

**The Importance of Chesed**  
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**Parshat Lekh Lekha 5781**

“Avram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all his property and the souls they had made in Haran, and they set out for the land of Kena'an...” (Ber 12:5)

On the surface it would seem “the souls they had made” refers to slaves that Avraham and Sarah had acquired in Haran. However, Rashi quotes the midrashic explanation that the souls referred to in this verse are the men and the women that Avraham and Sarah had “brought under the wings of the Shekhina.” In other words, before journeying to the promised land Avraham and Sarah were already busy converting people to the worship of the Holy One, Blessed be He. Interestingly, we have no such mention of converts when it comes to the other patriarchs and matriarchs. Why should we only hear about the converts brought in by Avraham and Sarah?

Each of the three Avot is associated with a different Divine Attribute: Avraham is the embodiment of Chesed—loving kindness, Yitzchak is Gevurah—strength, discipline, restrained, and Yaakov is Tiferet—Harmony, Beauty, Truth that results from the synthesis of Chesed and Gevurah. It was not Yitzchak's discipline, or even Yaakov's beauty that attracted new adherents, but Avraham's Chesed.

While each of these three attributes is intrinsically positive and necessary, only Chesed can connect with others and draw them near to G-d, Torah and the Jewish people.

Bais Abe, has long been a community where people who may feel distant from Torah or Jewish community are inspired to connect and commit to their Judaism more deeply. This is so, because we have been a community that, like our forefather Avraham, and like his namesake, Rabbi Avraham Magence ztz”l, embodies the attribute of Chesed. Chesed is often translated as lovingkindness, but it is much more than that. Chesed is a love which overflows boundaries, which

respects no limits. Chesed, like water, will flow wherever gravity takes it. At Bais Abe, Chesed has taken the form of not only loving and accepting every Jew for who they are, regardless of how “religious” or pious they appear, and of outreach efforts to communities that have not always been well-served by other synagogues or institutions, be it recent immigrants from Russia, college students, secular Israelis, the LGBT community, converts or Baalei Teshuvah. I dare say that most people who are members of Bais Abe today, myself included, were drawn here by that spirit of Chesed.

Now, Chesed can be dangerous. A love which overflows all boundaries can hurt people. In order to protect ourselves and the people we come into contact with, we need to temper Chesed with Gevurah, with discipline and restraint. There is no more clear illustration of this than the ways that social distancing guidelines protect us and others from COVID-19. The impulse to give our friend or relative a hug or a kiss when we meet them comes from the spirit of Chesed, from love, but during a pandemic, or even in a normal year during flu season, we need to restrain that impulse to show love, and not hug people or even shake their hands. We need to stand several feet away, and even wear a mask over our nose and mouth to protect them and ourselves. Now, more than ever, the necessity of Gevruah is clear.

Here at Bais Abe, in order to keep our community safe, we need Gevurah, in the form of social distancing guidelines, limits on the number people who can come to events, abbreviated prayer services. However, Gevurah does not bring new people in. Only Chesed can do that.

As the pandemic continues, and it becomes clearer that things may never be the same, and that social distancing will be a necessity for many more months, maybe years. When we thought this was going to be a matter of weeks or months at most, we could afford to put all our efforts into Gevruah, into restrictions to keep us safe. Unfortunately, the Gevruah that keeps us safe often makes it harder to connect with new people. Shortening services by omitting the devar Torah, Mishekebrakhs, and beloved songs like Adon Olam and Anim Zemirot, make services less appealing to those who are

not already committed to davening with the community. Not hosting guests makes it harder for newcomers to connect with community, and makes it harder for converts and Baalei Teshuvah to learn the ropes of Jewish observance. In order to make sure that our community is still open to newcomers and to outsiders, we have to find ways to bring Chesed into our Gevruah, to bring some boundless loving kindness into our restraint, playfulness into our discipline, and a little chaos into the order. If we don't find a way to do this, it would be a tragedy not only for our shul, which will suffer from the failure to attract new members, but for all the people out there, who might be drawn close to G-d Torah and the Jewish people through a connection with Bais Abe.

Our task as a community is to find ways to reach out and connect with people without creating conditions that increase the likelihood of spreading COVID-19. This is essential for our health as a community.

I believe it's equally essential for our health as individuals, that we find ways throughout this pandemic to connect with people in spite of the necessary public health restrictions. We need to find ways to continue reaching out to people through phone calls, written correspondence, video chats or maybe even socially distant in person gatherings. Just as we have had to get creative as a shul to figure out how to connect with people during this pandemic, we as individuals have to figure out how to connect with people.

The temptation is to retreat into the cocoon of our private homes and habits. I want to challenge all of us to continue finding new ways to reach out and connect with people, with our community and with causes that are important to us.

When we do this, we are, like Avraham and Sarah, "making soul." G-d's presence dwells in the space between people who are in loving relationship toward another, engaging in holy pursuits together. When we build those sacred connections with others, we are, as it were, bringing more of G-d's presence, which is the soul of the world into this world. And in that merit, may we emerge from this

pandemic not only physically intact, but even more spiritually and socially connected to one another as well. Shabbat Shalom!