

Parshas Chayei Soroh

Cheshvan 5772 November 2011

Kind Hearted

וְאַחֲרָיִךְ כֵּן קָבַר אַבְרָהָם אֶת שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ

“After that, Avrohom buried Soroh his wife...” (23:19)

Harav Sholom Schwadron recounts a conversation that took place between him and Harav Isaac Sher. He recalls how he was taking one of his children to the doctor, when they saw Reb Isaac walking down the street. Reb Isaac noticed Reb Sholom's son, and the worried expression on Reb Sholom's face. He realised where Reb Sholom was going, and offered a few words of advice. “Where are you going,” he asked rhetorically, “To the doctor. Why... because your son is ill and needs to see the doctor. Yet,” he continued, “Animals also do everything they can to look after their children, so what differentiates you from an animal?!” Reb Sholom writes that he was struggling to think of a response when Reb Isaac spoke again. “In truth,” he explained, “Both you and an animal care about your children, but there is a huge difference between you. The animal cares about its children, simply because they are its children, but a Jew must know, that when he takes his child to the doctor it is not only because he is his son. Rather, it is because he is doing the Mitzvah of Chessed!”

Reb Sholom uses this story to explain a question on the Midrash on the Possuk quoted above. The Midrash writes that Hashem considered Avrohom, through his burying of Soroh, to have been involved in Chessed of the loftiest sort. Reb Sholom questions this, and asks why it should be that Avrohom is considered to have done such an amazing Chessed in burying his wife. He notes that it is actually perfectly normal that if a person's wife unfortunately passes away; he takes care of organising the burial. Furthermore, the Gemoro (Kesubos 46) actually mandates that a person is obligated to involve himself in burying his wife, if he finds himself in that situation. Therefore, why does the Midrash laud Avrohom when he was only fulfilling his obligation?

To answer this point, Reb Sholom offers an insight into the difference between Tzedoka and Chessed. Tzedoka, he explains, is where a person recognises that someone else is missing or lacking something. Tzedoka therefore aims to fill that empty space within the prospective recipient, whether it is money given to a pauper that fills his need for money to buy food, or a compliment to a person feeling low, that fills his need for self-respect. In contrast, Chessed is a higher level, in as much as it is based not on what any particular recipient is missing, but in an inherent desire on the part of the giver to give. Chessed does not represent pity or compassion; rather, it is a deep rooted wish in the innermost recesses of the heart to help others. It is for this reason, explains Reb Sholom, that we speak of “loving kindness,” since Chessed has its root in the heart. As such, concludes Reb Sholom, that was the lesson Reb Isaac Sher was teaching. A persons' devotion to Chessed is measured by their intentions not their actions. The same action, can be either Chessed or not, depending on the intention of the person performing that action. It was this exact idea that the Midrash was telling us about Avrohom. Avrohom, who was obligated by Halocho to bury his wife, was none-the-less able to transform this obligatory action into one of Chessed, simply through his intention at the moment of performing it. It is true that anyone else in a similar situation would do the same, but Avrohom, through his desire to give, was able to do what everyone else would have done, but to do it as a Chessed.

Serving the Cause

וַיּוֹשֶׁם לְפָנָיו לֵאמֹר לֹא אֲכַל עַד אֵם

דְּבַרְתִּי... וַיֹּאמֶר דְּבַר וַיֹּאמֶר עֲבַד אַבְרָהָם אֲנִי
“He placed before him to eat. He said, ‘I can't eat until I've spoken.’ He said, ‘Speak’. He said, ‘I'm a servant of Avrohom.’” (24:33-34)

The Chanukas Hatorah writes that this conversation between Lovon and Eliezer is difficult to understand. It is hard to believe, he writes, that by the time Lovon had served Eliezer, he was unaware of who his guest was, and more importantly who his master was. Therefore, why does the Possuk imply that Eliezer feel an urgent need, the minute the food was served, to announce whose servant he was?

The Chanukas Hatorah answers with the following explanation. Lovon served the food; however Eliezer told Lovon that he felt he could not eat until he had explained his mission. Lovon responded by criticising Eliezer for his desire to speak of mundane matters at a meal, since Chazal tell us, that any meal at which Divrei torah are not spoken, is considered a meal of offerings to idol worship. In response to this Eliezer said, “I am a servant of Avrohom,” hinting at Chazal's words that, “The speech of the servants of the Ovos is more precious than the main parts of the Torah,” thereby pointing out to Lovon, that even his mundane speech was worth more than Lovon's Divrei Torah.

Water Ways

וַיִּמַּם לְרַחֵץ רַגְלָיו

“And water to wash his feet.” (24:32)

The Chizkuni notes that when Avrohom welcomed the angels into his home, he offered them water to wash their feet, in case they worshipped the dust. However, this explanation seems difficult to expand to the offer made in this Possuk by Lovon to Eliezer, for the same facilities, since Lovon was a known idol worshipper himself. Therefore, writes the Chizkuni, it must be that whilst Lovon was indeed an idol worshipper, he had no intention of allowing someone else to bring a different idol than his own into his house!