

Siyum – Masechet Kiddushin and Seder Nashim

Shabbat Chayei Sarah – 5784 – Maimonides Kehillah – Seudat Shlishit

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In memory of Batsheva bat Pinchas HaCohen, a”h and Rut bat Yosef Eliezer HaChohen, hk”m

We are all familiar with the statement that a little flame can bring light into a dark space. We all know how a gesture, or a smile can impact another person. And we all know what Yahadus expects of us:

שָׁמַר וְשָׁמְעָה אֶת כְּלֵי־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ לַמַּעַוְ יֵטֵב לָךְ וּלְבִנְיָךְ אַחֲרַיִךְ עַד־עוֹלָם כִּי תַעֲשֶׂה הַטּוֹב וְהַיָּשָׁר
בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

The Sifrei, quoting Rabbi Akiva, comments on the end of this Pasuk – HaTov BAynay Shamayim – in the eyes of Heaven, and HaYashar BeAyney Adom – in the eyes of those around you. This focus on doing good informs the Jewish personality. From a young age, we are taught, particularly by example, that good deeds matter. Whether it is placing a coin in a Tzedakah box, helping an elderly person with finding the place in their Siddur, or visiting the sick or the grieving, and so many other ways, we are a people of giving and doing.

Enormous communal enterprises of chessed activities, of taking care of those less fortunate than us, of truly caring for those around us, fill us with hope that we, each in our own way, can really make a difference. One of the key messages of Judaism is that we each chart a path for goodness and that that goodness is infectious to those around us. Our acts matter, both to ourselves and to others.

The Gemara in Kiddushim, Daf 40b, points out, in as direct a fashion as one might imagine, the beauty of our acts of kindness, even one act of kindness. How so?

תָּנוּ רַבָּנָן: לְעוֹלָם יִרְאֶה אָדָם עֹצְמוֹ כְּאֵילוֹ תְּחִיב וְתִצִּיּוֹ זָכָאִי. עֲשֵׂה מִצְוָה אַחַת – אֲשֶׁרִיּוֹ, שְׁהַכְרִיעַ עֲצָמוֹ לְכַף זְכוּת,
עָבַר עֲבִירָה אַחַת – אוֹי לוֹ, שְׁהַכְרִיעַ אֶת עֲצָמוֹ לְכַף חוֹבָה.

The Rabbis taught: A person should always look at themselves as if they are equally guilty and equally innocent (of wrongdoing). [What difference does it make seeing yourself in this way?] When one performs a Mitzvah, they are fortunate, for that person is now firmly in the category of a meritorious

individual. On the other hand, if one acts in a way that is not positive, woe to that person for they have now placed themselves in the category of one who is guilty.

The Gemara continues:

רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון אומר: לפי שהעולם נידון אחר רובו, ונהיחיד נידון אחר רובו, עשה מצנה אחת – אשריו, שהקריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף חובה, עבר עבירה אחת – אוי לו, שהקריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף חובה.

Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon adds that the entire world is judged according to the majority of good or bad and the individual is judged in a similar manner. In this more expanded perspective, the performance of a single good deed can not only move our needle to the overall good but that single act moves the needle of the world to the positive as well.

What Rabbi Elazar is telling us is that we have an obligation to see our actions as affecting not only our nearest neighbors but those in ever widening circles around us. One act of goodness at a time continues to shape and mold us as human beings – that act reverberates and spreads much like the ripples in a pond of water when a pebble is dropped in.

Within the context of this Masechet, where Kiddushin defines the nature of the sacred and special bond of a marriage, we can also appreciate the Kedushah that is brought into this world with every good deed and with every good word. The actions that we perform to build community and, in these terrible times, to defend and protect ourselves, bind us together much as the act of Kiddushin merges one human being with another.

What is Kedusha if not a recognition of our desire to connect to that which is the ultimate good, to separate ourselves from Chullin, the mundane and the ordinary, and elevate our everyday existence to an Am Kadosh – to a people who, firmly planted in Olam HaZeh, recognize the challenges and opportunities to repair and perfect the world around us through incessant acts of goodness and love.

Within the corpus of American Country Music, there was a song written by David Frasier, Ed Hill, and Josh Kear called “Most People Are Good”. The song was an attempt by Kear who was desperate to emphasize, in the wake of the polarizing 2016 US election (i.e., Trump vs. Clinton) that, in the grand scheme, there is way more good happening than bad. The song was recorded by country superstar Luke

Bryan in 2017. The song then rose to Billboard's #1 ranking in 2018. Part of the chorus from the lyrics that has continuously resonated with me every time I hear it is:

*I believe this world ain't half as bad as it looks
I believe most people are good.*

How do we react as Jews when times are dark? We find ways to demonstrate small acts of kindness. In the wake of the horrific massacre this past October 7, people have opened their homes to those displaced, have assisted those afflicted with the stress of this terrible trauma, have supported those grieving for those lost and others not yet home, have contributed millions of Dollars and Francs and Shkalim, and Euros to support our soldiers, have written letters to soldiers and their governments, and the list goes on and on.

We are not the people of “Ki Ayn Banu Maasim” – we are a people of goodness, caring, sympathy, and peace. May our study of Kiddushin continue to inform us in our relationships with others and may it resonate with us as we weave through the thicket of our complicated world. Finally, as the study of Talmud can help us all become better students of Torah, may the final lines of the Masechet ring true for us:

רבי נהוראי אומר: מניח אני כל אוּמנוּת שְׂבָעוּלָם וְאֵינִי מְלַמֵּד אֶת בְּנֵי אֵלָא תוֹרָה, שְׂכָל אוּמנוּת שְׂבָעוּלָם אֵין עוֹמְדָת לֹא אֵלָא בֵּימֵי יְלָדוּתוֹ, אֲבָל בֵּימֵי זְקֻנָּתוֹ הָרִי הוּא מוּטָל בְּרָעָב. אֲבָל תוֹרָה אֵינָה כֵּן – עוֹמְדָת לֹא לְאָדָם בְּעֵת יְלָדוּתוֹ, וְנוֹמְנָת לֹא אַחֲרֵית וְתִקְנָה בְּעֵת זְקֻנָּתוֹ. בְּעֵת יְלָדוּתוֹ מֵהוּ אֹמֵר? “וְקוֹנֵי הַ” נִחְלִיפוּ. כֵּחַ יַעֲלוּ אֲבָר כַּנְּשָׁרִים” בְּזֻקְנָתוֹ מֵהוּ אֹמֵר? “עוֹד יִגְבּוּן בְּשִׁיבָה דְּשָׁנִים וְרַעֲנָנִים יִהְיוּ”

The Mishna taught that Rabbi Nehorai says: I set aside all the trades and I teach my child only Torah. It is taught in the Tosefta (5:14): Rabbi Nehorai says: I set aside all the trades in the world, and I teach my child only Torah, as all other trades serve one only in the days of one's youth, when one has enough strength to work, but in the days of one's old age, behold, one is left to lie in hunger. But Torah is not like this: It serves a person in the time of his youth and provides one with a future and hope in the time of one's old age. Regarding the time of one's youth, what does it say about a student of Torah? “But they that wait for HaShem shall renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31). Regarding the time of one's old age, what does it say? “They shall still bring forth fruit in old age, they shall be full of sap and richness” (Psalms 92:15).