

Hesed in Community

Today's haftarah, those powerful words from the prophet Isaiah, were a call and a challenge to a community that had fallen down on its obligations. To our ears Isaiah's charge may sound radical, like a call for a new type of community or society. But in the context of the Bible, the prophet's call was not for something new, but for a return to something old: a call to the Israelites to return to the terms of the covenant that God had established with them hundreds of years before in the wilderness. To care for the poor and the powerless, along with observing ritual obligations like fast days and Shabbat, was a central component of this covenant. The prophet, speaking in God's name, was telling the Israelite people that this covenant is a two-sided deal: if the people live up to their side, then God will respond in kind, that only then will the "waters of healing flourish," will cities be rebuilt.

This idea of covenant is at the core of who we are as a Jewish people. It describes our understanding of our communal relationship with the divine, and is the foundation of how we relate to one another. On Rosh Hashanah a few years ago, I spoke about what it means to create community, and I talked about the different kinds of community that we find ourselves a part of. One sort I called "intimate community," that network of relationships we have with the people closest to us, the friends and family with whom we interact regularly and share a level of intimacy and emotional support. Another sort of community I called "situational," those groupings we find ourselves a part of based on where we live or work or study, what softball league we belong to or what school our children attend. In this sort of community we don't choose who the other people are, and while there are varying levels of emotional connection, close emotional ties are not the main point.

In thinking about Jewish community, and more particularly a congregation like Dorshei Tzedek, we are talking about covenantal community: a group of people drawn together by historical ties and shared background, but also through a covenant, a mutual agreement about what the purposes of the community are, and what its members owe one another. We may not even know everyone in such a community, yet we share goals and commitments, and we share obligations to one another.

Today I'd like to talk about one aspect of what it means to be a member of a covenantal community in a Jewish context. I'll begin with a story:

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai once was walking with his disciple Rabbi Joshua near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Joshua looked at the Temple ruins and said: "Alas for us! The place which atoned for the sins of the people Israel through the ritual of animal sacrifice lies in ruins!" Then Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: "Be not grieved, my son. There is another way now of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain atonement through *gemilut hasadim*, acts of lovingkindness, for it is written: *For I desire hesed, not*

sacrifice (Hosea 6:6) (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 11a)

This is a well-known rabbinic story, perhaps you have heard it. I am amazed by the radical claim made here by Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. Imagine the setting: they are standing in the rubble of what was once God's holy Temple, amidst the ruins of Jerusalem, whose destruction by the Romans these rabbis had witnessed. A Temple that had stood for 500 years, the successor of the First Temple in Jerusalem which had also stood for almost 500 years. They were standing amid the rubble of what had been the center of a religious civilization for a millennium. And so Rabbi Joshua's question had great urgency. The sacrifices brought to the Temple, and the yearly ritual of cleansing the sins of the priesthood and of the people (which we just read about in this morning's Torah portion), had been the central way that the Jewish people had connected to God. Atoning for sin meant righting the relationship between them and their God, as well as restoring balance to the community. How was the community going to continue to function, how were the people going to continue to relate to God, if the central mechanism for doing so was gone?

Rabbi Yohanan presumably could have responded in a number of ways. He was the founder of the *yeshivah* at Yavneh, the center of study, that became the basis for the survival of Judaism once the Temple system was gone; why didn't he answer, "Torah study, that is the way that we will connect to God and to another?" Or, as the organizer of a new system of Jewish leadership based on the authority of the rabbi, he could have promoted the power of the rabbi, versus the priest, as the new path.

But instead he responded, "we must now gain atonement through *gemilut hasadim*."

How do we translate this phrase, *gemilut hasadim*? What precisely was Rabbi Yohanan referring to?

Hasadim is the plural of "*hesed*." *Hesed* is one of the many Hebrew words for "love," but it does not mean "love" in the romantic sense or in the sense of love that one feels for a family member or a friend. The King James Bible created the English word "lovingkindness" to capture its meaning; others translate it as "loyalty." It is not an emotional state but a description of a certain kind of relational action.

