

Parshat Lech Lecha 5783

Lech Lecha opens with the first of the 10 nisyonos (tests) of Avraham Avinu according to many authorities. We are all familiar with the concept that each of the Avos exemplified a particular trait, and that Avram's was chesed. We usually translate chesed as "loving kindness" and we might intuitively feel that an element of altruism may be involved.

Rashi's first words are "Lech Lecha : Lahano'oscho uletovoscho" meaning to go for your own good and benefit. Rashi then explains what this means: To father a great nation, and to have wealth, fame and a good reputation.

In this first nisayon for Avraham Avinu who is the Ish Chesed, there seems to be a degree of personal advantage. In terms of testing Avram, why doesn't Hashem simply request that Avram go to Canaan without making these reassuring promises? Furthermore, If we are looking for insights in the sedrah to Avram's character, we can see a few pesukim later. (Bereshis 12:13) when Avram tells Sarai to pretend to be his sister. He says "L'maan yitav li " which Rashi interprets as "they'll give me gifts!"

There seems to be difficulty in reconciling Avraham's supposed characteristic of chesed which we take to mean "kindness, selflessness or altruism" ie concern for others; with this apparent concern for his own welfare!

There are two posukim in Mishlei which help to answer this question:

1. 11:13: Gomel nafsho ish chesed v'ocher se'ero achzori. "a man of chesed looks after himself -he who afflicts himself is cruel.
2. (14, 34) (rather more controversially) chesed l'umim chatos" – the chesed of the nations is a sin!!"

We also find a Midrash in Vayikrah Rabba, (34:3) which recounts a conversation between Hillel who, upon encountering his talmidim, pronounces that he is about to do a mitzvah- He is going to take a bath!"

These sources appear to be defining chesed as an each man for himself free for all! Apart from feeling counter-intuitive, these notions of chesed seem to contradict all that we've been taught. Rambam Hilchos Tshuva. (10:1) explicitly spells out that a person should not perform the mitzvos in order to receive a reward. Rather he should be like Avraham who only served Hashem out of love. Yet Avram seems in our Parsha to be prepossessed at times with material benefits. On the other hand, he is *the* Ish Chesed a paradigm of Avoda Me'ahava supposedly a model of selflessness. How can these contradictory portrayals of Avraham and these differing notions of Chesed be reconciled?

We have a Mitzva Doraisa of Veahavta Lereacha kamocha. Rabbi Avraham Twerski comments that before you can love others you must love yourself. He writes at length in many of his books of the necessity of high self esteem as a prerequisite for dealing generously and genuinely with others.

Rav Dessler in Michtav Me'Eliyahu also points out that a person is incapable of performing any act that he does not *want* to do. Even when a person takes a difficult decision to do something he perceives he would rather not do, he is nonetheless acting in his own interest.

He explains that if A performs an act of kindness for B, for no reason other than to be kind to B, the act nonetheless comes from within A. A did it because A *wanted* to do it. The act is not selfless. If I act leshem shemayim I do so because that is what I *want to do*.

True selflessness on the other hand can actually be quite damaging. Rav Mattis Weinberg says on this issue that Chesed means having no "ulterior" motive. The only thing not "ulterior" in any way is my own self. Somebody who finds his own personal experience meaningless can by definition only be motivated by something outside of himself. The motives of such a person can only be 'ulterior'.

Now perhaps we can understand why Mishlei says that the chesed of the nations is a chatas.

Nations that imagine that chesed equals altruism or acting 'for the greater good' rather than from any personal involvement will always end in a chatas.

In the previous century, both the Nazis and Soviets demanded true "selflessness" of their citizens i.e. the subservience of the individual towards the state. Between them they contrived the mass murder and deaths of 100 million people.

However, on the contrary, Gomel Nafsho Ish Chesed. A kind person looks after himself. A person whose entire being is suffused with giving so that kindness to others is not selfless but is simply an expression of being.

When we give to others, it should be because we *want* to give, because we *want* to love. For this reason, Hashem says to Avraham, Lech Lecha "Lahano'oscho uletovoscho"

It had to be also for his benefit and not from repression of physical needs. There are not two separate facets of life, one of material benefits and looking after number one; the other of kindness to others. Chesed demands they must both be part of the same whole. Love of others and Love of Hashem must arise from love of life itself!

Avraham is being challenged to reach the ultimate "L'Shem Shamaim" and truly serve Hashem from within.