בס"ד

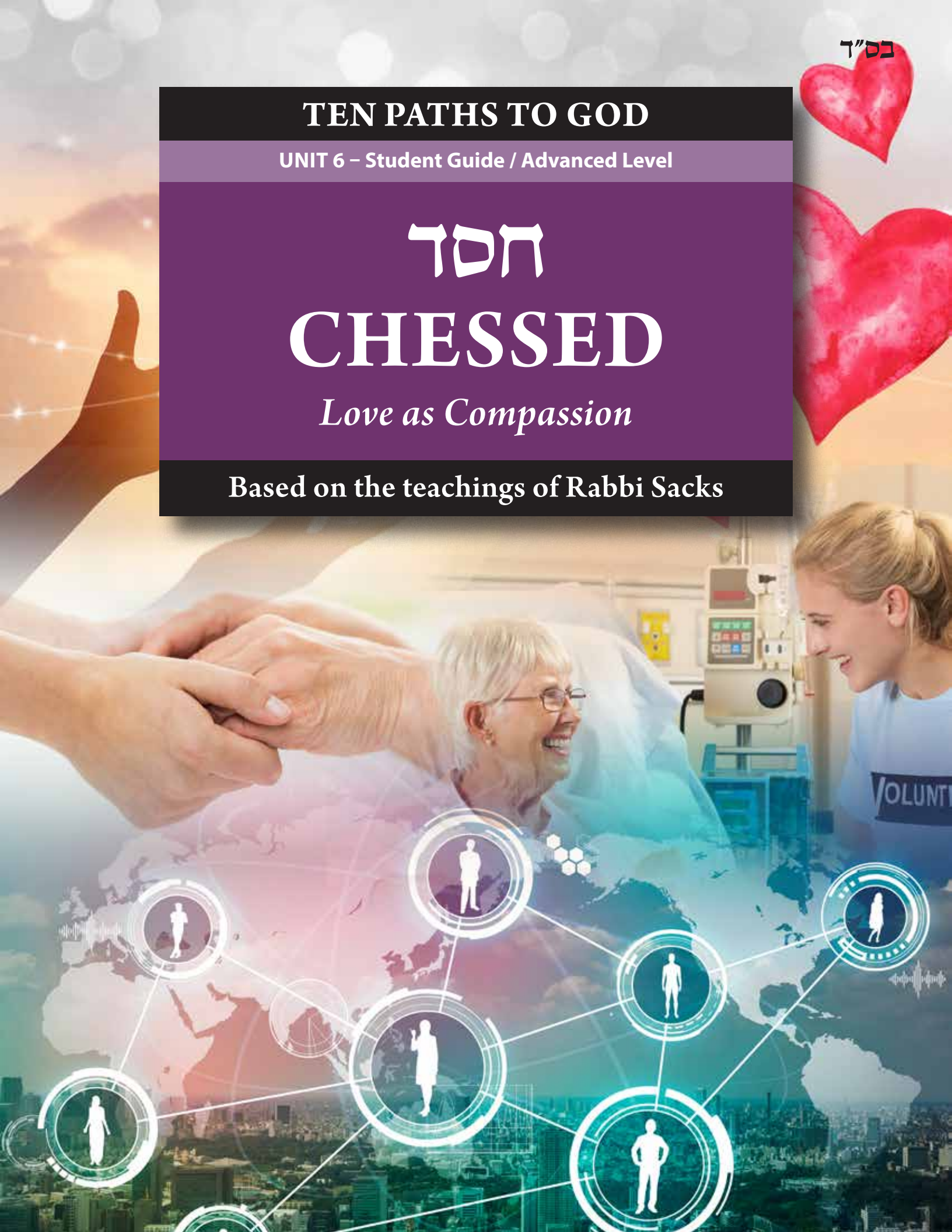
TEN PATHS TO GOD

UNIT 6 – Student Guide / Advanced Level

חסד
CHESSED

Love as Compassion

Based on the teachings of Rabbi Sacks



“Among the fine people it has been my privilege to know, Chaim (Harry) and Anna Schimmel hold a special place. Their life has been built on a love of Torah, which they have learned, taught, supported, and in Harry’s case written brilliantly about. They epitomized it for our community; they have communicated it to everyone they know, and especially to their children and grandchildren. I always counted Harry as my benchmark. If he agreed with an interpretation I had given, I was confident I was on the right lines. Now that Harry and Anna have made *aliyah* to *Yerushalayim Ir ha-Kodesh*, I count it as a special delight that this curriculum project has been sponsored in their honor. They inspired me; I hope these materials inspire others.”