Hesed can only be understood in the context of covenantal relationship. It is a word that applies to the relationship between God and the Jewish people, as described in Biblical texts, and in rabbinic understanding it applies to the relationships among members of a covenantal community. The scholar Daniel Elazar writes that *hesed* is "the loving obligation resulting from a covenantal tie." He goes on to say that if *brit*, covenant, "creates a partnership, then *hesed* is what makes the partnership work." Gordon Freeman has described *hesed* as "reciprocity...a value that goes beyond the minimum utilitarian aspect of living together in society...Its purpose is to lead to greater cohesiveness between people." (Elazar and Freeman in *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses*, ed. Daniel

Elazar, 1983)

In this understanding, acts of *hesed*, of loving obligation, are what maintain covenantal community; they are the means by which the members of such a community go beyond the narrow definitions of what it means to be in such a partnership, in order to—in the words of Elazar—“make the relationship between them a truly viable one.”

Although this word “love” appears in our discussion of *hesed*, acts of *hesed*—called *gemilut hasadim*—are in some way the opposite of what we might think of as acts of love. When I feel love for someone, I am inspired to care for them, be kind to them, to express my love in both word and deed. But as Gordon Freeman writes, acts of *hesed* “are to ensure that individuals are mutually concerned for each other.” With *gemilut hasadim*, we do not act based on our feelings: rather we act because of our covenantal obligation, and the feeling of connection, of “mutual concern,” comes after; it arises out of that action.

The actual practice of *gemilut hasadim* seems to have developed over time, and reflects the experience of Jewish communities caring for their members and for those in their midst over hundreds, even thousands of years. The classic list of obligatory acts of *hesed* include hospitality to travelers and wayfarers, visiting and caring for the sick, providing a poor woman with the means to be married, attending to the dead and comforting mourners. In the Middle Ages in Europe, it took on the meaning of providing an interest-free loan to a community member in need.

So Rabbi Yohanan’s teaching is that it is through such acts, acts that serve to bind us together in a web of mutuality, that we are able to connect not to just to one another but also to God/liness. Other rabbinic texts teach that we are in fact modeling God’s actions when we do *gemilut chasadim*: that in the Torah we see ways in which God clothed the naked, visited the sick, buried the dead, and so we are called to enact Godliness as well. And according to Rabbi Yohanan, such acts “atone for our sins”—they are the avenue through which we can repair our relationship with one another and restore our connection to the Godliness that we encounter in other people, in ourselves, and in the world.

Gemilut hasadim, understood in this way, is not just a practical means for ensuring a close-knit community. It is also a spiritual practice, a way to transform ourselves even as we touch the lives of others. As the Talmud makes clear, *gemilut chasadim* demands much of us on many levels. In contrasting the practice of *gemilut chasadim* to the practice of *tzedakah*, the obligation to give money to those in need, the rabbis said:

Gemilut chasadim is greater than *tzedakah* in three ways: *Tzedakah* can only be given with one’s money, and *gemilut chasadim* by personal involvement and with money. *Tzedakah* can only be given to the poor,

and *gemilut chasadim* to both the rich and the poor. *Tzedakah* can only be given to the living, and *gemilut chasadim* to both the living and dead. (*Sukkah* 49b)

Hesed asks that we give of our selves and of our time, not just from our checkbook. Acts of *hesed* can be done by anyone, rich or poor, and our own experience of being giver or receiver will shift at different times. *Hesed* asks of us perhaps the greatest challenge: to be present to people in their death, to care for the deceased according to the rituals of Jewish burial, and to accompany those who have died to their final resting place. As the rabbis note, this is an act of love that is completely selfless, for it can never be directly repaid.

