

KINDNESS IS PRICELESS

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As a boy, Howard Kelly (1858-1943) went door to door selling goods to pay for his education. On one of his outings, Howard became very hungry and didn't have enough money to pay for a meal so he decided to knock on a door and ask for food. When the young woman answered, he became distracted and asked for water instead of food. Seeing that he looked famished, she gave him a large glass of milk. He offered to pay her, but she responded "Mother has taught us never to accept pay for a kindness." Years later, Dr. Howard Kelly was a world famous surgeon in a major hospital. A woman was admitted with a rare disease. Dr. Kelly discovered that it was the woman who gave him the glass of milk. He personally took care of her and helped her battle the disease. After her recovery, she received an envelope from the hospital, thinking it would be a bill that would take her a lifetime to pay off. Instead it said "Paid in full with one glass of milk," (signed) Dr. Howard Kelly.

We have all been faced with decisions whether to perform certain acts of kindness. Should those decisions be influenced by who the recipient is, what they have done for us recently or what we can gain from helping them?

Let's look at the following scenarios:

CASE ONE

Liz helps Shoshana out frequently, so when Liz asks Shoshana to help Liz study for a test tomorrow, she is faced with a dilemma. She has been waiting for an opportunity to help Liz, but she knows that Liz is not very studious and Shoshana's own grade might suffer as a result. What should she do?

CASE TWO

The Kleins have hosted the Cohens a number of times for Shabbat meals and haven't received a return invitation, though the Cohens frequently host other Shabbat guests. The Klein children have been asking their parents to invite the Cohens again. Should the lack of reciprocity affect their decision?

CASE THREE

Every Friday afternoon, the students of room 206 are responsible to set up the room for the congregation that uses it on Shabbat and each week Shmuel doesn't help. His classmate Shimon, while rushing to class, notices Shmuel trying to hang up a large banner and it looks like could use some help. If it was someone else, Shimon would try to help, even though he would be a little late for class. However, he feels that he might be justified in not helping since Shmuel never helps on Fridays. May he excuse himself on the basis of Shmuel's previous misdeeds?

Examining the sources

Do we owe someone when they do us a favor?

We can learn an important lesson about exchanging favors from Moshe Rabbeinu and Yitro:

The priest of Midyan had seven daughters. They came, drew and filled the troughs to water their father's cattle. The shepherds then came and chased them away and Moshe arose, saved them and watered their cattle. They came to Re'uel (Yitro), their father, and he said "why were you so quick to come today?" They said "an Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds and he also drew water for us and watered the cattle." He said to his daughters "Where is he? Why did you leave this man? Call him and let him eat bread."

Shemot 2:16-20

וְלָכֶּהּן מִדִּין שְׁבַע בָּנוֹת וַתְּבַאנָה וַתְּדַלְּנָה
וַתִּמְלֶאנָה אֶת הַרְקָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבֵיהֶן.
וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרֹעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשִׁיעַן
וַיִּשְׁק אֶת צֹאנָם. וַתְּבַאנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל אֲבֵיהֶן
וַיֹּאמֶר מִדּוּעַ מְהֵרָתֶן בָּא הַיּוֹם. וַתֹּאמְרֶינּוּ אִישׁ
מִצְרָיִם הִצִּילֵנוּ מִיַּד הָרֹעִים וְגַם דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ
וַיִּשְׁק אֶת הַצֹּאן. וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל בָּנֹתָיו וַאֲיֹ לָמָּה
זֶה עָזַבְתֶּן אֶת הָאִישׁ קְרָאֵן לוֹ וַיֹּאכֵל לֶחֶם.

שמות ב:טז-כ

Yitro was grateful for Moshe's act of kindness and demanded that he be repaid. However, this is not the end of the story. When Moshe Rabbeinu is told to leave Yitro's house to save the Jewish people, he first asks Yitro's permission to leave. (Shemot 4:18) Why did he need to do this? The Midrash explains:

When God told [Moshe] "Now go and I will send you to Pharaoh," Moshe said "Master of the Universe, I can't because Yitro has taken me in, opened his home for me and I am like a son to him. If one opens the door for a friend, there is a debt of gratitude."

Shemot Rabbah, Parasha no. 4

בשעה שאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא "ועתה לכה ואשלחך אל פרעה" אמר לו רבון העולם איני יכול מפני שקבלני יתרו ופתח לי ביתו ואני עמו כבן, ומי שהוא פותח פתחו לחברו נפשו חייב לו.

שמות רבה פרשה ד'

Question for the Table

- Yitro took Moshe into his house in order to repay Moshe for saving his daughters. Why, then, did Moshe feel indebted to Yitro? Weren't they now considered even, neither one owing anything to the other?
- Did Moshe really need to ask permission of Yitro? Isn't saving the entire Jewish people more important than showing gratitude?