RABBI SACKS

Introduction

Watch: The opening video for Unit 6

First Reading: Read through the text from the video. Highlight each word or phrase that you are unsure of, whether it is the meaning of the language or the meaning of the concept.

Tzedakah is the gift of money or its equivalent. But sometimes that is not what we most need. We can suffer emotional as well as physical poverty. We can be depressed, lonely, close to despair. We may need company or comfort, encouragement or support. These too are human needs, no less real for being untranslatable into the language of politics or economics.

That is what *chessed* is about: emotional support, loving-kindness, love as compassion. It is what we mean when we speak of God in Psalm 147 as one who 'heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds'. It includes hospitality to the lonely, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, raising the spirits of the depressed, helping people through crises in their lives, and making those at the margins feel part of the community.

It is *tzedakah's* other side. *Tzedakah* is done with material goods, *chessed* with psychological ones: time and care. *Tzedakah* is practical support, *chessed* is emotional support. *Tzedakah* is a gift of resources, *chessed* a gift of the person. Even those who lack the means to give *tzedakah* can still give *chessed*. *Tzedakah* rights wrongs; *chessed* humanizes fate.

Avraham and Sarah were chosen because of their *chessed* to others. Rut became the ancestress of Israel's kings because of her *chessed* to Naomi. At the heart of the Judaic vision is the dream of a society based on *chessed*: society with a human face, not one dominated by the competition for wealth or power. *Chessed* is the mark of a people joined by covenant. Covenant creates society as extended family; it means seeing strangers as if they were our long-lost brothers or sisters. A community based on *chessed* is a place of grace, where everyone feels honored and everyone is at home.

Jonathan Sacks

Analysis in *Chavruta*: Now in *chavruta* (pairs), take a look again at the text. Discuss and answer the questions on the key terms and phrases that are highlighted for you.

Tzedakah is the gift of money or its equivalent. But sometimes that is not what we most need. **We can suffer emotional as well as physical poverty.** We can be depressed, lonely, close to despair. We may need company or comfort, encouragement or support. These too are human needs, no less real for being untranslatable into **the language of politics or economics**.

That is what *chessed* is about: **emotional support, loving-kindness, love as compassion**. It is what we mean when we speak of God in Psalm 147 as one who 'heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds'. It includes hospitality to the lonely, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, raising the spirits of the depressed, helping people through crises in their lives, and making **those at the margins** feel part of the community.

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We can suffer emotional as well as physical poverty.

1. What do you think "emotional poverty" means? What can cause emotional poverty?
2. Do you think emotional poverty is worse in this generation than previous times? Why do you think that might be?
3. How can we treat emotional poverty?

the language of politics or economics

1. What is "the language of politics or economics"? What is the government and the economy generally concerned with?
2. Why do you think emotional needs are not the concern of government or economics?
3. Do you think the political system or the economy should be more concerned with the emotional wellbeing of those in society?

emotional support, loving-kindness, love as compassion

1. What do these three terms mean?
2. How do they differ from each other?
3. Who can and should be the recipients of these?

those at the margins

1. What does it mean to be at the margins of society?
2. What kind of people might be at the margins of society?
3. What do they all have in common?

*Tzedaka*h is done with material goods, *chessed* with psychological ones

1. What are material goods? Give examples.
2. What are psychological goods? Give examples.
3. Which can make the most impact for those in need?

chessed humanizes fate

1. What does fate mean?
2. To humanize something is to make it feel human, so that it becomes something that we can all relate to. What do you think Rabbi Sacks means when he says *"chessed* humanizes fate"?
3. What message are you giving someone else when you show them *chessed*? How can this help them deal with their fate?

a society based on *chessed*

1. What values are at the center of *chessed*?
2. What would a society based on these values look like?
3. Is our society based on these values today? Can you think of some examples?

Covenant creates society as extended family

1. What is a covenant? What is a society based on a covenant?
2. When you see strangers in the street do you consider them part of your extended family? Should you?
3. What do you think needs to change so that members of society feel more like an extended family?

where everyone feels honored

1. What does it mean to "feel honored"?
2. What does it take to make someone feel that way?
3. How can a community ensure that this happens?

everyone is at home

1. What does it mean to feel at home?
2. What does it take to make someone feel that way?
3. What is the difference between feeling at home and feeling honored? Is there a connection?

Share your analysis: Come together as a class, and share your answers to the questions. Listen carefully to the perspectives of your classmates. Did anyone take a different approach to the text from you? Does their approach resonate with you?

