



YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREAT NECK

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The Parsha in Practice

Chesed: It's Not IF, But WHEN

This derasha is being published earlier than normal. On a regular week, I'm usually not ready to get to writing it until Friday morning. This week, I have no choice, as I'll likely still be in the hospital on Friday morning. Thank G-d, I am here electively as I've made the decision - as have many thousands before me - to donate a kidney. I've always been comfortable sharing personal thoughts and reflections with you all, and I figured you might be curious to understand my thinking, so here goes.

I've been joking with people when asked why I'm donating a kidney: "It seems that I have an extra" or that "it's the only weight loss technique I can get to work where the weight won't come back." Funny.. (for a rabbi,) I know.

Jokes aside, I see this as a relatively obvious takeaway from the studying and teaching of Torah I've done in my life. To bring but one example in this week's Parsha, after clarifying the care we are to take for the disadvantaged, the Torah says "*Im kesef talveh es ami*, If you lend money to my people.." and continues to teach the laws of free loans.

The Midrash on these words claims that this is one of three cases where the word "*Im*," should not be translated as "if" as it normally would, but instead as "when," and so it should read "When you lend money."

The difference between "if" and "when" is the difference between "If I climb Mt. Everest" and "When I climb Mt. Everest." The difference is about 35,000 ft. of climbing.

If true, the Torah would be making the assumption that the chesed of providing another with the capital to get themselves on their feet is not something that we might do, but something that we must do. This seems to be literally the furthest thing from the obvious pshat reading of the text, and yet, this interpretation is taken as a given among all of the commentaries.



Of course, to be able to lend, you require your own resources, and to have been approached by someone in need of your help, but the universal reading of this verse assumes that if both of those conditions are present, you **will** help. No "if"s, ands or buts. It's just a matter of **when**.

Quite simply, I find this amazing. Our tradition had no question as to the "real" meaning of this verse in spite of what it actually says! The expectation that they will provide free loans to another Jew, the extreme presumption of generosity towards others that we observe here, is a central element of Judaism and a middah that needs no confirmation or will ever face any dispute. The Jewish people are meant to be identified for their mercy and generosity towards others. Whether it's through our time, energy, or resources, we are meant to see no greater value than to roll up our sleeves and to give back in gratitude for what we have. If this past year is any indicator, we have been given so many opportunities for chesed and have risen empathetically and emphatically to the task. I am so grateful to be in a community that responds the way we have, with initiative, creativity, and unparalleled generosity. This is simply what the Torah expects of us.

I see this donation as the logical extension of the kindness the Torah assumes we are all capable of. We have all given of ourselves when things were tough and sacrificed for others in need. Behaving kindly and generously - even when challenging - is our glorious inheritance.

A kidney though? Now that might seem like a bit much. It's certainly different in scale but also magnified in its scope and impact. At the same time, I know about ten people who have done this, and honestly, after speaking to some of them and hearing their accounts, it's become decidedly less impressive. "About half as risky as childbirth." "The recovery was quick." "The only thing I can't do now is Advil." Doesn't seem so bad!

Where did this idea come from? I've received that question a number of times. I owe the idea to Renewal, an organization that facilitates Kidney donation. I was introduced to them by families in our shul who had benefited from their kindness. They offer a variety of services to support donors and recipients and assist in overcoming the obstacles that some may experience when considering a kidney donation, but to me, I am most grateful to Renewal for introducing me to an idea that at first seemed impossible, but now seems obvious.

So, what led me here? Why am I doing this? I realize that there might be counter-arguments or skepticism at my overly idealistic perspective. Also, personal considerations and individual and family risk profiles make it impossible for so many to consider this as an option, and my reasons may be difficult to even relate to. Here are some:

- The past year has been one of intense focus on health. Our own. We've understandably been doing what we can to protect ourselves and our loved ones from COVID-19. For me, the past year has reminded me of the gratitude I owe for my own health and after a year of extreme inward-attention, it's time for me to balance with some outward expression.
- I just can't think of a straighter line between a single thing a person desperately needs most and my ability to provide it.

- Many tens of thousands of theoretical recipients await a kidney, knowing that the number of kidneys naturally available will simply never meet the demand. Every altruistic living donor increases hope for every one of those people that the needle might - someday - move closer in the direction of their survival.

So, that's the story. You're receiving this after the surgery has happened. It seems I'm ok, and most certainly receiving excellent care. I hope the recipient is doing a lot better as well! I should be home before Shabbat and hope to be back in shul sometime next week. Feel free to reach out, I apologize in advance if it takes me some time to respond. Thank you to those who will need to pick up any slack in my absence.

Remember, when it comes to chesed of any kind, our Parsha teaches the only lesson that matters: "It's not IF, but WHEN."

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach