



Passing the Torch: Insights from the Future Leaders of the Jewish Community

Rav Chessed and the Job of the Rabbi

“What is the job of a rabbi?” This is a question that was once posed to three *gedolei hador* — Rav Itzele Petterburger, Rav Yechiel Michel Epstein and Rav Chaim Soloveitchik.

Rav Itzele responded that a rabbi’s job is to spread Torah in *Klal Yisrael*; the rabbi is responsible for teaching Tanach and Mishnah, and for establishing regular *shiurim* in Gemarah and Halachah. Rav Yechiel Michel answered that the rabbi’s job is to rule on halachic matters and to be available to answer the questions of his community. Rav Chaim, however, responded somewhat differently. Rav Chaim answered that the job of a rabbi is to do *chedsed* — to empathize with the trials and tribulations of each and every Jew and to be an active participant in acts of kindness towards others.

At first glance, Rav Chaim’s response appears to be somewhat surprising. While Rav Itzele and Rav Yechiel Michel’s responses focused on what most of us would instinctively believe to be the principal responsibility of a rabbi — ensuring widespread Torah learning

and providing halachic guidance to the community — Rav Chaim takes a whole different approach. What is it about doing *chedsed* and showing compassion to others that, in Rav Chaim’s opinion, makes it the defining characteristic of the “job” of the rabbi and community leader?

The Rishonim (see Rambam, *Sefer HaMitzvos, Mitzvas Aseh 8, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 611*) count the *mitzvas aseh* of “*v’halachta b’drachav*” (*Devarim 28:9*), the *mitzvah* to emulate Hashem and follow in His ways among the 613 *mitzvos*. What does it mean to emulate Hashem and follow in His ways? Chazal (*Shabbos 133b, Sota 14a*) specifically highlight the *chedsed* of HaKadosh Baruch Hu — “*ma hu chanun v’rachum*,” just as Hashem is compassionate and merciful, “*af atah heyei chanun v’rachum*,” so, too, we are supposed to be compassionate and merciful. “*Ma hu malbish arumim... af atah halbeish arumim*” — just as Hashem clothes those who are without clothing, so, too, you should clothe those who are without clothing. “*HaKadosh Baruch Hu biker cholim... af atah baker cholim*” — just as HaKadosh Baruch Hu visits the sick, so, too, you should visit the sick.



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“*HaKadosh Baruch Hu nichem avelim... af atah nachem aveilim*” — HaKadosh Baruch Hu consoles mourners, so, too, you should console mourners. “*HaKadosh Baruch Hu kavar maisim... af atah k’vor maisim*” — HaKadosh Baruch Hu buries the dead, so, too, you should bury the dead.

We see from Chazal that the way to emulate HaKadosh Baruch Hu is by showing compassion, having mercy and

doing chessed. Each individual must emulate Hashem in this way, but Jewish leaders and rabbis especially must be “*domeh la'malach Hashem*” (Moed Katan 17a, Chagigah 15b) and act properly (see Rambam, *Hilchos Talmud Torah* 4:1). In fact, this quality, according to the Alter of Kelm, Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv (*Chochma U'Mussar* 1:3), was the quality, which made Moshe Rabbeinu fit to be the first leader and “rabbi,” of *Klal Yisrael*.

The Torah in Parshas Shemos records three stories about Moshe Rabbeinu, which teach us about Moshe Rabbeinu's essence and what made him fit to lead the Jewish people. The first event occurred when Moshe left Pharaoh's palace and witnessed an Egyptian man striking a Jewish slave. The Torah (Shemos 2:11-12) tells us:

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסַבְלֹתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מַכֶּה אִישׁ עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו. וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּדְּף אֶת הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל.

And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe had grown up, he went out to his brethren and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brothers. He looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he struck down the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.

The very next passuk in the Torah (ibid 2:13) records the second episode:

וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי וַהֲנִה שְׁנַי אֲנָשִׁים עֹבְרִים נְצִים וַיֹּאמֶר לְרִשְׁע לְמָה תִּכֶּה רֵעִי.

He went out the second day, and there were two Hebrew men fighting and he said to the wicked one: “Why are you hitting your friend?”

Then the Torah records that Moshe fled to Midian to escape Pharaoh who attempted to kill him and sat by a well (ibid 2:15). The Torah (ibid 2:16-19) then records a third incident involving Moshe:

וּלְכַהֵן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַ בָּנוֹת וַתִּבְאֵנָה וַתִּדְלְגָה וַתִּמְלֹאנָה אֶת הָרְהָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן. וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרֹעִים וַיִּנְרְשׂוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשֶׁעַן וַיִּשְׁק אֶת צֹאנָם. וַתִּבְאֵנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִדּוּעַ מִהֲרַתָּן בָּא הַיּוֹם. וַתֹּאמְרָן אִישׁ מִצְרִי הִצִּילָנוּ מִיַּד הָרֹעִים וְגַם דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁק אֶת הַצֹּאן.

The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. But shepherds came and drove them off. Moshe rose to their defense, and he watered their flock. And when they returned to their father, Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come back so soon today?” And they answered, “An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.”

The Alter of Kelm says that from these three stories we see who Moshe was as a person and why he was chosen as the leader of the Jewish people. Moshe stood up against injustice and showed compassion for individuals in their times

of need. Moshe saved a Jew from an Egyptian who was oppressing him, he protected another Jew from someone who was hitting him and defended the daughters of Yisro from the shepherds by the well and gave water to their animals. Moshe saw people who were struggling and came to help them manage their difficulties. Ultimately, in each of these instances, Moshe emulated HaKadosh Baruch Hu, he did chessed for people in their times of need and stood up against injustice. It was for that reason that he was fit to be the leader of the Jewish people.

Being a rabbi and Jewish leader requires one to emulate HaKadosh Baruch Hu and be compassionate and merciful towards others, something that Moshe Rabbeinu exemplified. This is certainly something that Rav Chaim did as well. Rav Chaim was not only famous for the Torah that he taught, which he must also have believed to be part of the responsibility of a rabbi, but for his legendary acts of chessed and the compassion he showed for others, memorialized on his tombstone as, “*Rav HaChessed Sar HaTorah*.”

May we follow in the ways of HaKadosh Baruch and learn from great leaders like Moshe Rabbeinu and Rav Chaim and fulfill our duty as rabbis and leaders not only by teaching Torah and answering questions, but by doing chessed with those who are in need of our help in whatever context we may find ourselves in.

