

Breishis Dvar Torah, Rabbi David Mahler

A few years back, a wonderful book made its way around business management and self-improvement circles.

Adam Grant, the youngest tenured professor at Wharton Business School, in looking at what ingredients make for success in the business world, posited that for generations we have focused on the individual drivers of success: passion, hard work, talent, and luck.

But Grant found that success is increasingly dependent on how we interact with others. It turns out that at work, most people operate as either takers, matchers, or givers. Whereas takers strive to get as much as possible from others and matchers aim to trade evenly, givers are the rare breed of people who contribute to others without expecting anything in return.

Using his own pioneering research, Grant shows that these styles have a surprising impact on success. Although some givers get exploited and burn out, many achieve extraordinary results across a wide range of industries.

Combining cutting-edge evidence with captivating stories, Grant shares a myriad of examples that support his thesis.

Thankfully, in our culture, the idea that giving and doing for others garners success is not a novel concept.

There's a beautiful *gemara* (*Sotah* 14a) that I believe has wonderful significance.

Rav Simlai taught the following lesson: The *Torah* both begins and ends with acts of *chesed*. It begins with *chesed* as it's written that *Hashem* made for *Adam* and his wife garments of skins and He clothed them. And it ends with *chesed* as it's written: And G-D buried Moshe in a place called *Gai*.

I understand the 2nd half of the *germara*. The very end of the *Torah* features an undisputed act of *chesed*. In order to keep the location of Moshe's final resting place a secret, no one could be present at his death. At the end of the *Torah* – which we just completed earlier this week – when Moshe dies, he's all alone.

There's a profound element of *chesed* in G-D personally attending to the burial of his beloved servant. In fact, seeing to the needs of the deceased is the prototype in *Chazal* for pure kindness – *chesed shel emet*. No one is ever going to return the favor.

But what do we make of the *gemara's* first claim – that the *Torah* opens with *chesed* inasmuch as *Hashem* provided clothing for *Adam* and *Chava*? If you recall, just a few *pesukim* earlier, *Adam* and *Chava* were not walking around without clothing.

Once they sinned, they recognized their own nakedness and quickly made clothes for themselves out of fig leaves.

So the *gemara's* very premise is flawed. *Adam* and *Chava* weren't naked when G-D gave them clothes. What is the great virtue in providing someone with something they already have?

Perhaps an argument can be made that their own clothes were only makeshift and *Hashem* furnished them with more lasting garments.

Perhaps. But I think it would be quite odd for the *gemara* to single out a wardrobe upgrade as G-D's paradigmatic act of *chesed*.

So how do we understand the message of *Rav Simlai*? What in fact is the great act of kindness that *Hashem* performs here?

I believe we can offer 2 answers:

Firstly, clothing aids in the dignity of man. Internally, the main difference between man and beast is that man has the ability to speak and think, while animals do not.

Externally however, we wear clothing. *Chesed* is about returning or reinstating one's dignity – their sense of inner worth.

A case in point is that famously, each of the 8 levels of *tzedaka* enumerated by the *Rambam* is more dignified than the next. You are not only providing the person with what they need but returning their *Tzelelm Elokim*.

The first lesson of the is that we are put on this earth to be dignified human beings. In a certain sense, clothes make the man. They should, to a certain degree, remind us that we are different than animals and have a responsibility to act like it.

But the second lesson is more profound and instructive. Our focus should not be on the literal act of providing clothing but rather on what it represents.

It is clear that *Adam* and *Chava* are devastated by their sin. Their Utopian world, literally Utopian, has been obliterated. It's over. Never to return and they ruined it. They're broken. That's their present emotional state.

They fear that they have irreparably wrecked their relationship with *Hashem*. They've just been condemned to a life of labor and certain mortality.

The *chesed* is in what *Hashem* communicates by His gesture. It's true - they weren't naked. The *Torah* never says they felt cold or exposed. They didn't need clothes. But emotionally, they were amazingly vulnerable. So *Hashem* provides them with the ultimate symbol of being sheltered and cared for – clothing.

In the garden, *chesed* meant seeing through the external, recognizing the internal need, and then providing a gesture of support that addresses that need. *Hashem* didn't view *Adam* and *Chava* as two people who had clothing. He was in tune with their emotional well-being and that's what He acted upon. They looked OK on the outside but *Hashem* was sensitive to their inner being.

I found this insight astounding. Perhaps it stems from us living in a very external society – even in our religious life – even in the area of *chesed*. We volunteer at *Tomchei Shabbos*, visit the sick, donate to worthy causes such as Friendship Circle and *Bonei Olam*. Our Middle and High Schools all require a specific number of *chesed* hours to be performed by our students – yet the archetype of *chesed* performed by *Hashem* is so much deeper.

It's about putting ourselves in the other person's world. *Chesed*, at its highest level is not about reacting to needs we are informed about but rather being proactive and being attuned to needs we are yet uninformed about.

Famously, on *Erev Pesach* one year, a woman appeared at the home of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik, the Rav of Brisk, and asked the rabbi whether one was able to *halachically* fulfill the obligation of drinking 4 cups of wine at the *seder* by drinking milk instead. Later that day, the great rabbi delivered wine and food to the woman and her family. He saw beneath the *shaila*. He saw a woman who couldn't afford to make *Yom Tov*.

Hashem's paradigmatic act of kindness is a gesture whose surface value is limited. What makes it so powerful is that it speaks to the underlying emotional needs of two human beings in pain.

People may look fine. When you ask them, they may even tell you that they are fine. But for too many people, underneath the surface, are long shadows cast by loneliness or despair or any of the challenges that confront us all in the course of a lifetime.

Rav Dessler has a line that always troubled me. He implores people to be "creative in their *chesed*". I now understand his line. We have to think outside of the box to become truly compassionate and giving people. We must see through the veneers and facades.

The *gemara* is urging us to look more deeply into what people might need and act upon that.

Sometimes that's a phone call, flowers, *challah* or a kugel being sent before *Shabbos*.

Adam and *Chava's* bodies didn't need clothing – their hearts did.