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Scharfstein essay

Given that this essay contains words of *Torah*, the reader is kindly asked to place this essay into *Shemot*

On *Gemilut Hasadim*- an Inner World

What is the difference between the words “nice” and “kind?” One might question this challenge claiming it’s merely semantics; however, I would like to use these two English terms are a model for this discussion. In many ways, many of us interchange these two phrases with each other. A man helps carry some heavy groceries to a car. We can describe him either as a “nice man” or a “kind sir.” How do these labels tell us about the essence his personality, and what qualifies each definition? When defining the term “*Gemilat Hasadim*” we find ourselves in a similar dilemma. However, beyond it being a question of semantics as in the English language, *Chazal’s* (the Rabbis’) use of language challenges us with questions regarding word choice. What exactly does “*Gemilat Hasadim*” mean? Why don’t we use the word “*Tzadik*” or “*Ish Tov*,” both connoting similar undertones? Furthermore, there is another act of kindness, that of *Tzedakah*, charity. What is the relationship between “*Hesed*” and “*Tzedakah*” namely are they different concepts or merely two sides of the same coin? It seems to that the most accurate way to define both the parameters and conceptual underpinnings of the term “*Gemilat Hasadim*,” we must look at how the *Torah* sources and the *Rishonim* (medieval, Talmudic scholars) define and expand the expression.

When looking at the *Torah*-definition of Kindness, there seems to be two potential sources. The first source is the commandment of “*Vi’Ahavta Li’Reiacha Ka’Mocha*”, demanding that one should love his friend as he loves himself. Just like you would like to have kindness done for you, being helped in any way necessary, similarly, one must help out his compatriot. A second source is from the idea of “*Vi’Halachta Bidrachav*” or “Follow His [G-d’s] ways.” *Chazal* tells us that included in this commandment are values and ideals such as being compassionate, kind, just etc. Before we begin to discuss the term involving *Chesed*, we first must define the these source texts to fully appreciate our topic.

Rambam (Maimonides) explains (*Deot* 1:6-7) that the imperative of “following the ways of G-d” is more centered about acting how G-d is described in the Torah. This entails more than

merely being just, kind, etc. As the *Rambam* famously demands focusing on living a balanced life is included. The integration of values and its outlooks on life are subsumed in this commandment as well. When describing the parameters of the “*Vi’Ahavta*,” however, *Rambam* seems to focus on the role of empathy as an integral part of the *Mitzvah* (commandment). He writes (*Deot* 6:4):

There is commandment on each man to love his fellow Jew like himself as it is said, “Love your friend like yourself.” **Therefore**, one is required to speak about the praiseworthy aspects of his friend and offer him monetary aid as one would like his own financial security and honor.

Unlike the former commandment mentioned earlier, relating between G-D and man, the directive of loving one’s friend is essentially interpersonal.

Beyond being a call for human intervention in the needs of the other, this commandment has two elements. Obviously, its physical manifestation is in acts of kindness (which will be defined later); However, the second aspect, more internal and concealed, is also present. Using a term of Rabbi *Behiyah Ibn Pequdah*, a Jewish medieval moralist and philosopher, *Hesed* has elements of “*Hovot Ha’Levavot*” or obligations of heart in counter-distinction to obligations of the limbs or actions. One must empathize with the other, understanding his needs. To accomplish this task, *Rambam*, explaining the commandment, tells us to form a paradigm shift. Instead of being self-centered and egotistical, look outwards. Focus your desires, needs, and love to the other, using yourself as a model. Just like you would want “x” see that need in your friend: this is really the definition of empathy as we know it today. Once he has internalized this outlook, *naturally* he required to praise his friend and aid him monetarily. For this reason, *Rambam*, categorizes specific acts of kindness such as celebrating in a marriage, assisting in a funeral, caring for the sick, and other deeds within the general umbrella of “*Vi’Ahavto Li’Raiacha Co’Mocha*” (*Aveilut* 14:1). It is via these acts one both expresses and is influenced to become a more caring person.

Part of creating this cerebral awareness of the other demands of one to perform concrete deeds of charity and kindness. It can be argued that the *process*, aside from the results, is equally, if not greater, important when comprehending the concept of kindness. The Talmud (*Sukka* 49b) relays the following idea: “The reward for *charity* is not paid in full without factoring the *Hesed*

involved in the act.” One who is sensitive to the language is perplexed with the redundancy present in the phrase. What is the difference between Charity and *Hesed*? Rabbi *Shlomo Yitzchaki*, one of the most well-noted Jewish scholars on the Talmud (*ibid s.v. Ela Le’fi*) explains that one’s reward for charity is not merely due to the fact that he gave the beggar financial assistance. It’s the method, the feeling and toil, the *Hesed*, which the giver conveyed when performing the act of charity which is has significant value. *Hesed*, as we are understanding now, is more than actions. It’s effort and feeling. Similarly, Rabbi *Yona* of Gerondi, a noted Talmudist and moralist, defines the term *Hesed* in his commentary to *Mishlie 3:3* (Proverbs), “*Hesed* and Truth shall not forsake you.” Expanding *Rashi*’s definition, Rabbi *Yona* presents his readers an extreme illustration of what *Hesed* means. What is one has no money and has no ability to help the other? Can he be defined as a *Ba’al Hesed*, one who embodies those values? The answer is fascinatingly, yes! The desire to help his fellow friend, feeling the pain of the downtrodden is what *Hesed* is all about, and though unable to actualize his desires, he is considered as if he has done those acts.