Moshe Rabbeinu may not have been obligated to ask permission to leave, but someone with Moshe Rabbeinu's sense of gratitude couldn't leave without asking permission.

R. Eliyahu Dessler explains the concept of gratitude:

Someone whose nature is to be a giver feels in their heart that they don't want a free gift because they are driven only to give [not receive] ... Therefore, when they receive something from a friend, they will feel a desire to pay for it and if they can't do that, they will feel indebted and this is what is called "thanksgiving"

Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Vol. I 46-47

הנותן ירגיש בלבבו אשר לא יחפוץ במתנות חנם, כי שאיפתו היא רק ליתן ... על כן כאשר יגיע אליו דבר מאת רעהו יתעורר בו הרצון לשלם עבורו, ואם לא יוכל לעשות זאת, לבו ירגיש בחובת התשלומין- וזו היא אשר נקרא לה בשם הודאה.

מכתב מאליהו חלק א' עמ' 46-47

Questions for the Table

- How do you think R. Dessler's comments answer the two questions presented above (regarding Moshe Rabbeinu asking permission to go to Egypt)?
- The Hebrew word for giving is *natan* (נתן), a palindrome, implying that when we give, we also receive. How does this idea relate to R. Dessler's comments?
- How can this discussion help Shoshana from case #1 make her decision? If Shoshana says no, are there other ways to show her gratitude?
- What motivates us to perform acts of kindness?

There is a verse in Micha that stresses the importance of performing acts of kindness:

He has told you, humankind, what is good and what God wants from you, but to do justice and love of kindness, and walk modestly with your God.

Micha 6:8

הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה ה' דורש ממך כי אם
עשות משפט ואהבת חסד ורחמים לכת עם
אלקיך.
מיכה ו:ח

R. Yisrael M. Kagan notes that "love of kindness" seems out of place. Why doesn't the verse simply say "to do justice and kindness"?

It says "love of kindness" and not "to do justice and kindness" ... Because even though we all perform acts of kindness, we do so because we are forced. For example, we might perform kindness because someone asks us one or two times for a favor and it is difficult to continue to come up with excuses ... "Love of kindness," means that a person should have love for the value of kindness. One shouldn't think that just because they occasionally perform acts of kindness that they have completely fulfilled their requirement ... When it comes to kindness, a person who has love for this value will exert all effort to find any opportunity to perform kindness and will do so generously.

Ahavat Chesed, Vol. II, Chapter 1

ומה שאמר ואהבת חסד ולא אמר כי אם עשות משפט וחסד .. כי אף שכולנו עושין חסד אבל ענין החסד שלנו הוא רק מצד ההכרח דהיינו כשהאיש העלוב הצריך להחסד הוא בא אצלנו פעם אחת ושתים וקשה להשתמט ממנו אז אנו עושין עמו חסד ואהבת חסד רוצה לומר שלא תחשוב בנפשך שבזה שאתה עושה לפעמים חסד אתה יוצא בזה בשלימות כי אם שהאדם צריך להיות לו אהבה למדה זו של חסד ... בענין זה של חסד כשאדם יהיה לו אהבה למדה זו יהיה מחפש בכל כחו איך לעשות חסד עם חבריו וגם יעשה בכל בעין יפה.
אהבת חסד חלק ב' פרק א'

Questions for the Table

- According to R. Kagan, how does our drive to perform acts of kindness affect the way we perform them? How does it affect whom we choose to be the beneficiaries of our kindness?
- How can one apply R. Kagan's insight to case #2? What other factors should be involved in the Kleins' decision?

How should we treat those who aren't as kind?

The Torah presents a series of mitzvot relating to how we treat others:

Do not hate your brother in your heart, rebuke your fellow and do not bear iniquity because of him. Do not take revenge and do not bear a grudge against your people and you shall love your neighbor like yourself, I am God.

Vayikra 19:17-18

לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך הוכח
תוכיח את עמיתך ולא תשא עליו
חטא. לא תקם ולא תטר את בני
עמך ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני ה'.
ויקרא יט:יז-יח

Ramban explains the progression of these verses:

The verse states, "do not hate your brother in your heart," for wronging you. You should, however, rebuke [and say], "why did you do this to me," and "do not bear iniquity" by concealing your hatred in your heart without expressing it. [By] rebuking, you will either get an explanation for their action or will encourage them to repent, admit their wrongdoing, and atone for their action. The verse continues to warn against taking revenge for what was done to you and from bearing a grudge, as it is possible that while you won't hate [your fellow], you may still remember their malicious action. Therefore, [the Torah] warns us to erase the mistake and wrongdoing from your heart. This is followed by [the Torah's] commandment to love your neighbor like yourself.

