

MAKING TIME FOR CHESED

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The story is told of the Rebbe of Nimarov who would disappear for many hours each day during the days leading up to Yom Kippur. His chasidim (followers) didn't know where he went during these days and they speculated that he actually went up to the heavens to pray for his people. There was a Lithuanian Jew in town who was very skeptical and suspicious of the rebbe's activities. He wondered how the rebbe can just disappear during this very important time of prayer and repentance, so he decided to follow the rebbe. What he discovered was the rebbe would dress up as a peasant, go to the forest, chop wood and sell it to the poor for very cheap. The skeptical Lithuanian Jew went on to admire the rebbe greatly and when he heard the chasidim saying that their rebbe disappeared to go to the heavens, he would respond "Who knows if he goes even higher than that?"

[From the Stories of Y.L. Peretz](#)

Being kind and performing acts of kindness (*chesed*) play an important role in Judaism, as the Mishna teaches:

Shimon the Righteous ... would say: The world stands on three things- Torah [study], service [of G-d] and acts of kindness.
Avot 1:2

שמעון הצדיק ... היה אומר על שלשה דברים
העולם עומד על התורה ועל העבודה ועל
גמילות חסדים.
אבות א:ב

Our rabbis teach us that acts of kindness are not just a practical way to maintain society, but key to emulating G-d:

R. Chama son of R. Chanina said: What is the meaning of (Devarim 13:5): "You shall walk after the Lord your G-d"? ... To follow the attributes of G-d. Just as He clothes those who have are unclothed, as it is written (Bereishit 3:24): "And the Lord G-d made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them," so too you should also clothe those who are unclothed. G-d visited the sick, as it is written (Bereishit 18:1): "And G-d appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre," so too you should also visit the sick. G-d comforted mourners, as it is written (Bereishit 25:11): "And it came to pass after the death of Avraham, that G-d blessed Yitzchak his son," so too you should also comfort mourners. G-d buried the dead, as it is written (Devarim 34:6): "And He buried him in the valley," so too, you should also bury the dead.
Sotah 14a (Translation Adapted from Soncino Talmud)

ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא מאי
דכתיב אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו
... להלך אחר מדותיו של
הקב"ה מה הוא מלביש ערומים
דכתיב ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם
ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם אף
אתה הלבש ערומים הקב"ה
ביקר חולים דכתיב וירא אליו ה'
באלוני ממרא אף אתה בקר
חולים הקב"ה ניחם אבלים
דכתיב ויהי אחרי מות אברהם
ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו אף
אתה נחם אבלים הקב"ה קבר
מתים דכתיב ויקבר אותו בגיא
אף אתה קבור מתים.
סוטה יד.

There are times when opportunities to do kindness conflict with other considerations. Let's look at the following scenarios:

CASE ONE	One night, after returning home for a long day at work, Elliot gets a call from his friend Yossi who asks for some help moving furniture. Elliot is very tired and he was looking forward to going to sleep early. What should he do?
CASE TWO	Dina plans to volunteer at a soup kitchen, when she gets a call from her older sister Michelle, who is not feeling well and asks Dina to babysit. Should Dina help her sister or go to the soup kitchen?
CASE THREE	Michael's friends plan to go one Shabbat afternoon to visit their friend Tzvi who just broke his leg, but Michael normally attends a Mishna study group at that time. What should he do?

The first case deals with a conflict between doing *chesed* for someone else at the expense of their own needs, the second with a conflict between two acts of kindness, and the third with a conflict between an act of kindness and a religious matter, specifically learning Torah.

🌀 PLEASE CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever been in situation when you had to decide between an act of kindness and another important activity? What did you do? Is the decision that you made applicable to any of the scenarios above?
2. If someone did not do a *chesed* for you because of a conflicting consideration, how would you feel?
3. Is it possible for someone to be too involved in acts of kindness? Can you think of any examples?

🌀 A SOURCED-BASED DISCUSSION 🌀

Some acts of kindness have a specific name such as visiting the sick, "*bikur cholim*," and inviting guests, "*hachnasat orchim*." Others, such as holding the door for someone with a heavy package or offering someone a ride home, do not have a specific name and are categorized generically as *chesed*. In delineating the different types of *chesed*, Rambam writes:

Although all these mitzvot are rabbinic in nature, they are part of the biblical commandment of "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself," that is: what you would have others do to you, do to your brother in Torah and commandments.
Rambam, Hilchot Avel 14:1

אע"פ שכל מצות אלו מדבריהם הרי הן בכלל
ואהבת לרעך כמוך, כל הדברים שאתה רוצה
שיעשו אותם לך אחרים, עשה אתה אותן לאחריך
בתורה ובמצות.
רמב"ם הל' אבל יד:א

The imperative to do acts of kindness is guided by what one would want if one was on the receiving end of that situation.

- 🌀 How does Rambam's categorization influence our performance of these acts?
- 🌀 Does it provide criteria for deciding when to engage in acts of kindness?

R. Akiva teaches us an important lesson about conflicts between an opportunity for an act of kindness and one's own personal needs:

[A discussion arose regarding] two people who are travelling through the desert and one of them has a jug of water. If they share the water both will die and if one of them drinks the water, he will survive. Ben Petura ruled that it is preferable that they both drink and die rather than one drink and watch his fellow die until R. Akiva came along and taught [the meaning of the verse (Vayikra 25:35)] "and your brother shall live with you" [to teach that] your life comes before the life of your friend.

Baba Metzia 62a

שנים שהיו מהלכין בדרך וביד אחד מהן קיתון של מים אם שותין שניהם מתים ואם שותה אחד מהן מגיע לישוב דרש בן פטורא מוטב שישתו שניהם וימותו ואל יראה אחד מהם במיתתו של חבירו עד שבא רבי עקיבא ולימד וחי אחיך עמך חייך קודמים לחיי חבירך.
בבא מציעא סב.

