

Chesed – Lovingkindness By Alan Morinis

INTRODUCTION TO THE WEEK

Tomer Devorah says:

A person should say with regard to every other person, “It is enough that they have been good to me or to someone else in such-and-such a way, or that they have such-and-such a positive quality.” In this way, one should delight in kindness.

We live in selfish times, which manifests as self-centeredness. Looking out for number one is lauded and celebrated. And so the benevolence toward others that is the essence of the trait of *chesed* [lovingkindness] and that is so central to Judaism can appear counter-cultural.

But we have no choice in the matter. The Jewish view of the person who aspires to a spiritual life insists that their heart be infused with lovingkindness, expressed as care for others. As Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement put it:¹

Most people are concerned about their own material needs and another person’s spirituality. It should be the other way around: a person is obligated to be concerned with their own spirituality and the material well-being of others. The material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual need.

And so we are called to be diligent, careful and persistent in bringing the trait of lovingkindness into our daily experience. That’s how we will grow, not just in lovingkindness, but in holiness.

The English “kindness” suggests a warm sympathy, a benevolent feeling. The Greek word *charis*, which denotes kindness (and is the root of the word “charity”) is treated by Aristotle (in his *Rhetoric*) as one of the 15 emotions. *Chesed*, in contrast, is not an emotion but an *act* of benevolence. In fact, if a person does something that is helpful for someone else, and yet does so reluctantly, resentfully, or even spitefully, the deed nevertheless remains an act of *chesed* because the definition revolves around the benefit done (or at least attempted), not the feeling behind the action.

Acts of *chesed* are a central feature of every aspect of Jewish thought, practice and observance. But if I am honest with myself, I have to admit that had wise people not

¹ *Ohr Yisrael*, letter 30.

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written about *chesed* and had not made it clear how and why it is important to be kind, and even beyond that, to love lovingkindness, I would never have come up with those ideas on my own. Never. Life appears to me to be so much more obviously a rat race, a competition, a limited pie. The tight interweaving of the golden thread of *chesed* into Jewish thought and practice is reason enough to believe that our tradition embodies divine revelation. Even if the ideas came through the mouths of people, they had to have originated on a higher plane because it is so unlikely that a human being could realize the profound importance of kindness on their own.

Chesed involves stretching beyond your current comfort zone to be a source of benevolence to others. It guides our behavior in ways we might not have chosen if we allow ourselves to be guided only by our own inclinations and feelings as they currently steer us. And that is how we grow.