

Chesed: Kindness
Reflections Ten Years After Columbine
Parashat Tazria-Metzorah; April 24, 2009

“V’huva el HaKohein; and he shall show the infection to the priest.”

Rabbi Asher of Stulin would complain about the other Chasidim. When they came to the rebbe, they would accentuate their good points – and conceal the bad. They would put their best foot forward. Be careful what they showed. Pad their resume. Edit their Facebook page. “Whereas when I,” said the tzaddik, Rabbi Asher of Stulin – would study in the presence of my teacher and rabbi Shlomo of Karlin (and here, he would kiss the tips of his fingers at the mention of his beloved rabbi), “I would conceal from him the good... I would show him the dark side of myself [for the teacher is like a priest who heals.] And for this reason, the priest needs to see the affection.

[based on *Itturei Torah*, modified with the modern references]

Not, for this occasion, the happy face and highest skill. Not the sense of accomplishment and fulfillment, of power and of pride, no. Not at this moment.

Because there has to be a place where we can go, to not always be at our best. There has to be a place for the un-touched up photo, the unadorned soul. We have to open up the wound to air... before it can begin to heal.

Fungus and skin disease and mold on the wall? Antiquated verses best left in the dustbin of history? Or, instead, does this puzzling portion give us a glimpse into one of the greatest – and most difficult – secrets of life? That we have to open up, when we most want to hide? That there is hope, even in the face of the hardest of challenges?

In our lives there is pain and anguish, heartache and hardship. But there is also the chance – and even the choice we can make – to open ourselves up... to healing and hope.

My friends, it has been two years since the events at Virginia Tech. And, as you may know, ten years this week... since Columbine. What to say, in the wake of such senseless and tragic loss? What words are there, that could possibly help?

And yet words are the weapons we have, in this wounded world of ours.

And a memory: that the actors in both places... were wounded souls themselves. Bullies, who were bullied.

What is a Jewish response? It comes in two parts. The first is in opening up, being able to be vulnerable with one another. But that is so hard. One of the very hardest things in life to do. And it can only happen... it can only happen if there is trust in a loving, and supportive response.

How, then, should we carry ourselves, to evoke such trust? Here one word comes to mind, a Biblical word, a word which packs a lot of power.

The Hebrew word *chesed* is hard to translate. One man, Rabbi Nelson Gleuck, the scholar and spy who was also the president of the Hebrew Union College, wrote an entire book about how to translate it.

You see, translating something from Biblical Hebrew is not as easy as it may seem. The best and first way to understand a word is from the context in which it is used, and with Biblical Hebrew we have a specific and highly circumscribed corpus, a limited linguistic treasury. In some cases, a root is used only one time in the entire Bible. The term for that is a *hapax legommena*, a word which only occurs once in the body of material before you. And in that case, when studying an ancient language, there really is a problem. Why?

Well, do you remember that scene from *Annie Hall*? There, at the beginning of the movie, Woody Allen and Diane Keaton are in line to see a film, and get into an argument about its meaning with the person next to them in line. Frustrated with the discussion, Woody Allen declares: “Oh, yeah? Well, I have the producer right here...” and he pulls the producer of the film into the scene, and on his side.

We’d love to do that with Biblical Hebrew. “You think it means that? Well, I happen to have a native speaker of an ancient language right here. Go ahead, Bathsheva, tell us what the word means!”

But we can't do that. So, to understand the Hebrew of the Biblical period, we rely on tradition, or on cognate languages – an argument similar in value to speculating about family resemblance based on the character traits of our cousins. Or we give it our best guess.

Fortunately, the word *chesed* is not a *hapax legomina*. It appears, in fact, many times in the Hebrew Bible. It is perhaps one of the key concepts of the entire Biblical period – and, I believe, one with a hope-building, life-affirming potential for our lives as well. The best way to understand it, then, would be to construct what linguists call a semantic field: to list every occurrence, and examine the context of each usage.

What did Nelson Glueck find, when he studied the concept of *chesed*? Roughly speaking, here is his best translation. *Chesed* means “something done for you that was really nice which you could probably have expected, based on your relationship with the person who did it, but could not really have demanded in a court of law.” [Should I say that again?] Glueck, I believe, eventually translated this as “covenant-love.” Most people, forced to use more mundane language, translate *chesed* as “lovingkindness.”

