

VAYECHI (GENESIS 47:28-50:26)

Kindness and Truth

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The Book of Genesis draws to a close with the death of our father Jacob. Genesis is a book that, to a great extent, dedicates itself to teaching us about character. By observing the lives of our Patriarchs and their wives, we learn about such traits as kindness and truth. In the following passage, we hear about a combination of the two:

The days grew near for Israel to die, and he called for his son Joseph ... "Act toward me with KINDNESS AND TRUTH, and do not bury me in Egypt. When I will lie with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their grave." (Genesis. 47:29-30)

Jacob's deathbed request was to be buried in the family plot in Hebron, in the Cave of Machpela. When asking for this final favor from his son, he used this unusual expression of "*kindness and truth*." What does that mean? Unquestionably, it is an act of kindness to do what his father asks him to do. But what does truth have to do with it? Certainly Joseph isn't going to lie about it! What is kindness and truth?!

Rashi tells us that Jacob is teaching us a new component of kindness: "*Chessed shel Emes -- Kindness of Truth*." The kindness performed for someone who has died is called a "Kindness of Truth" because the departed person will not be able to return the favor. If I visit you when you are not feeling well or help you jump start your car when the battery dies, I know that there is a possibility that when the tables are turned, you will be there for me. This does not apply in the case of the dead. If you put yourself out to attend someone's funeral, you can be sure that he won't come to yours!

"*Chessed shel Emes -- Kindness of Truth*" has become synonymous with taking care of the needs of the departed; there are communities where the local volunteer burial society uses that phrase as the name of their organization.

But true kindness does not have to be limited to what we do for the dead. The Sifsei Chachomim, a commentary on Rashi (a commentary on commentary!), takes Rashi's point further. He refers us back to the time when Abraham's servant was looking for a wife for Isaac. He asked Rebecca's family to perform "*...Kindness and Truth for my master...*" (Genesis, 24:49) His intent was to inform them that this was a kindness for which they should not anticipate a payment from Abraham! That they should allow Rebecca to marry Isaac simply because it was the right thing to do, not in anticipation of a payback.

How kind is OUR kindness? When I do a favor for another person, do I do it because it's right? Or do I do it because there's something in it for me? Am I kind to my fellow man because G-d wants me to take care of His children? Or is it because it never hurts to "earn a few points" for future consideration? Are we more likely to do a favor for the rich and influential than for the poor and powerless? When we give *Tzedakah* do we do it quietly and modestly? Or do we make sure that the world knows how generous we are?

Lest we fear that our charitable acts will be ignored, let us rest assured that no good deed goes unnoticed. Joseph saw to it that his father's burial wishes were fulfilled. As a reward for his kindness, none other than Moses himself saw to it that Joseph's remains were transferred to the Land of Israel. Moses, in turn, was rewarded for fulfilling Joseph's burial wishes by being buried by G-d Himself!

Is this contradictory? Do good deeds, not anticipating any favor in return, only to discover at the end of the day that there WILL be a favor in return? Yes and no. (I guess that answer is also contradictory!!) Antingnos of Socho tells us "... do not be like servants who serve the master in the expectation of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of receiving a reward, and let the fear of Heaven be upon you." (Pirkei Avos 1:3) Do what is right. But do it for the right reason. Yes, G-d rewards us for doing what is right, but that shouldn't be our motivation.

As we turn the pages away from the Book of Genesis, the Book of the Beginning, let us begin a new chapter in our lives. Let us devote ourselves to helping others only because it's the right thing to do; in the end, everybody wins.

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

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