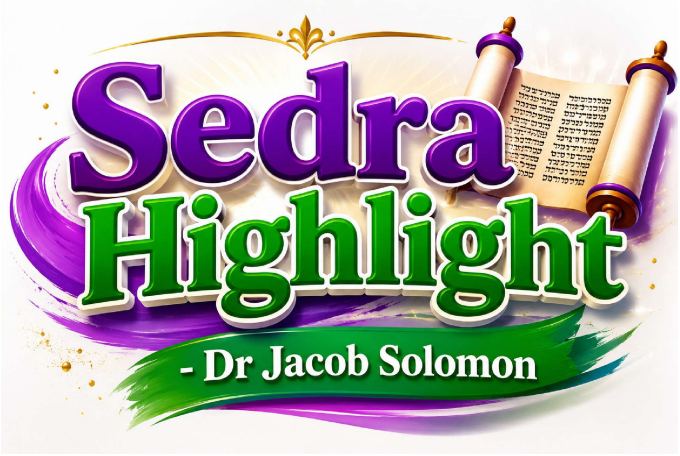


CHAYEI SARA

He declared: G-d... please let it happen today, and show chesed - kindness - to my master Avraham (24:12).

The servant has travelled a considerable distance to find a suitable wife for Yitzchak. He arrives with ten camels and a generous provision of Avraham Avinu's wealth, but none of this can guarantee success. He must still find the right young woman, and her family must agree to the marriage. His success depends upon the chesed of the people he has yet to meet.

Now, chesed is a fundamental of the Creation: OLAM CHESED YIBANEH - the world is built on chesed (T'hilim 89:3). It is a universal human quality, expressed in recognising the needs of others and responding with kindness and goodwill. Chesed is not exceptional behaviour, but natural and decent behaviour, a human capacity that makes living together possible. Here, Rivka appears, sees somebody who needs help, and responds generously. There is no 'out of the kindness of her heart', no exceptional act of generosity. Her generosity is remarkable, but it is not unnatural. She responds spontaneously to another person's need, without calculation or expectation of reward. It happened naturally from her being part of OLAM CHESED YIBANEH. This young woman who offers him water and volunteers to water his camels, the servant hopes, will be the one intended for Yitzchak. The one whose natural capacity has not been influenced by the selfish and by the mercenary. She offers assistance before asking who this stranger is or what he can give her in return. She steps forward without asking questions.

Here, we meet chesed in full form: the willingness to create the space and conditions in which another person can benefit, succeed and flourish. The Torah does not offer us an explanation, though T'hilim very likely does: OLAM CHESED YIBANEH.

Throughout the Torah, chesed appears in different circumstances, and I suggest that a generally common thread is the willingness to create conditions in which another person can benefit and flourish. Thus for example, when Yaakov Avinu asks Yosef to show him CHESED VE'EMET, the chesed lies in Yosef's willingness to honour his father's burial wishes, while his trustworthy commitment

enables Yaakov to approach death with peace of mind.

Our story of Rivka, then, is powered by OLAM CHESED YIBANEH. Thus Rivka responds to a stranger's request, and then goes far beyond it, offering to water his camels without first establishing who he is or what reward he might offer. Recognizing her chesed, her generosity, the servant then praised G-d's chesed: "Who has not abandoned His kindness and faithfulness..." (24:27).

And after telling his story to her family, he proceeds to propose to take their daughter Rivka on a long journey to marry Yitzchak, opening with "And now, if you will act with chesed and emet..." (24:49). Here he needs more than chesed: he needs emet - truth - as well; a trustworthy agreement that will allow the marriage to go forward. The family agrees, and Rivka herself consents to depart.

Thus our story tells of chesed from complete strangers: acts that are not exceptional impulses to help another person, but perfectly natural willingness to create circumstances in which others can flourish: the others here being the servant, Rivka, and Yitzchak.

Our society depends upon far more than laws, contracts and individual ambition. Families, communities, education, commerce and even great economic enterprises require people to trust one another, honour commitments and take an interest in one another's success. OLAM CHESED YIBANEH, chesed is integral to the way than Mankind, created in the image of G-d, is designed by the Creator to interact with each other. Contracts can provide safeguards, but they cannot replace goodwill. Nor can legal obligations alone create the confidence necessary for sustained cooperation.

This may help explain why networks of trust were so important to the development of modern commerce, banking and industry. Progress requires individuals with different abilities and resources to cooperate, often over long periods, confident that others will fulfil their responsibilities. Trust need not imply personal affection, but sustained cooperation becomes easier when people are willing to recognise interests beyond their own immediate advantage.

The same principle applies on a much smaller scale. A teacher helps pupils develop their abilities. A neighbour assists somebody in difficulty. A stranger offers help without expecting recognition or reward.

These are not peripheral acts of goodness. They help sustain the relationships upon which human life depends.

The world is built through goodwill, sustained through trust, and enabled to flourish through integrity.

That is the enduring significance of CHESED VE'EMET. 