Ramban, Vayikra 19:17

ויאמר הכתוב, אל תשנא את אחיך בלבבך בעשותו לך שלא כרצונך, אבל תוכיחנו מדוע ככה עשית עמדי, ולא תשא עליו חטא לכסות שנאתו בלבך ולא תגיד לו, כי בהוכיחך אותו יתנצל לך, או ישוב ויתודה על חטאו ותכפר לו. ואחרי כן יזהיר שלא תנקום ממנו ולא תטור בלבבך מה שעשה לך, כי יתכן שלא ישנא אותו אבל יזכור החטא בלבבו, ולפיכך יזהירנו שימחה פשע אחיו וחטאתו מלבו. ואחרי כן יצוה שיאהב לו כמוהו.
רמב"ן ויקרא יט:יז

According to Ramban, if someone does something wrong to us, and we keep it inside, we can violate the prohibition against hating someone else or against bearing a grudge. While we are working out our issues with someone who has wronged us are we justified in withholding kindness from them?

If you see the donkey of your enemy having trouble with its load are you not going to help him? You should certainly help him.

Shemot 23:5

כִּי תִרְאֶה חֲמֹר שֶׁנֶּאֱדָר רֵבִיז תַּחַת מְשָׂאוֹ וְחִדְלָתָּ מֵעֹזֵב לוֹ עֹזֵב תֵּעֲזֹב עִמּוֹ.
שמות כג:ה

The verse states that we must even help people we despise if their donkey is having trouble with its load. R. Menachem Meiri extends this idea to all acts of kindness:

Hate for another person should never be a reason to withhold any type of kindness from them as it states "Do not hate your brother in your heart."

Beit HaBechira, Yoma 75a

לעולם לא תהא שנאת אדם מונעתו מלהטיב לחבירו בכל מה שאפשר לו להיטיב והוא שנאמר לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך.
בית הבחירה, יומא עה.

Questions for the Table

- "Love your neighbor like yourself" is the source of our obligation to perform acts of kindness. How can one apply Meiri's comments to the progression developed by Ramban?
- How would you apply Ramban's and Meiri's comments to case #3? What would be the best way for Shimon to bring up his issue with Shmuel?

R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Shiurim L'Zecher Abba Mari*, Vol. II (pg. 170)¹ teaches that our obligation to emulate God (Devarim 28:9) is not limited to emulating His good deeds. We must also try to emulate His attributes by being good natured people whose kindness and generosity is compulsive. This is the message that we learned from R. Dessler and R. Kagan who stress the focus of becoming givers and loving acts of kindness. When we incorporate these lessons, we are above all calculations, rewards and retributions and we are able to perform the most noble acts of kindness like the ones performed by Moshe Rabbeinu and Yitro and by Dr. Kelly.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953) was born in Latvia. He moved to London in 1928 to help his ailing father and held a number of rabbinic positions there. In the late 1940's, he moved to Israel and became spiritual leader (*mashgiach ruchani*) of the Ponevezh Yeshiva. His *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* on Jewish thought and ethics, is widely studied in many yeshivot.

R. Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838-1933) is known to many as "The Chafetz Chaim" after his famous work on the laws of slander. He spent most of his life in Radin, Belarus, where he established a yeshiva. He authored many works, most notably *Mishna Berurah*, which is considered by many to be the authoritative work on Jewish law relating to daily life.

R. Moshe ben Nachman (also known as Ramban and Nachmanides, 1194-1270) was a leader of Spanish Jewry during his time. He wrote many works including a commentary on the Torah and a commentary on the Talmud. In his later years, he moved to Israel and established a synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem, which exists to the present day.

R. Menachem Meiri (1249-1306) was a Spanish scholar. He is most well known for his Beit HaBechirah, a commentary on the Talmud. He was heavily influenced by the teachings of Rambam.

R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was born in Pruzhan, Poland, the son of Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, and grandson of Rabbi Chaim HaLevi. In 1932, he moved to America and settled in Boston. He founded Yeshivat Rambam—the Maimonides School—and delivered weekly shiurim there for many years. In 1941, he succeeded his father, upon the latter's passing, as rosh yeshiva at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (Yeshiva University), commuting from Boston to New York each week for over four decades. His shiurim in halachah and aggadah, which reached to the ends of the Jewish world, made a profound impact on Torah learning in our times. He was known by many as "The Rav" to connote that he was his generation's quintessential teacher of Torah, ordaining more rabbis than any other in his generation.

¹ See also R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Community" *Tradition* Vol. 17 no. 2 (1978) pg. 22.