

Kindness Cafe

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Aaron Dahan¹ is the Jewish proprietor of Cafe Aronne, a cafe on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Since October 7, he has put Israeli flags on display in his store, and conducted a fundraiser for Magen David Adom- both initiatives with which his baristas were unhappy; they were supporters of the Palestinian cause. According to Dahan, he offered them an opportunity to sit down, have dinner together and attempt to arrive at some kind of understanding, but they were not interested. Since October 7, five baristas have quit due to their sympathies with Palestine; the two most recent departures were this week, after Dahan attempted to initiate a conversation with them about the Palestinian flag pins they were wearing. Faced with the prospect of shutting down due to the lack of staff, Dahan reached out to the one woman who he knew would help him- his mother Peggy. He was at a catering event, and called her and said, "Mom, I'm going to have to close down." She was emphatic that she would not let that happen, and instead, she came and worked the register, as did her assistant. Soon, word got around; instagram influences like former Shaare member Ira Savetsky² encouraged people to

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<https://nypost.com/2023/11/07/metro/jewish-community-shows-in-droves-to-support-ues-cafe-after-pro-palestinian-baristas-walk-out/?fbclid=IwAR1hcFiflOaBW3H91jdzECakLMo9WeK9kCpSU61vQCqVIAot-U8rBPV2gss>

² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CzWjwsBrz3T/?hl=en>

support a Jewish-owned, pro Israel business as did several local Rabbis. Locals stepped up to help staff the cafe. A teacher in Ramaz named Rabbi Pesach Sommer conducted a Torah class in the cafe. In short order, lines formed on Lexington and E. 71st that snaked around the block! This is a story of Jewish solidarity in support of Israel, resolve in the face of petulant woke baristas, and the far-reaching impact of the war in Israel. If it teaches us anything, it is about the power of compassion, but also about something more simplistic, but no less true: it is so hard to find good help these days! These two lessons are actually related, as we learn in this week's Parsha.

It is time for Avraham to find a bride for his son Yitzchak, and he sends his servant, Eliezer, on the holy task of identifying a suitable candidate. As he is about to begin his search, Eliezer turns to God in prayer, for His divine assistance in his success.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם הַקְרָה־נָּא לִפְנֵי הַיּוֹם וַעֲשֵׂה־חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם:

And he said, "O יהוה, God of my master Abraham's [house], grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham:

הֲנֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹצֵב עַל־עֵינֵי הַמַּיִם וּבְנֹת אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר יֵצְאֹת לְשֹׂאב מַיִם:

Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townspeople come out to draw water;

Rav Mordechai Druk, in his masterful collection of Torah discourses called *Darash Mordechai*, asks a simple question. What kind of prayer is this? God knows where you're standing! Think about it: When the Chazzan, on the Yamim Noraim, begins mussaf with the prefatory *Hineni* prayer, he says הִנְנִי הָעֲנִי מִמַּעַשׂ - here I am, impoverished in deed- but he doesn't say, "Here I am, standing at the Bimah in the center of the shul..." When you daven on an airplane, you don't say, "God, it's Ariel in 18E"!

Rav Meir Leibush Weiser, the Malbim, explains that the location where he stood was actually an essential part of the test- to see whether Rivka was a true *baalat chessed*. Eliezer was a strapping war hero. Standing astride a well, he certainly didn't *look* like he needed the assistance of a young girl to draw water. It would have been easy for her to tell herself, "I don't need to help him! Let him get his own glass of water!" The test was whether she would help at all; it was whether she would someone *who didn't appear to need it*.

We often think of *chesed* as only assisting those who appear to us as *nebbach* cases, presenting with obvious life challenges. However, there are many people in our sphere

who appear to have their act together, so we assume they don't need our help or even a check-in from time to time. Because they present as strong people, we don't rate them as worthy of our acts of *chessed*. In fact, Eliezer's location stresses to us that the highest form of *chessed* is when you bestow kindness on those no one else would consider worthy of *chessed*. After all, you never really know. Someone who appears strong may actually be falling apart inside, or behind closed doors. The confident, successful entrepreneur may be plagued by crippling anxiety and self-doubt. The dream couple who seem so passionately in love and so effortlessly in sync may be weathering a marital crisis that threatens to break them; The family that seems financially successful may be totally overextended on purchases they can no longer afford, or have finances that are so precarious that they are one crisis away from penury; the person who seems to be the picture of health and optimism may be dealing with a serious, life threatening medical condition. In this context, it is worth noting that three women in Jewish community in Dallas are in need of kidneys: Ellen Bock, Suzanne Goldstone Rosenhouse, and our own Linda Blasnik, with whose permission I am sharing this with you. You often would not know from looking at kidney transplant candidates that they are dealing with such a serious condition and such an imperative need.. Linda always has a smile on her face and always walks everywhere- someone so healthy and optimistic can't possibly need a kidney! But she does, and if it is in your medical ability

to get tested to be a donor, it would be an enormous, incalculable *chessed*, a way to give life to people who are full of life themselves.

