

A “Torah of Hesed” on Hesed shel Emet¹

Parashat Vayechi

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This Dvar Torah is given in honor of Devora Steinmetz

פִּיהָ פְּתִיחָה בְּחָכְמָה וְתוֹרַת אֱלֹהִים עַל-לִשׁוֹנָהּ:

She opens her mouth with wisdom;

A torah of hesed is on her tongue. (Proverbs 29:26)

Ray Madoff is an old friend of mine. She is a law professor at Boston College Law School who specializes in trusts and estates law. She once wrote A *Practical Guide to Estate Planning*. (In case you're interested, it's available online for the not-very-practical price of \$495.) She once spoke here at Temple Aliyah about a book of hers that is of more general interest and available for much less -- only \$15 -- entitled, *Immortality and the Law: The Rising Power of the American Dead*. Her thesis is that American law grants people much greater control over property after their death than anywhere else in the world. But interestingly, when it comes to two things, there are very few protections: your body and your reputation. If, for example, you want yourself buried in a certain way, you have to ask people to take care of that -- and hope that they'll carry through.

Ray Madoff's research makes clear that, even though thousands of years separate us, we have something very much in common with Jacob, the patriarch whose dying, death and funeral we read about today: namely, even though we are all mortal, many of us do seek to influence what happens after our deaths. For most of us, that desire is expressed in the form of writing a will and/ or establishing a trust.

¹ Many thanks to Ilana Kurshan for inspiring this *dvar torah*. See “True Lovingkindness,” [Torah Sparks! Parashat Vayechi 5782 - The Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center \(FJC\)](#) .



For some of us, it includes what is called “pre-planning.” That’s when you pay a funeral home in advance to handle your funeral arrangements.

Jacob had the same concerns -- and he believed in pre-planning. He wanted a double portion of his estate to go to his grandchildren, the sons of Joseph. And so he formally adopted them and legally gave them the right to inherit along with Joseph’s brothers.

And he had strong opinions about where and how he was going to be buried. Since this was well before the age of funeral homes, he called his son, Joseph, to him and asked him to promise -- to *swear* -- that he wouldn’t bury him in Egypt.

And indeed, Joseph swears to that effect and, after Jacob’s death, carries out his father’s wishes. He ceremoniously brings his body back to the Land of Canaan and buries it there.

I want to zero in on the words Jacob used when he asked his son to promise to handle the funeral in accordance with his wishes. He said,

“If I have found favor in your eyes, place your hand under my thigh and treat me with **lovingkindness and truth**: Please do not bury me in Egypt!” (Genesis 47:29).

וַיִּקְרָבוּ יְמֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּתָּ וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו לְבָנָיו לְיוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ שְׂיָמְנָא יָדְךָ תַּחֲתַי
וְרַגְלִי וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת אֶל־נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרָיִם:

“Treat me with **lovingkindness and truth**.” In Hebrew, *hesed v’emet*. Why both? That’s a strange combination. You would think that lovingkindness is by its nature true. Rashi says that “lovingkindness and truth” means “lovingkindness *OF* truth,” or “*TRUE* lovingkindness.” But what does that mean? And what would *not-so-true* lovingkindness look like?

Well, that question is asked within the midrashic work on Genesis called Bereshit Rabbah. The text answers the question in the form of a parable.

It tells us that if someone were to be willing to promise to assist in the burial of one of your family members but not in your own burial -- that would be an example of not-so-true lovingkindness. Why? Because that person would only be willing to do something *during your lifetime* -- afterwards, no. Such a person would be seeking reciprocity. Without reciprocity, their generosity disappears.

In contrast, when someone is willing to do something for you *after* your death, with no hope or expectation of a reward, that is *true* lovingkindness. That's the behavior that Joseph demonstrated; that's the behavior that any of us perform when we handle funerals of our loved ones in the manner in which they would want them to be handled.

