

THE TRUE MEANING OF CHESED

Second Day Pesach 5779

I.

In four different places, the Torah reminds us that the Jewish people left Egypt in *chodesh ha-aviv*, springtime (Ex. 13:4, 23:15, 34:18; Deut. 16:1). While it's good to know a bit more detail, it seems a tad unnecessary for the Torah to repeatedly underscore when God took us out. Why is it so important for us to know that we left in the Spring?

I came across a beautiful answer to this by Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, the founding *rosh yeshiva* of the first *hesder yeshiva* in Israel, Kerem Be-Yavneh, in his *sefer Asufot Ma'arachot* (Bo, §7) who begins by quoting a *gemara* in *Yevamot* (79a) that describes three characteristics that make the Jewish people special. Two of which are *chesed* and *rachmanut*, typically translated as “kindness and mercy,” but the English translations obscure the question asked by R. Goldvicht: aren't these two words usually seen as synonyms of one another? What's the fundamental difference between *chesed* and *rachmanut*?

His answer is that *chesed* and *rachmanut* are two fundamentally different expressions of kindness. *Rachmanut* is really pity: it's a reaction to something we see. A crisis develops and we respond to help. Perhaps we see someone outside a supermarket asking for money or food and we give them some. A friend of ours falls on hard times and so we give them some assistance. *Rachmanut*, as R. Goldvicht insists, is very important. But it's very different to *chesed*, a sustained, consistent act of charity done with intent in advance and anticipation of a situation occurring. *Chesed* is not giving money or food to the odd asker but the realization that hunger and homelessness are problems and thus giving a recurring donation to a soup kitchen or shelter. *Chesed* isn't giving assistance to someone when they fall on hard times but the creation and sustaining of a resource to help people who struggle.

In other words, we act with *rachmanut* when the mood strikes us, when we feel a need to help; but *chesed* is performed no matter our mood, no matter how much else is going on. *Rachmanut* is opt-in, *chesed* never gives us a day off. *Rachmanut* is reactive; *chesed* is proactive.

II.

This distinction, says R. Goldvicht, is learned from the very way God took us out of Egypt, in the Spring. As Rashi notes (Ex. 13:4),

רָאוּ חֶסֶד שְׁגַמְלָכֶם, שֶׁהוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם בְּחֹדֶשׁ שֶׁהוּא כְּשֶׁר לְצֵאת, לֹא חֶמָה וְלֹא צָנָה
וְלֹא גְשָׁמִים,

See the kindness God bestowed, that He took you out in a month that's pleasant:
it's neither too hot nor too cold, nor is their rain.

God could have taken the people out in the depths of winter or height of summer – and, after 210 years of slavery, it would've been appreciated – but that would only have been an example of *rachmanut*, pity. In contrast, taking us out in spring revealed *chesed*: God realized in advance the best time to take the people out and thus acted accordingly.

III.

Yesterday, I spoke about the centrality of *chesed* to our Seder. By reversing the order of the meal and *Maggid*, the Haggadah helps us realize that those in need have the same dignity as us. But, as much as I said yesterday that the Haggadah prevents our act of *chesed* from being an act of pity, inviting people at the Seder is still more likely to be an act of *rachmanut* – a once a year act of kindness done with the realization that others need a Seder.

But our Seder must inspire us to transform our *rachmanut* into *chesed*. It's not enough to invite people just once a year – it must be a recurring commitment. As Rambam famously declares in a halakhah I have quoted before (*Hilkhos Shevitat Yom Tov* 6:18), the obligation to open our homes to all exists on all *yamim tovim*.

And so, I want to end by encouraging you all to make sure that you don't just engage in acts of *rachmanut* but also acts of *chesed*. Think about the ways that you can make a sustained, recurring, consistent contribution to those in need, rather than only reacting when necessary.

We celebrate Pesach in the spring because that is when God took us out. But it also teaches us how we should act in the world – not just with *rachmanut*, pity, but also with *chesed*, consistent kindness.