

Hardheaded Altruism

My late grandmother, Helen Sarna, lived in my parent's home for three and a half years while I was in high school. One early morning, in December of my senior year, days after I had been admitted to college, my parents told me that she had passed away. A death in our home. Once upon a time this is what death normally looked like. It was gentle, we knew it was coming, and there it was. My father's parents both made it extremely clear that they wanted to die at home, and my parents made possible this final wish.

In Parashat Vayechi, Jacob has a final wish as well: to be buried in Israel.

In the very first verses of our Torah portion, Jacob says to Joseph:

אם-נא מצאאתי חן בעיניך...ועשית עמדי חסד ואמת, אל-נא תקברני במצרים. ושכבתי, עם-אבותי, ונשאתני ממצרים, וקברתני בקברתם;

If I have found favor in your eyes...promise that you will deal kindly and truly with me: please do not bury me in Egypt. But when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.

Deal kindly and truly with me. Chesed v'Emet.

Rashi, in twelfth century France, comments on this verse. He says, based on the Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah, that the kindness, the chesed, that we do with the dead is a חסד של אמת, a kindness of truth-- an ultimate kindness- because we do not expect anything in return. We are acting kindly towards a person who cannot repay us.

And indeed, Jacob in some ways has already not repaid Joseph. When Joseph brings his sons to Jacob's deathbed, Jacob speaks to them about the death of Rachel, Joseph's mother. Rashi wonders-- why does Jacob bring up Rachel in this moment? And Rashi suggests that Jacob is worried that Joseph won't bury him in Hebron, in Maarat HaMachpela with his father, because Jacob did not extend that courtesy to Rachel. He didn't even bring her in to Bethlehem for burial-- he just buried her on the way, where they were. So why should Joseph go out of his way to bury his father in Israel? The Ramban, a thirteenth century Spanish commentator, adds to Rashi, and says that Jacob mentions Rachel in order to apologize to Joseph. In order to say, "I wish I could have brought your mother to Hebron. Please don't make the same mistake that I did. Bury me in Hebron." The chesed shel emet, the ultimate kindness, that Jacob asks of Joseph is a kindness that Jacob himself did not extend to Joseph's own mother.

And more than that. In some ways, Jacob already did not repay the kindness. We know exactly what Jacob would have done if Joseph had died-- because Jacob thought Joseph had died! Jacob thought Joseph had died, and he did not search for the body. He did not ask the sons to go back and find Joseph's remains after they told him that a wild animal had eaten him. Wild animals leave behind bones-- but nobody went back to look for Joseph's and bury them in Hebron. Jacob is truly requesting a chesed shel emet. An act of kindness that he did not model and that he cannot repay.

Chesed Shel Emet. Kindness without reward. Altruism.

Altruism is a controversial subject. Many psychologists and philosophers would tell you that altruism does not exist. Kindness is worthwhile, but the person who does the act of kindness is always repaid in some way or another. Perhaps through reciprocity. Perhaps by gaining power. Perhaps it's that strengthening the group at individual expense supports overall genetic survival. This cynicism about altruism goes back a long way. Aristotle questioned altruism. His Nicomachean Ethics begin from the starting point that human beings act ultimately for the sake of their own Eudaimonia-- often rendered as "happiness" or "well-being." Aristotle would say that the ultimate purpose, even of generous acts of kindness, is the well-being of the actor.

And Aristotle finds good company with Rabbi Meir, a second century scholar and influential voice in the Mishnah. The Talmud in Moed Katan 28b records him saying:

דיספד יספדוניה דיקבר יקברוניה דיטען יטענוניה דידל ידלוניה

"He that eulogizes will be eulogized by others. He that buries others will be buried by others. He that loads many words of praise and tribute into the eulogies that he delivers for others will be similarly treated by others. He that raises his voice in weeping over others will have others raise their voices over him."

This is in direct contradiction to Rashi's interpretation of Chesed Shel Emet. Here Rabbi Meir recommends: bury others and others will bury you. Not those same others, obviously, but if you are a person who is involved in taking care of the dead, people will be sure to take care of you when you die. You will have set a model, you will have inspired others-- and they will remember your merits and take care of you when you pass. But ultimately then, your actions are not altruistic-- you benefit in the long term. What goes around comes around-- so send the right things around!

But the story of Jacob's death teaches us that Chesed Shel Emet is real. Joseph embalmed Jacob and transported him to Hebron selflessly, knowing that his father did not do the same for his mother, knowing that his father did not attempt to do the same for him. At the end of our Parsha, Joseph does not even request the same for himself. He only asks that when the Jews ultimately leave Egypt and return to Canaan, they bring his bones with them. For all of our philosophy and evolutionary theory

and cynicism about human nature-- **in Judaism, we hard-headedly believe in altruism.** We believe in selfless kindness. Kindness at great loss. Chesed shel emet.

The State of Israel has, over and over again in its 70 year history, exchanged prisoners for bodies. The Jewish state practices selfless kindness, endangering itself, for the bodies of its dead. And these efforts are ongoing, as news reports that Israel is still in negotiations with Hamas over the bodies of Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul. Why does Israel bother retrieving bodies? Chesed shel Emet. We treat our dead with dignity, we bury them with dignity, as a final kindness that they can never repay.

When my grandmother passed away in our home that December morning, I remember being shocked by who showed up: the director of operations from my high school. His name is Merv. We called the Rabbi, the Rabbi called the chevra kadisha- the team of volunteers who prepare bodies for Jewish burial-- and up drove Merv. At the Maimonides School, Merv supervised the janitorial staff, yelled at kids for throwing balls too close to windows, and generally took responsibility for the building. I saw Merv probably every day of high school. And I had no idea that he regularly took time off work-- because he was the head of the Chevra Kadisha. When you do chesed shel emet, you don't talk about it. You don't accept accolades for your work. You don't expect a reward, and you don't get one-- you just do some of the holiest kindnesses that exist because you are an altruist.

Our belief in altruism is not limited to the way we treat the dead-- it extends to the living as well. We inconvenience ourselves for others even if we don't know them, and even if they might never reciprocate. We go late to work because there's a bris or simhat bat-- knowing that the baby most likely won't do that for us any time soon. We stay up late cooking a meal for new parents, or people who are sitting shiva, even if we have no relationship at all with those people-- without expectation that those parents or mourners will cook for us. We invite strangers into our homes as guests on Shabbat, even though we have no plans ever to visit them in return. We visit members of our community who are hospitalized -- even if we don't know them, and even though we hope to never be hospitalized ourselves. We inconvenience ourselves to extend kindness even to those who have never offered us that same kindness, even to those from whom we do not expect kindness in return. Chesed shel Emet. A kindness of truth. A true kindness.

Jacob wanted to be buried in Hebron. He asked for altruism from Joseph. In some ways, a ridiculous and unfounded request. But then Joseph does it.

In Parashat Yavechi, Jacob and Joseph teach us to overcome our cynicism and believe that altruism is real. That we are capable of extending selfless kindness, Chesed shel Emet. It is an incredible challenge even just to believe that altruism is a possibility. But Judaism asks us to do more than-- it asks us to believe we are capable of it, and then, like Joseph, act in conformity with that capability. If we are capable of altruism, then we must strive be our best selves-- we must become selfless givers.