

## A Charity Case

### Parshat Noach - 5782

“Yocheved” is an Israeli woman who suffers from a severe kidney disease and is in urgent need of an operation, one that will cost her at least a million shekel. Her husband is an amputee who is not able to work, and children she needed to marry off. Her case was the subject of an active Facebook campaign, and an all-day fundraising drive on the Israeli chareidi radio station Radio Kol Chai. No doubt you have come across an urgent message like this at some point; a dire medical case, accompanied by poignant music that tugs at your heartstrings and compels you to donate immediately. This week, the Israeli business site “The Marker<sup>1</sup>” broke a story whose shockwaves are reverberating right now throughout Israel - and it has reached our shores as well, publicized by the fearless journalist Avital Chizhik Goldschmidt<sup>2</sup>, who, you will recall, spoke virtually to our community in March. Apparently, the level of fraud involved in these charitable campaigns is astounding. An Israeli non-profit campaigned for the medical expenses of 26 patients. When auditors requested their files, 18 of them were “lost”. Other cases, like Yocheved’s, were verified, but the funds were appallingly misappropriated. In her case, the public responded generously; NIS 5 million was raised... of which she only received **116K**. The overwhelming majority went to PR firms, including to the radio station that conducted the campaign and the announcer who did the talking. Other funds went to various administrators and activists, known as *askanim*. Those with an axe to grind might say that this is no revelation at all; only a willfully naive person

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.themarker.com/law/premium.HIGHLIGHT-MAGAZINE-1.10255663>

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/avitalrachel/status/1445037144989446150>

would assume that these types of campaigns are on the up and up. Of course, this story serves as a wakeup call about the need for transparency in charitable organizations and discernment in where to direct your charitable dollars. One might think, though, that the primary victims of this fraud are the donors who are fleeced, and the intended beneficiaries who are robbed. But I'd like to address another casualty, one that has a ripple effect far beyond the defrauding of individuals.

Our sages tell us that, despite their many crimes, the fate of the generation of the flood was ultimately sealed because of one behavior alone - חמס. As the verse states,

וְתִמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס

What is the meaning of this term? Many commentators understand *chamas* as referring to a very specific category of theft- one that is undetectable, habitual and non- actionable in a court of law. For instance, if someone stole an item whose worth was less than a *perutah*, approximately one cent, the court could not adjudicate the case, because such negligible sums were at stake.

In his commentary titled *Tiferes Shlomo*, the great Chassidic leader, Rav Shlomo haKohen Rabinowicz of Radomsk (1801-1866), suggested that the rampant nature of this avaricious behavior represented an even more significant character failing. It meant the end of *rachmanus*, of compassion - a character trait manifested in the small moments of kindness, and concern about others even regarding seemingly insignificant matters. Taking small and worthless items that belong to others betrays a lack of compassion because the victim is still

left with feelings of betrayal at his security being compromised and his property being taken; perhaps the item that was taken was of little financial value, yet it possessed untold emotional value. Now, he is left without an avenue to productively address or quell his anger.

Recall that the final verdict to destroy the world and start over was rendered **only** because of this sort of theft, because it is this act which robbed the world of something far more precious than a few tchatchkes...it robbed the world of *rachmanus*, compassion. A world without compassion has no justification for its continued existence, and that is why the story about these charities is especially egregious. When our sympathies are cynically manipulated under the guise of compassion, it represents the ultimate perversion of this essential trait, especially because the result will be that people refuse to give even to legitimate causes, further depleting the world of the very trait on which it rests.

There is a fascinating Midrash<sup>3</sup> (Shochar Tov) which describes the fateful encounter between Malkitzedek (otherwise known as Shem) and our patriarch, Avraham Avinu. Avraham asked Shem how he and his family had managed to survive the terrible flood which wiped out the rest of humanity? Shem responded that he performed the mitzvah of tzedakah. Avraham was incredulous; how can it be considered tzedakah if there are no beneficiaries? There wasn't even a Yocheved! The only other people on the ark were members of Shem's immediate family, and none of them were poor. Who, indeed, were the beneficiaries of this so-called

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<sup>3</sup> Midrash Shochar Tov Tehillim 37

charity? Shem responded that his act of charity was feeding the animals on the ark and tending to their every need.

