

The Torah of Kindness, Parashat Vayera 5782

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It is said of the great Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunam of Priscah, that when he was a boy about five years old, his father – who was himself a prominent rabbi – invited some guests to the house. As expected, the rabbi prepared a meal for his guests. And while they were eating, he called to his son, Simcha, and said to him: “Go, my son, and prepare something from the laws of *haknusat orhim*, welcoming guests.” The boy went away to a nearby room and stayed there for a short while.

When the boy came back to the table, his father asked him: “Did you learn anything new? *Hidashta ma?* Did you draw out any novel teachings?” And the young Simcha answered, “Yes.”

The guests, who had heard that this boy was an *ilui*, a genius scholar, assumed the rabbi was demanding a new interpretation about the law. They finished eating, and the rabbi told his guests: “Let’s go and see what new thing my son has uncovered.”

They went into the next room, and the rabbi showed his guests the “teaching” of his son. In the room, they saw two beds, exquisitely made with beautiful pillows and cushions. The rabbi told his guests that they would sleep on those beds. And the guests understood what young Simcha had been doing when he went to “prepare” something from the laws of welcoming guests. They were amazed by the boy’s wisdom and righteousness.

It is fitting that this story is told as an introduction to Abraham. Abraham is never praised for his scholarship or learning; Moses is the one we call “Rabeinu, Our teacher.” Abraham isn’t called wise like Solomon either; and he isn’t a popular warrior-king like David. Abraham, instead, is defined by acts of kindness.

We meet him this week sitting outside his tent, which the midrash suggests was open on all four sides to enable Abraham to easily spot wayfarers and welcome them in. When he finds three travelers, Abraham runs after them. The text tells us that he rushed, he urged Sarah on: “Quick!” he says. “Knead the dough so we might offer our guests some bread.” Abraham’s eagerness to serve his guests is even more impressive when we consider that this is Genesis chapter 18. Genesis 17 describes how Abraham circumcised himself at 99 years of age. Presumably he was still recovering when he ran after those guests.

The Akedah, the Binding of Isaac at the end of the narrative, is a difficult story to understand; and I don’t want to parse through all the questions that narrative raises. But fundamentally, it is a story of service. The Torah calls it a test – a test to determine if Abraham’s love and devotion to God would supersede even his love for his son. It’s an extreme example to prove the point of selflessness at Abraham’s core. He lived to serve others, and especially the Other.

Consider also Abraham’s interactions with Lot. When the shepherds of Abraham quarreled with the shepherds of Lot, Abraham negotiated a settlement: “Let there be no strife between you and me. ... If you go south, I will go north; and if you go north, I will go south.” Abraham was willing to give up so

much for the sake of peace. Not long after, when Lot was captured, Abraham went to battle to save his nephew. And then he told the king of Sodom who wanted to share the spoils of war, "I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours," Abraham said, "that you should not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich.'" Abraham didn't act for himself; he acted only for the sake of his kinsman. And then, of course, Abraham saved Lot and his family from the impending destruction of Sodom, where they lived.

Kindness, service, selflessness, and love. These are the traits of our patriarch, the father of the Jewish nation. And we should take note.

On Monday, our nation lost a great hero to complications from Covid. Colin Powell was raised by immigrant, working-class parents in South Bronx, New York. By his own account, he was a mediocre student. He had a C-average as a geology major at City College of New York, until he enrolled in the college's ROTC program. Powell thrived amidst the discipline, the camaraderie, the sense of purpose; and he devoted himself to a life of service. Service to country. Service to presidents. And also helping those who are less able to help themselves.

As only the fourth Black four-star general in Army history, Powell saw himself as a personal affront to racism and a model for other Black soldiers. As a private citizen, he founded America's Promise, a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving at-risk youth. The organization is founded on the principle, as stated on their website, "that every young person deserves to succeed and every adult is responsible for making that happen." How much more basic a statement can one make to describe Abraham's core values of selflessness, service, and responsibility?

Some of you know that Sharon and I are trying to help Rebecca through the college selection process. It is interesting to see what colleges choose to say about themselves to encourage applications. There is obviously a lot about the courses of study. Some schools have unique majors that seem enticing. They talk about the size of the faculties and the volume of prestigious research. Those things are important, but we are also encouraging Rebecca to look for more.

It is a pretty safe assumption that large, elite universities are going to have strong academics across all their departments. But I want to know some other things. What are the other students like? Is the atmosphere collaborative or competitive? What is it like to participate in student life or Jewish life? Are there opportunities to serve? I want to know not just how a particular school is going to nurture my child's brain. I want to know how the experience will develop the whole person by demanding service and selflessness and personal responsibility.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is credited with having said: "When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people." Or as Jeff Bezos's father apparently said to his son after he had made a disparaging remark about his grandmother: "One day you'll understand that it is harder to be kind than clever." Our tradition calls it *torah hesed*, the Torah of Kindness, the teaching you learn by watching and doing and setting an example for others.

On Monday evening and Tuesday, the 20th of Cheshvan, we will observe the first Yahrzeit of Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In his last book, *Morality*, Rabbi Sacks writes about the need to transform our "I" society into a "we" society. He cites a distinction David Brooks makes between "resume virtues" and "eulogy virtues." "Resume virtues" tend to be about the self – our educational accomplishments,

acquired skills, and career achievements. “Eulogy virtues”, on the other hand, focus on the impact we make on others – the kindnesses we have shown, the things we have done to make other people’s lives better.

And that is a fitting commentary on the story of Abraham, which begins and ends with the commandment “*lekh lekha*, Go for yourself” to the land that I will show you, and, later, to the Land of Moriah with your son. The *midrash* comments on that word “*lekh*, for yourself,” that this journey is “*lhana-atekha ul’tovatkha*, for your own well-being and betterment.” How telling for a person who comes to define his life through acts of service and kindness! Your path to personal growth and success is paved by the deeds you do and kindnesses you show to others. What an important message for a society that lionizes the myth of the “rugged individual”!

In the Talmud, the 3rd-century scholar Rabbi Simlai remarks about the Torah itself – the very definition of wisdom and learning and instruction: “*Techilata gemilut hasadim v’sofah g’milut hasadim*, It begins and ends with acts of lovingkindness.” The Torah begins with kindness, as God sews garments for Adam and Eve when they are naked in the Garden; and it ends with kindness, as God buries Abraham in the valley of Moab. In between, our patriarch Abraham models for us the virtuous life marked by kindness and service and selflessness and love. May we strive to follow his example. Shabbat shalom.