This lesson, about our stereotypes of *chessed*, plays itself on the global scene as well. One of the major shortcomings of progressive social justice organizations and initiatives is that they identify solely with whoever they perceive to be the underdog or think is oppressed. To be clear, helping and advocating for the oppressed is a Jewish value. The book of Kohelet is replete with references to the special care God extends to those who are oppressed:

וְשָׁבַתִּי אֲנִי וְאָרְאָה אֶת-כָּל-הַעֲשֻׂקִים אֲשֶׁר בַּעֲשִׂים תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהִנֵּה | דְּמָעַת הַעֲשֻׂקִים וְאִין לָהֶם מְנַחֵם וּמִיָּד עֲשָׂקִיהֶם כֹּחַ
וְאִין לָהֶם מְנַחֵם:

Kohelet 4:1

I further observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors— with none to comfort them.

But when it comes to Jews, suddenly Jews are not worthy of mercy. There is always a narrative constructed to frame the oppression of Jews as somehow deserved, whether

because we have too much financial power and acumen, because we are ourselves powerful oppressors, because we are colonizers of land that rightfully belongs to others, or because we are a pernicious influence by virtue of our Jewishness. Indeed, the only time we rate as worthy of *chesed* is, to borrow the title of Dara Horn's exceptional book, when we are Dead Jews. The image of the helpless, cowering Jew is, of late, one that can arouse a modicum of sympathy, so long as we don't fight back or do anything to change that image. Indeed, in the war of Israel on Hamas, the tactic of portraying oneself as a *nebbach* to arouse sympathy is one of the most potent forces shaping rampant anti-Israel sentiment. Whoever is a bigger *מסכן* wins in the court of public opinion, and Hamas and their useful idiot shills (including, tragically, many groups with the word "Jewish" in the title) are amazing at this. Images of kids holding up bloody hands are certain to arouse public sympathy, unless you look carefully and see that the kid has six fingers, and it's actually an almost perfect AI image. The pictures of people pulling bodies out of rubble, including those of children, are powerful and saddening, for sure. You can see how someone who views these pictures without context would think Israel is guilty of war crimes, genocide even. Forget that there actually *are* Moslem groups that are experiencing targeted genocide, like the Uighurs in China and the Rohingya in Myanmar. But no one seems to care about *them*, because Hamas are master manipulators of the attention, opinion and sympathy of the public. The common narrative of Israel occupying Gaza and applying a stranglehold on it are

so entrenched that the fact that Israel left Gaza in 2005 is never mentioned; even the notion that the Gazans are not suffering under Israeli occupation, but under Hamas oppression goes unnoticed, and even if it were noticed, no doubt no one would mention that the Gazans elected Hamas in the first place. There is no context provided explaining that Hamas operatives set up rocket launchers in places like schools and playgrounds, hide themselves among civilian populations and commit every possible violation of the laws of war, of which hostage taking is only one example- because Hamas are masters at portraying themselves as the world's *nebbach* case.

And Israel does itself no favors in the court of public opinion by projecting the image of strength. The narrative of strong, resolute Jews who will not be cowed by a craven enemy, who will stop at nothing to defeat it, and who continue to celebrate life and love even in the darkest of times is not one that earns plaudits from The Guardian or CNN. Of course, Israelis *are* strong and resolute- but if we're honest, we need them to be that way, or at least to appear that way. Israelis who are strong give us strength here in the diaspora to weather a world that is rapidly changing, or at least more openly showing its true colors. But in addition to resolve, Israelis, especially those who have been evacuated from the south and the north, are stressed, strung out, tired, terrified...and bored. Their routines are completely upended, their sources of income have evaporated as the primary breadwinners have been drafted or they had to leave the place where

their income is generated. They are in hotels or temporary dwellings with very little oversight or awareness of their needs save for grassroots initiatives; their kids have no school, no structure and nothing to do. Just because they are keeping a brave, optimistic face doesn't mean they don't need our assistance, our compassion- our *chessed*.

This is the lesson of Eliezer standing by the well, and Rivka's kindness. *Chessed* is not about the soundbite or the instagram feed, it's not about what makes for the best story. It's about learning to recognize who needs your help the most; it's not necessarily who you think.

Today, we are celebrating the aufruf of Steven Hamburger, and the Shabbos Kallah of Monica Ribald. If there is anyone who personifies the proper way to do *chessed*, by understanding who needs it most, how to do it best and how to benefit Israel through *chessed*, it's Monica. Thank God, our community has benefitted from her perspective- and, yes, from her legendary frankness- for many decades. Thank you, Monica, for bringing Steven to our community. If you have selected Steven as your partner in this new chapter of your lives, it must be you see these same qualities in one another. May you continue to do amazing, true *chessed* for one another, and together for others, for many more years in good health and happiness. Mazal Tov!