

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



CHAYEI SARA

Kindness & Truth

Avraham's servant is the major player in the central drama of this week's Torah reading, namely the mission to find a wife for Yitzchak. Besides actually finding Rivka, he is the first person to ever say BARUCH HASHEM!, and he seems to also invent the phrase CHESED V'EMET, which he uses twice (B'reishit 24:27,49). What's mind boggling to me is the fact that we don't even know his name! I know Rashi and the world at large assume that it's Avraham's faithful factotum Eliezer, but God through Moshe Rabbeinu's Torah doesn't so inform us.

The plaudits for this anonymous hero are vast. The Midrash tells us that, 'The conversation of the servants of the Patriarchs' household are more significant than the Torah laws of the descendants' (B'reishit Raba 60:8). The descendants referred to are CHAZAL, our Sages from the Talmud! This assumption is based on the amazing length of this narrative, 67 verses, the longest chapter in B'reishit and second longest in Chumash, over two columns in a written Torah.

But my focus in this piece is on the phrase CHESED V'EMET, which I translated in my title as 'kindness and truth'. JPS goes with 'true kindness', Rav Aryeh Kaplan 'kind and right' and Prof Alter 'steadfast kindness'. I prefer Rav Kaplan's approach that these are two separate nouns identifying two ideas for reasons which will become apparent in a few paragraphs.

Ya'akov Avinu reused this phraseology towards the end of his life in conversation with his beloved Yosef: And the time drew nigh that Yisrael must die: and he called his son Yosef, and said to him, If now I have found grace in thy sight (in real English that would be: If you really love me!), put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly (CHESED V'EMET) with me; bury me not, I pray thee, in Egypt (47:29).

It is this conversation which gives us the most common usage of the phrase: CHESED SHEL EMET. This means the great kindness shown to the deceased, and refers to the reality that participating in a burial is a kindness which cannot be returned; hence SHEL EMET, true kindness without expectation of reimbursement.

In our story, when we look closely at what the 'servant' had in mind, I think that Rav Hirsch explains our phrase

correctly: 'Deal kindly' to nullify your desires and agree to send your daughter to a faraway land, and 'truly' to keep your word that Yitzchak will never come back to Charan where his father was told LECH L'CHA.

However, over the centuries our rabbis have suggested many beautiful ways to interpret this phrase. The Meor V'Shemesh sees the statement as making sure no descendant of Canaan would ever marry into our gene pool, because Canaan made his offspring swear to never adhere to truth (Pesachim 113b). I wonder how one can trust an oath to never tell the truth.

The S'fat Emet avers that our 'servant' was really explaining that CHESED and EMET only exist in the world because of the AVOT. They discovered, displayed and disseminated these traits to the rest of mankind.

From the idea that our 'servant' is explaining the very concept of CHESED and EMET, it is a very short jump to the most famous verse where these terms and concepts appear: Give EMET to Ya'akov and CHESED to Avraham, as You promised an oath to our fathers in days gone by (Micha 7:20). That verse, of course, appears in the daily U'VA L'TZIYON prayer, but is also the last verse in our annual TASHLICH ceremony, and is the last verse in the book of Micha.

Rav Soloveitchik wants to know why Yitzchak and his character trait, GEVURA (strength of character) do not appear in our very famous verse. Doesn't seem fair. But the Rav explains it makes perfect sense. Because GEVURA involves retreat, an act of withdrawal. So, 'Yitzchak is absent, consistent with the very theme of withdrawal which he personifies'. Staying in character, he remained at home.

The Vilna Gaon explains that the whole scenario is consistent with the intent of the character traits. CHESED involves voluntary acts of kindness and largess. It encompasses the promises given to Avraham (I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing [B'reishit 12:3]; To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates [15:18]; As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations [17:4]).

On the other hand, Ya'akov was to represent EMET which entails the fulfillment of the promises. He has the large family and goes down to Egypt where the adventures of the promises begin to unfold.

But for me it was Rav Yissachar Frand who really clarified the distinction between these two

character traits. He says that in Rav Nissan Alpert's eulogy for his beloved Rebbe (and surrogate father) Reb Moshe Feinstein, he pointed out that Reb Moshe almost always gave recommendations for any person or cause which approached him for support. Why didn't Reb Moshe look carefully into these issues (as he did in his Halachic decisions)?

Rav Alpert explained that CHESED and EMET are not really compatible. One is based in the brain and the other in the heart. Rav Frand expanded:

In a sense, truth is the antagonist of kindness. If we would do a thorough investigation of poor people that ask for charity, we would probably reject most of them. Indeed, when CHESED and EMET are mentioned together in the Torah, the word CHESED always precedes the word EMET. CHESED is quick and instinctive. EMET is deliberate and thorough. If CHESED would wait for EMET, it would never get off the ground. A person's first reaction must be kindness.

Avraham, the Master of CHESED, had to be the first Patriarch. EMET is critical to our long term survival, but can arrive a bit later. When approached for help, lead with your heart. Maybe the title of this piece should be: Kindness THEN Truth. 