

REEH (DEUTERONOMY 11:26-16:17)

Birds of Different Feathers ...?

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Chesed -- kindness. It is the basis for the world's existence. "*The world is built through Chesed -- Kindness.*" (Psalms, 89:3)

G-d is kind to us, and He expects us to be kind to others. Children are taught from a young age to engage in acts of *Chesed*. Every morning we give thanks to "...He who performs *Chasdim Tovim* -- beneficent acts of kindness to His People Israel," and we ask Him to "Establish peace, goodness, blessing, graciousness, *Chesed* -- kindness... upon us and all Your nation Israel." We refer to the pious as "*Chassidim*", which we could translate literally as "those who are kind." At the very end of a person's life, we perform the *Chesed shel Emes* -- a true and unselfish act of *Chesed*, by burying him.

I could go on. In every aspect of our lives, we are called upon to act with kindness and compassion. So much so, that G-d even limits our intake of foods that could somehow have a negative impact on our ability to be kind.

"You are what you eat."

The Torah provides us with a list of non-Kosher birds. If a bird is on the list, it is not Kosher. If the bird is not on the list, it is Kosher.

(The problem, however, is that we don't necessarily know the exact translations of the various birds on the list. Therefore, we only eat those birds for which there is an established tradition. We eat chickens because our parents ate chickens and their parents ate chickens, and their parents... We don't eat robins, not because we know them to be non-Kosher, but rather that we don't have an unbroken tradition that they are. For an interesting article on the attempt to "establish" a tradition that certain birds are Kosher, [click here.](#))

It is commonly understood that the reason we don't eat eagles, owls, and hawks is that they are birds of prey. Birds that attack other animals and tear them to shreds with their claws are not the types of creatures we want to consume. Therefore, we tend to prefer the birds that use their feet for walking and perching, rather than hunting and killing. Nachmanides (on Leviticus 11:13) explains that the Torah wanted to distance us from the consumption of cruel animals because they would somehow taint us spiritually and ingrain a degree of cruelty into our souls.

One interesting bird on the list is the *Chasidah*, usually translated as a stork. The name *Chasidah* comes from the word *Chesed*. The Talmud (Chullin 63) explains that there is a specific reason that this bird was given this name. The *Chasidah* is a very generous bird who shares its food with its fellow *Chasidahs*. So, instead of “stork”, we could translate it as “The Kind Bird.”

“The Kind Bird.” This begs the obvious question. Nachmanides says that we don’t eat these non-kosher birds because they are cruel. We don’t want to ingest a nasty bird that kills other animals. But the *Chasidah* is a nice guy! He shares his food with his fellows. He does *Chesed*, acts of kindness for others! So what’s the problem?

The Rizhiner Rebbe answers that the *Chasidah* has misplaced priorities. It is very nice that the stork is kind to other storks. But what about everybody else?

It is easy to be kind to those who are part of one’s immediate circle of friends. What takes some effort is being kind to strangers.

Still, one wonders, how bad could the stork be? It may not be the friendliest bird in the aviary, but at least it is kind to other storks. After all, the Torah still does use the name *Chasidah*. It is a bird that performs *Chesed*. So what’s so terrible?

I would like to suggest another insight into the etymology of the word *Chasidah*. In almost all cases we find that the word *Chesed* is translated to mean kindness. However, there is one exception that comes to mind:

If a man takes his sister, be she the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother, and he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is an extremely shameful perversion, and they shall be cut off spiritually from their people. Since he has committed incest with his sister, he shall bear his guilt.
(Leviticus, 20:17)

“...It is an extremely shameful perversion.” That is the translation that Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan gives to the word “*Chesed*.”

“*Chesed!*” screams the Torah. How could decent people behave this way? It is incest! It is despicable! It is *Chesed!*” Rashi explains that in Aramaic the word “*Chisuda*” means “shame.”

Chesed can easily be misapplied. One may look at a brother and sister and see a perfect match. They have been raised in the same home with the same values. They will agree on how to raise a family. Why not?

NO! cries the Torah. This is absolutely unacceptable! It is shameful and perverted. It is NOT the will of G-d. It is *Chesed*!

Now, let's look back at our friend the stork. She takes care of her friends, but couldn't care less about anybody else. That's not just insufficient kindness. It is *Chesed*. The bad kind. The sick, shameful, incestuous, perverted kind. That is a bird whose influence we want to avoid.

Do you remember as a kid in school when there were certain kids in the "in" crowd while others were on the outside looking in? Do you know how painful it is to be excluded? The friends may be nice to each other, but they treat the outsiders like pariahs. Is such a friendship of any value?

There is a Mitzvah to send *Mishloach Manos*, gifts of food, on Purim. We share the joy of the holiday by sending gifts to our friends. One rabbi I know tells people to send the gifts to their enemies! "Forget about your friends," he tells them. "They will remain your friends with or without a fiftieth Hamentash and a seventeenth bottle of wine. Send a gift to your neighbor down the street who has no friends. Send a gift to the fellow you had that fight with last year."

We're all in this volatile world together. We can't ignore each other. Rosh Hashanah is a month away. I'll pray for you. Will you pray for me?

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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