Bobbi Breitman, a feminist psychotherapist and teacher at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, has written about the ways in which the practice of *hesed* challenges us to cross boundaries, to bridge the gap we experience between ourselves and others, “for the experience of self to be enlarged by moral action” (“Jewish Models of Self and Other, *The Reconstructionist* Spring 1996). She emphasizes the extent to which the practice of *gemilut hasadim* can be transformational, both for individuals and for communities.

Like any spiritual practice, *gemilut hasadim* has guidelines and specifications about how to do it. Yet at the same time, our tradition realizes that you cannot legislate these types of actions in the same way that other religious acts can be prescribed. The very first words of the Mishnah include *gemilut hasadim* in a short list of *mitzvot* for which there is “no prescribed measure (Mishnah Peah 1:1)—meaning that we do not limit the amount that we can give, with the implication that more is always better.

For those of us not raised in a traditional Jewish community, the practice of *hesed* can feel foreign or even threatening. Where Judaism assumes membership in covenantal community, modern American culture assumes individual autonomy and a norm of privacy. Where Judaism emphasizes the obligations of one member of a community to another, our society emphasizes the rights of freedom of the individual. We are used to having our actions dictated by our feelings; outside of familial obligations, we tend to do for others based on the level of connection that we personally feel. It feels and sounds strange to be expected to give to and receive from others whom we may barely know.

On a practical level, this can translate into an enormous amount of discomfort when we try to put the ideals of *hesed* into practice. How can I just show up at someone’s house for a shivah minyan after a funeral when I don’t even know that person? They’ll think I’m barging in on their private space. Why would I want people I barely know visiting me when I am ill, or offering me comfort when I grieve? How do I know when to ask, or if it’s appropriate to ask, for help?

These are all good questions, and the discomfort and awkwardness we have around issues of illness, death, and being in need are things that people have probably felt for many centuries. For precisely this

reason Jewish tradition has organized things so that one doesn't need to ask—the obligations are clear for all concerned. Jewish law requires a quorum of ten adults to say the Mourner's kaddish, so a mourner does not “invite” members of the community into her home: those members are coming to fulfill a loving obligation.

Yet the experience of *shivah* minyan extends far beyond this ritual obligation. More than once I've had people tell me that they were nervous about going to a *shivah* house of someone they didn't know, and yet once they arrived they realized how important it was to be there. And similarly I've heard from those who were initially wary of having “strangers” in their home at a time of intense grief, how comforting it felt to be surrounded by expressions of love and support, to know that the community was there for them, regardless of how many vaguely familiar faces filled the room. These personal stories speak to ways in which the communal experience of Jewish mourning, of sitting shivah, can be an important first step in the creation of “mutual concern,” the first step in fostering relationship between otherwise unconnected members of the community.

If the fear of being intrusive, or the awkwardness of reaching out to people we feel we don't know, can get in the way of being on the giving end of *gemilut chasadim*, there are also real obstacles on the receiving end. The ethic of self-sufficiency, of “raising yourself up by your own bootstraps,” that is part of the Protestant legacy in our American culture, can make us feel that we don't or shouldn't need help in times of trouble. We tend to privatize our problems and to feel that we have to deal with them entirely ourselves, or with those whom we pay for their help.

And even for those of us willing to accept help from the community, there can be feelings of shame attached to being in need. Illness or loss can threaten our sense of self, can make us want to withdraw, can make us fear the judgments of others. All of this can make it awkward to ask for help or to know how to receive it.

Traditional Jewish practice helps mitigate these feelings by standardizing, in certain ways, acts of *hesed*, so that the need to ask is lessened, and thus also the opportunities for shame or confusion. Traditionally, a meal is prepared by the community for a mourner for right after the funeral—no questions asked or expected. It is an obligation to visit one who is sick, and there are long discussions in Jewish texts on what to say or not to say, and how to be mindful of the ill person's wishes without making them have to ask for the comfort of a visit. Jews have always been especially skilled in the realm of food (!), and so a meal will arrive at the door of one who is suffering, with no special request having gone out. Similarly, there are guidelines about what to say and what not to say at the house of a mourner, to overcome the natural awkwardness we feel when in the presence of someone who is grieving. If I am on the receiving end of acts of care, it can be a great relief to know that the community knows how to respond and does not expect me to have to initiate the process.