Looking at the Hebrew words of *Gemilat Hassadim* themselves, one sees this idea as well. The word “גְּמִילוֹת” is a derivate of the three-letter root ג-מ-ל. A similar roots appears in the word היגמל, or to be weaned. Is there a relationship between these two words? Rabbi Kook, a modern-day Rabbi and leader of the Jews of British-Palestine, explains that the term wean connotes the removal of oneself from another entity. Thus, a child is weaned from his mother’s milk and thus removed from that nourishment. The idea of *Gemilat Hasadim* is conceptually the same thing. When performing an act of kindness, it’s not enough to do the act. He must invest and commit to the other person. He must give himself up for the other person. If what is needed requires him to commit time, effort, and money, and he does so whole-heartedly, he has performed an idealized form of *Hesed*. What is essentially self-nullification is in fact self-redemption, changing not just the emotional, economic state of the other, but actually changing oneself to become a more caring and compassionate person.

Until now, we have discussed what the definition of *Hesed* in its broader implications. As in any discipline, taking concepts and theoretic principles and applying them into practical, daily life is a challenge for any serious student of wholesome living. Obviously, one who signs up for a

summer program, caring for child with special needs or disabilities such as those in our community like Simcha, Kaylie, HASC etc. and committing to work in intense conditions and extended hours for a summer, is one major way one can train himself to become a true *Ba'al Hesed*. However, given that many of us are unable to commit to such programs given one's personal circumstances and settings, I would like to suggest two methods in how to internalize the trait of *Hesed* into our *daily* life: the forming of a compassionate person, able and willing to listen to the plea of the other. The first suggestion can be argued as counterproductive; however, I think if placed in a proper context, our goal will be met. Instead of imagining a paradigm of awareness of the other and thinking of the other's needs, perform actions. However, I don't refer to organizing major fundraisers and charity runs. I am referring to small acts of kindness. A lot of them. The *Mishna* in *Avot* (3:15) says that, "According to the majority of acts the world is judged." *Rambam* in his commentary to this phrase points out that the *Mishna*'s *language* of "majority of acts" contains an extra phrase. What's the emphasis of "majority of acts?" Why not simply say "according to actions?" The answer given reminds us of a theory argued by students of Behaviorism: the way a person is changed and ultimately evaluated corresponds not the size of each act but the number of acts performed. The *Rambam* offers a practical application of this theory. If has a thousand dollars, what is more a more worthwhile investment: a single large donation or small but plentiful acts of charity. The *Rambam* recommends the later since the effects of *Hesed* will have more of an impact each time he gives, regardless of the size. If we want to truly internalize what it means to do *Gemilat Hasadim*, to gain a perspective of being a giver, consistency is a better mentor than magnitude.

There is a second recommendation which is an offshoot of our larger discussion of kindness. It is commonly understood that *Hesed* can only be done with the downtrodden and weak. We are to lift them up and bring them back up on their feet. Though this is a definitely a form of *Hesed*, it is in truth more associated with the word *Tzedakah*, charity, than the word *Hesed*. The Talmud in *Sukka* (49b) marks several distinctions between the word "*Tzedakah* and *Hesed*," most notably limited charity on to the poor and expanding *Hesed* to all social classes, including helping the rich by offering them advice, caring for their health etc. Initially one would ask what is the source of this discrepancy. However, based off a more precise definition of

Tzedakah and *Hesed*, we can understand how *Tzedakah* is more goal oriented, helping the financial needs of the poor, while *Hesed* connotes a much broader interpretation: the overall feeling for the other and its ultimate performance.

Expanding *Hesed* to a larger population allows for more opportunities to fulfill this lofty directive. One avenue which I would like to explore with this introduction is the implementation of *Gemilat Hasadim* during his vocational endeavors. Everyone who is in the labor force contributes to society and helps people. Instead of being a means for attaining selfish pleasures and status, a job, with the right perspective, is essentially the greatest form of *Hesed*. Rabbi Wolbe, in his magnum opus *Aleh Shur*, a work primarily focused on self-improvement, references us to the biblical character *Chanoch*. The Rabbis tell us that he was a shoemaker. Aside from making shoes however, he “unified the world with every stick he sewed.” Though unclear and esoteric on its surface, Rabbi Salanter, a leader in the 19th century Mussar Movement, is quoted explaining this statement in a simple, yet profound way. *Chanoch* was in truth simply making shoes, but in his every stitch sewn, he had in mind that his job was to help his future customer. “Unification of the world” doesn’t have to refer to an esoteric concept. The greatest tool of unification of the world is found in the small but powerful stitches of the shoemaker, giving himself over to his fellow for the betterment of society.

After this discussion, when we understand the words “kind” and the pseudo-synonym “nice”, we see two completely different worlds. Kindness is more than just the acts. It’s the emotion, the effort, the total human involvement for the other. It creates a bond between the given and the receiver, paradoxically removing the donator’s self from the equation while simultaneously giving him substance, meaning, and purpose. When we look at the result of a kindness, aside from the happy recipient, we see a transformed philanthropist. Nice is pleasing to the recipient but it’s superficial. Though following social norms and codes, a nice act is empty. Potentially beneficial to the recipient, the act is meaningless to the donor and most of the time he feels that he is being forced in doing so, trying to live up to everyone else’s standards. The nice person is internally weak while the kind is emotionally stable, willing to give up from himself for the other. It is no coincidence that the meaning of the word nice is derived from the Latin

word *nescius*, implying both the terms ignorant and coy. We are required to rise above such shallowness, ultimately changing ourselves and our surroundings through our actions.