Such an example of true lovingkindness is exemplary. But are there other ways it can be carried out?

I would like to tell you a story about a woman named Devora Steinmetz, a Bible and Talmud scholar and Jewish Educator who taught Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary when I was a student there.

About nine years ago, Devora Steinmetz spent the year in Israel as a Visiting Scholar at the Mandel Leadership Institute. She decided, during that year, to donate a kidney to a stranger -- someone she had never met before. She donated her kidney to a 23-year-old man who was studying to become a dentist.

After the surgery, the young man's mother tried to shower gifts on Devora. Boxes of chocolate. Perfume. She offered to send food to her house. She wanted to send her family on a vacation to the Dead Sea. Devora refused them all. She said, No. That's not why I did what I did.

But the mother was persistent. So Devora told her the following:²

² The following is adapted from Devora Steinmetz's essay on her experience as a kidney donor, [The Torah of hesed: Why I Became A Kidney Donor | Jewish Week](#)

Ten or so years ago in shul, someone taught her the following *torah* that they had just learned from a friend: When someone does *hesed* for you, you want to find a way to pay them back, to reciprocate the *hesed* that they have done, but in most cases you can't ever do that. Yet there is a way that you can pay them back, and that is by **doing *hesed* for someone else.**

This teaching stayed with Devora through some very difficult times. Over her lifetime, she herself has been the recipient of extraordinary *hesed*. Just around the time that she heard this *torah*, her family was dealing with a serious illness, and so many people helped them in ways that she could never have imagined and *in ways that she knew she might never have done herself*. And she knew that there was no way she could ever reciprocate. But what she could do was try to take opportunities that presented themselves to her to do *hesed* for others.

Devora happens not to be scared by hospitals; she is not afraid of blood, she is not very sensitive to pain. For her, donating a kidney was a rather easy thing to decide to do and to carry out. [Someone was in need of something she had, that she could live without. Done.] And it's something that's pretty clear-cut: the need is obvious, the way to help is obvious, the hoped-for result is clear.

As Devora was about to leave the hospital where she'd donated her kidney, she went to say goodbye to the kidney recipient and his parents.

She wished the young man many years of good health full of many opportunities to do *hesed* for others. And then, in her words, "something incredible happened."

Here's how she describes it:

"This woman who had been trying to shower me with boxes of chocolate and perfume told me that she and her son had discussed a plan for when he finishes school and becomes a dentist—that he would set aside one day each month, in my name, to treat people who can't afford to pay. I don't know whether he will do exactly that, but I did feel, in a most powerful way, that this young man and his parents were now recipients of the *torah* that I had learned, the *torah* of *hesed*, and that my own act, like the acts of those who have done *hesed* for me and my family, will generate more acts of *hesed* in the world."

I want to conclude with the words that Devora Steinmetz herself used to summarize her perspective on this:

“Each of us has the capacity to do tremendous acts of *hesed*. And each of us has different ways in which we are capable of doing *hesed*.”

“Donating a kidney is one way that made sense for me. ... [If this is your path, speak to your doctor, and you will find your way.] If this is not your path of *hesed*, then know that you have ways to help someone else that may be just as powerful and life-saving.

“... May [all of us] be privileged to find our own path in the *torah* of *hesed*.”³

We don't have to wait until our loved ones -- or others -- are on their deathbeds. There is much that we can do today. Let's take the *torah* of *hesed* that Devora Steinmetz has taught us to heart. Let's reflect on all the *hesed* that has been shown to us over our lifetimes -- and then, let's go ahead and pay it forward.

Shabbat Shalom.

³ As I reflect on Devora Steinmetz's words to the mother of the recipient of her kidney and her words of exhortation to the readers of her essay, a particularly felicitous translation of Proverbs 29:26 comes to mind: “*She opens her mouth with wisdom; her tongue is guided by kindness.*” (*A Rabbi's Manual*, The Rabbinical Assembly, Jules Harlow, Ed., 1965)