One must take care of one's own needs before taking care of others.

While R. Akiva is discussing a life threatening situation, the Gemara, *Baba Metzia* 33a, applies this principle to any situation where one must choose between one's own needs and helping others. It is interesting that the same R. Akiva, who teaches that loving your neighbor as yourself is a very important principle (*Sifra, Parshat Kedoshim* no. 2), also teaches that one must take care of oneself before one takes care of others.

🔗 **In considering case 1, how do you think taking care of oneself and helping others should be balanced?**

🔗 **How can we determine when putting one's own needs first is a legitimate claim and when it is a convenient excuse for not helping someone else?**

R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), *Ha'Amek Davar*, Vayikra 19:18, teaches that one can determine whether personal needs are a legitimate claim or convenient excuse by imaging oneself in the position of the recipient. What would you expect of others if you were in the same situation of need and your friends had conflicts with their own personal needs?

When faced with the choice to do one of two acts of kindness, consider the relative needs of each recipient. The Midrash, *Sifri, Parshat Re'eh* no. 62, states that when dealing with the poor, "the one who is hungriest comes first" (**תאב תאב קודם**). Also, consider the relationship of the benefactor to the recipient. R. Yosef Karo, *Shulchan Aruch* states:

One who gives to his adult sons or daughters ... or one who gives gifts to his father and they need it, this is a form of charity, and one should give precedence to them over others. Even if the person is not an immediate relative, but they are related, one should give precedence to them over others. *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 251:3

הנותן לבניו ובנותיו הגדולים ... וכן הנותן מתנות לאביו והם צריכים להם הרי זה בכלל צדקה ולא עוד אלא שצריך להקדימו לאחרים ואפילו אינו בנו ולא אביו אלא קרובו צריך להקדימו לכל אדם. שלחן ערוך יורה דעה רנא:ג

The needs of family members take precedence over the needs of others.

It is important to note that:

1. R. Yisrael Meir Kagan, *Ahavat Chesed, Dinei Mitzvat Halva'ah* 6:14, writes that the rules relating to priorities in charity relate to all types of acts of kindness.
2. R. Pinchas HaLevi Hurvitz, *Panim Yafot, Devarim* 15:7, writes that one's family supersedes others even if the needs of others are more pressing. This position is also adopted by R. Moshe Sofer, *Chatam Sofer*, Y.D. no. 331.

🔗 **How would you apply these two factors to Dina's dilemma in case 2? Who has a greater need for Dina's service? What would be the consequences at the soup kitchen if Dina does not go, and the consequences**

for Michelle if Dina does go? Would the decision be different if the soup kitchen was counting on her and would not be able to operate properly without her?

In considering case 3, Rambam teaches:

If one has the opportunity to perform a mitzvah or to study Torah, if it is possible for the mitzvah to be performed by someone else, one should not interrupt one's study. If not, one should perform the mitzvah and continue studying.
Rambam, Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:4

היה לפניו עשיית מצוה ותלמוד תורה אם אפשר
למצוה להעשות ע"י אחרים לא יפסיק תלמודו.
ואם לאו יעשה המצוה ויחזור לתלמודו.
רמב"ם הל' תלמוד תורה ג:ד

☞ **How would you apply Rambam's statement to Michael's conflict? Is Michael's mitzvah of visiting his friend something that someone else can do? Do you think it is necessary for Michael to visit Tzvi with all of his friends or can he go at a different time and avoid missing the learning session? Does it make a difference if Michael is not comfortable visiting Tzvi alone?**

☞ **What role does personal preference play in the last two cases? Is it possible that if Dina had tickets to a concert, she would be able to tell her sister that personal needs take precedence, yet her desire to volunteer at a soup kitchen is not relevant? Does it depend on what she would expect others to do if she were in a similar situation?**

We have seen in this discussion the importance of *chesed* and how we can enhance our own lives by helping others. We should always seek out *chesed* opportunities, even when they may be inconvenient. When they conflict with other things that are important to us, we should try to find creative ways to make time for *chesed*.

COMPILED BY RABBI JOSH FLUG, DIRECTOR OF TORAH RESEARCH, CJF

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Moshe ben Maimon (also known as Rambam and Maimonides, 1138-1204) is one of the most famous rabbis in Jewish history. His works on Jewish law and Jewish philosophy are extremely influential and are studied regularly by students of Jewish law and philosophy. He began his life in Cordoba, Spain but eventually settled in Egypt.

R. Yosef Karo (1488-1575) is most well known for his *Shulchan Aruch*, The Code of Jewish Law. Born in Toledo Spain, his family was forced to leave Spain in 1492 when they settled in Portugal and then Bulgaria. He eventually settled in the Land of Israel about 1535. Aside from *Shulchan Aruch*, he authored numerous works including *Kesef Mishneh* and *Beit Yosef*.

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. Pinchas Horowitz (1731-1805) was born in Chortkiv, Ukraine and died in Frankfort-on-the-Main, Germany, where he served as the rabbi of the city. His commentaries on *Masechet Kiddushin* and *Masechet Ketubot* are studied in many yeshivot when those tractates are studied. *Panim Yafot* is R. Horowitz's commentary on the Torah.

R. Moshe Sofer (1762-1839) is known as "The Chatam Sofer" after his works by that name. His writings include responsa, commentary on the Torah and commentary on the Talmud. His positions continue to play a very prominent role in contemporary responsa. He held a number of rabbinic posts before becoming the rabbi of Pressburg (Bratislava), Austria-Hungary, where he established a major yeshiva.