Here, then, is the hope I find, and the stance we should take with one another. To act out of kindness, out of love... To treat others with *chesed*, to make a space that is safe, a place that is holy, so that we can strive to be whole.

Chesed is not simply the sanctification of being “nice,” which, according to some people, is all religion should offer, and all it should ever have to say. That’s part of my problem with “lovingkindness” as the translation... too easy to think it’s just about being nice all the time. No, *chesed* means acting out of the depth of a relationship. And in relationships we hold the desires of our loved ones and what we can see as their long term interests, what they want and what they need, often in dynamic tension with one another. That’s more than just being nice.

Chesed means commitment and care, involvement and intensity. It does mean to remember the *midat harachamim*, the measurement of mercy, as well as the *midat hadin*, the measurement of judgement, of rules, of law, of enforcement, the dual measurements which are, according to our tradition, held in eternal and cosmological balance by the God who sustains the universe. It means love, and understanding, acceptance of others – and also of ourselves.

How important is kindness? I share with you now a story I told, ten years ago, in the aftermath of Columbine, when it was clear that name calling and bullying, isolation and ostracism were factors in what happened.

Our society has so very many pressures. For high scores and good grades, for grace of body and quickness of wit, for appearance and accomplishment. It is so hard to grow up in the midst of these pressures, to find one's own place in the pull of subliminal messages. To know who you are, and connect with others: sex mistaken for intimacy, identity confused with popularity, friendship tossed aside for a better offer with a cooler crowd. We teach our kids so much in so many unintentional ways. Have we forgotten to teach our kids to be kind?

A story of a woman. We'll call her Judy Cohen. It's not her name. But the story is real. And in one form or another, this has happened to more than one person I know.

When Judy Cohen was in sixth grade, she began to develop some deformities. Her body shook in weird ways. Her speech was slurred. Her self-image shattered. The kids in her school were unspeakably cruel to her. Her public school -- and her synagogue's religious school. But there was a difference. In the public school, officials acted. They threatened the kids who were the most cruel to her with expulsion. And the problems eased. Not completely. But enough.

And her synagogue's school? Well, what could they do? All we can do is beg our parents to send their children in the first place. Don't throw away a 4000 year old heritage because your kid prefers to play soccer. We negotiate. We plead. We accommodate. We have no teeth.

Expel a kid? We're begging them to be here in the first place... How could we do that?

Things are a bit better in our religious schools these days, I believe. A little bit. But we have few teeth. The cruelty of one child to another is simply worse in a setting where some kids feel forced to attend. For Judy Cohen, at least in her mind, the cruelty eased in public school. In religious school it did not.

Judy Cohen grew out of her problems. She developed more confidence. She grew to have friends. She grew to love her life.

Judy Cohen is very, very active in her spiritual community today. They really feel like they couldn't do without her. She came to see its importance because, in college, she found a group that simply welcomed her the way she was. In love. In acceptance. In true community.

Judy Cohen is very active in her spiritual community today. And her Church, they sure are glad to have her.

You know, kindness isn't just superficial stuff. Before we can fill our heads with facts, we must be in a place we feel we belong. But kindness is not just the prerequisite we need in order to learn. Warmth and welcome, kindness to one another is the substance of what we must learn. It is both: the first commandment of community, and the most lasting lesson of life.

Let us remember, let us never forget that those who feel unwelcome, unwanted, unloved... they are all around us. It will take big hearts to make sure that there is never another Littleton.

Let us be the place where we can be who we are, where we can let our faults show. To paraphrase Cheers, let it be at a Bar Mitzvah, not a Bar – a shul and not a pub -- where everybody knows your name. And they're always glad you came.

Neither the priest of old nor the therapists of today solve every problem, or cure every wound, of body or mind. But they did and they do... help. And they can and they will... cure some of the wounds of the world.

We think of love in boundless and infinite terms; we speak of unconditional love. I don't know if that is an attainable goal for human beings or not; we are flawed and we are finite, and little in our immediate experience truly knows no bounds.

So *chesed* as a response... to the anguish around us... is not a one-stop shop, a magic wand, a cure-all for everything. But is it *powerful*. And it is real. And it is there for us, to give, and to get, if we can trust enough, feel safe enough, be delicate enough... to be there for each other.

Shabbat Shalom.