The Radomsker concludes that Shem and his family were able to demonstrate that *rachmanus* still existed; in preserving God's creations, they had proven to Him that mercy endured. As Portia proclaims in Act IV of the Merchant of Venice,

*The quality of mercy is not strained;*

*It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven*

*Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;*

*It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:*

When Avraham heard Shem's account, he had but one thought: If this man, Malkitzedek, can survive because he fed rodents to a python, supplied carrion to a black vulture and cleaned up the dung of a rhinoceros, imagine what **I** can do *for my fellow man*.

Hence, the midrash traces the legendary attribute of kindness which is synonymous with Avraham Avinu back to the Ark and the story of Noach. It was on the merit of this kindness that God decided to allow the world to be rebuilt once again. This is the meaning of the verse we say every Shabbat at Mincha<sup>4</sup>-

אדם ובהמה תושיע ה':

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 36:7

“God, save mankind and animals,” homiletically interpreted by the Radomsker as “In the merit of saving the animals, man was spared as well.”

For the loss of one basic trait, the world was almost entirely destroyed. At the same time, when it was demonstrated that mankind was still capable of compassion, that *rachmanut* was not extinct, the world could be rebuilt and repopulated once again - עולם חסד יבנה.

During the pandemic, as they weathered a storm of their own and sequestered themselves and their families, many Americans reenacted this aspect of Noach’s *teivah*. How many people do you know who have purchased a dog or some other pet during COVID?

Intuitively, we knew that we needed to do something to sustain our attribute of compassion by channeling it toward a new living thing under our roof.

Of course, we don’t need to be told about the importance of compassion, and how it is the one trait essential for the existence of a community. In fact, many communities and congregations historically chose titles for their institutions based on these values. For example, on the Upper West Side, there are two shuls with the word Chessed in them- the Ridniker shtiebel, whose formal title is **Ahavas Chessed**, and another shul called **Anshei Chessed**. In Montreal, there is a shul named **Chevrah Kadisha**, which, ironically, is a popular wedding venue. In 1914, the Rhodesli community (the Jews from Rhodes) in Seattle formed

an organization under the name Koupa Ezra Bessaroth of Rhodes.<sup>5</sup> The name was derived from the verse

תהלים פרק מו

אֱלֹהִים לָנוּ מִתְּסֵה וְעֵז עֲזָרָה בְּצָרוֹת נִמְצָא מְאֹד:

God is our refuge and stronghold, a help in trouble, very near.

Shortly after incorporating, they began to conduct services, and **Congregation Ezra Besarroth** exists to this very day. Indeed, the other Sephardic shul in Seattle, started by Turkish Jews, is also named after an act of kindness- **Bikur Holim**, a name shared with the Ashkenazi shul directly across the street from it.

But understanding the importance of compassion is quite different from making it a primary value in our households. In 2019, Adam Grant and his wife Allison Sweet Grant published an article in The Atlantic titled “Stop Trying to Raise Successful Kids.” In it, they assert that if you survey American parents about what their children think is most important to them, more than 90% would say that their children think kindness is most important. However, if you survey the *children*, 81% would say that their parents value achievement and happiness over kindness and caring.

*“...They see their peers being celebrated primarily for the grades they get and the goals they score, not for the generosity they show. They see adults marking their achievements without*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ezrabessaroth.net/our-history>

*paying as much attention to their character. Parents are supposed to leave a legacy for the next generation, but we are at risk of failing to pass down the key virtue of kindness. <sup>6</sup>*”

The Grants offer some concrete suggestions. At the dinner table (and, I’d add, at the Shabbos table) ask your children how they helped someone that day. Share with them instances in which you did something for someone else- and instances in which you failed or could have done better. Don’t make kindness into a chore to be resented, but praise it so children will know that it is noticed and valued.

But it’s not just about teaching children. Acts of chessed should not just be the initiative of individuals or small groups, and we should not just take pride in the acts of chessed performed privately by our members- as important as those are. We need to make sure compassion is part of the structure and fabric of our community in the form of communal programs that center chessed both within and outside of the Jewish community. If we learn from the cautionary tale of the generation of the flood, our communities, and our families, will forever flourish.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/stop-trying-to-raise-successful-kids/600751/>