the *dayan* (rabbinical judge). However, the main role of the rabbi is to help the needy, protect the persecuted, defend the widow, and sustain orphans. In a word, it is acts of lovingkindness (*gemilut chasadim*). The truth is that the acts of Reb Chaim in these areas were fantastic. Stories abound about the illegitimate children whom he adopted, provided for, and sent to cheder. You all know how he helped the Bundist revolutionary on Yom Kippur. He saved his life.

There was no greater *ba’al chesed* (person who does kindnesses) than my grandfather, Reb Chaim Brisker. As a matter of fact, my father and my uncle insisted that the attribute of *rav ha-chesed* (master of benevolence) be inscribed on his tombstone. This was contrary to Reb Chaim’s wishes in his testament that no titles be inscribed on his monument. They felt that this was the dominant feature of Reb Chaim’s personality. In my opinion, as a *chesed* personality Reb Chaim towered above his intellectual personality.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Ketubot* 50a.

¹⁵ Adler, *Seventy Conversations*, 164–165. The Rav certainly was on firm halachic ground, as the *Chafetz Chayim* in his *Ahavat Chesed* (ch. 20) lists several exceptions to the “one-fifth” limitation. Among them is one who actively supports Torah study, for his reward is substantial. It is known that the Rav gave significant donations to his Maimonides school and to his uncle’s yeshiva in Jerusalem. See Adler, *Seventy Conversations*, 163.

¹⁶ See *Moreh Nevuchim*, III:53.

¹⁷ Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, 1:193–194.