Bobbi Breitman makes a very interesting point about the challenges of doing *hesed* in our modern world. She writes:

“Our definitions of community have changed dramatically since earlier times. In some ways our community, the social matrix in which our lives are embedded, has expanded; in other ways it has contracted. In an open, democratic society, many of us live in neighborhoods with people who are not Jewish, belong to communal and social organizations with non-Jews, and count among our friends [and relatives] people who are not Jewish... On the other hand, living in an excessively privatized culture, in which traditional forms of community have all but broken down, we live “in community” only if we have made concerted efforts with others to consciously and conscientiously reconstitute some form of communal life.” (p. 22)

To the extent, as Breitman describes, that our sense of community has contracted or shrivelled, it is acts of *hesed* that serve to expand that experience, to expand our sense of ourselves and of what it means to live in mutual relationship.

As a community, Dorshei Tzedek has already embarked on the challenge of creating a covenantal community based in *hesed*. Members have been caring for one another in a variety of ways since the congregation was founded, and I have been moved and impressed by the kinds of efforts that have been made to support one another in times of need. And I am also excited that there is a group of congregants, organized by the recently re-named Chesed Committee, who want to go even further, to help the congregation look at its own relationship to the “Torah of *hesed*” in the same way that we have engaged so deeply with the “Torah of money.” As with matters of money, Jewish tradition is rich in teachings about what it means to truly be a caring community. There are many questions to explore together, to further refine this covenant that we are a part of. What are the obligations of each member of the community to one another in times of trouble? What can a member expect from the congregation in times of need, and what can be rightly asked of a member to give? How do we help each other overcome feelings of shame or discomfort, so that the loving obligation of *hesed* can flow more freely? How do we ensure that we do not take on too much, while at the same time affirming that *gemilut hasadim* is a mitzvah which has no limit?

This is truly holy work, and I am excited that the community is beginning the journey of looking at questions like these. Keep an eye on the newsletter for announcements of upcoming meetings and discussions. Just as we’ll be wrestling in the year to come with the important issue of the outside structure of our community, with the physical space that houses our activities, so will we be looking at the inside structure, at the webs of relationship that give this congregation its true strength.

I’d like to close with another rabbinic story. It’s a midrash that talk about the mitzvah of hospitality, and that holds up our ancestor Abraham as the model for this type of *hesed*:

“[Abraham] went out, getting about in the world. When he met prospective guests, he brought them to his home. Even to him who was not accustomed to eat wheat bread, he gave wheat bread; to him who was not accustomed to eat meat, he gave meat; and to him who was not accustomed to drink wine, he gave wine. Not only that, but he got busy and built spacious mansions along the highways, and stocked them with food and drink, so that whoever entered ate, drank, and blessed Heaven. Therefore, unusual satisfaction was given to Abraham, and whatever any person requested was to be found in his house.” (Avot d’Rabbi Natan 7)

I love the point that this midrash makes about the blessing of generosity, about the bounty that redounds to one who gives greatly not just of material goods, but of effort and time as well. In our efforts to create a covenantal community, to fulfill the mitzvah of *gemilut chasadim*, we might fear that we don’t have enough to give, or that if we give what we are able we’ll suffer burn-out, we’ll have nothing left to give. But Abraham here is a model of receiving even as he goes out of his way to give: “unusual satisfaction was given to Abraham, and whatever any person requested was to be found in his house.” My wish for Dorshei Tzedek as we engage the mitzvah of *gemilut chasadim* is that our house becomes like Abraham’s house, full of abundance for those who are in need. If as a community we come together to give in the way that Abraham was said to give, the teaching here is that the mitzvah of giving will create a sense of bounty and blessing not only in the lives of those who receive, but for those who give as well. May this “unusual satisfaction” be the gift that we give one another in the months and years ahead.

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