Chessed: Covenantal Love

***Chessed* is the mark of a people joined by covenant. Covenant creates society as extended family; it means seeing strangers as if they were our long-lost brothers or sisters.**

Analysis in *Chavruta*: In our opening text Rabbi Sacks describes *chessed* as "the mark of a people joined by covenant". In this section we are going to explore what he means by covenant, and the role *chessed* can play in a society based on covenantal relationships.

In your *chavruta* read through the following text by Rabbi Sacks, in which he defines a **social covenant** and distinguishes it from a **social contract**. Write two headings on a piece of paper, 'Social Covenant' and 'Social Contract', and make a list of defining characteristics for each. If you can, try to include some examples of contracts and covenants, and institutions that uphold them. Use these lists to help you compare and contrast the meaning of contract and covenant.

Covenants and contracts are different things and address different aspects of our humanity. In a contract, what matters is that both gain. In a covenant, what matters is that both give. Contracts are agreements entered into for mutual advantage. They are undertaken by individuals or groups on the basis of self-interest. They have specific purposes. They can be terminated by mutual consent. They end once both parties have fulfilled their obligations. By contrast, covenants are moral commitments, and they are open-ended. They are sustained not by letter of law or by self-interest but by loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness. In fact the key word of Judaism, *emunah*, usually translated as 'faith', is better translated as faithfulness.

Social contract creates a state; social covenant creates a society. Social contract is about power and how it is to be handled within a political framework. Social covenant is about how people live together despite their differences. Social contract is about government. Social covenant is about coexistence. Social contract is about laws and their enforcement. Social covenant is about the values we share. Social contract is about the use of potentially coercive force. Social covenant is about moral commitments, the values we share and the ideals that inspire us to work together for the sake of the common good.

The Home We Build Together, pp. 109–110

Share your analysis: Come together as a class, and share the lists you made of characteristics that define contracts and covenants.

Chessed in a Covenantal Society. Your teacher will ask for a volunteer to read out this next quote, and then as a class discuss the role of *chessed* in a covenantal society.

What is *chessed*? It is usually translated as 'kindness' but it also means 'love' – not love as emotion or passion, but love expressed as deed. Theologians define *chessed* as covenant love. Covenant is the bond by which two parties pledge themselves to one another, each respecting the freedom and integrity of the other, agreeing to join their separate destinies into a single journey that they will travel together, 'fearing no evil, for You are with me' (Tehillim 23:4). Unlike a contract, it is an open-ended relationship lived toward an unknown future.

To Heal a Fractured World, p. 45

Analysis in _Chavruta_: Now let's further explore the role of *chessed* in a covenantal society. Read through the following two quotes from Rabbi Sacks, and use the questions below to help your analysis.

The logic of the covenant, unlike the social contract of the state, has nothing to do with rights, power and self-interest. Instead it is defined by three key words – *mishpat*, *tzedek* and *chessed*.

Mishpat means, roughly, justice-as-reciprocity. It is the principle of the covenant with Noach: As you do, so shall you be done to. It is the legal equivalent of Hillel's famous saying, 'That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.' *Mishpat* is the universal minimum of a just society. Wrong is punished, injury redressed. All persons are equal under the law, and all have access to it.

Tzedek or *tzedakah* is a far more radical idea. The word *tzedakah* is usually translated as 'charity' but in fact it means social or distributive justice. In biblical law it involved a whole series of institutions that together constituted the first-ever attempt at a welfare state… *Tzedek*, the Bible's welfare legislation, is built on the premise that freedom has an economic dimension. Not only does powerlessness enslave, so too does poverty. So no one is to forfeit his independence or dignity…

And finally there is *chessed*, usually translated as 'kindness' but in fact meaning covenantal love. *Chessed* is the loyalty I owe to those who are members of my family – and a covenantal society is one in which all citizens form a single extended family, as the children of one God. Much of the Bible's welfare legislation, especially those provisions which concern rescuing someone from servitude, is introduced by such phrases as, 'If

your brother becomes poor.' God Himself uses the language of family in announcing the redemption of the Israelites from Egypt: 'My son, My firstborn, Israel.' This is the origin of the concept of fraternity invoked in the French revolution. As a secular concept, though, it has never succeeded because the necessary theological foundation – the brotherhood of man under the parenthood of God – is lacking. *Chessed* represents the idea that a gracious social order can never be constructed on the basis of rights and obligations alone. There are times when we must go 'beyond the letter of the law,' beyond the requirements of equity and reciprocity. *Chessed* is the personal, unquantifiable, I-Thou dimension of society, the compassion and humanity that can never be formalized as law but instead belong to the quality of relationships, to the idea that the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger are my brothers and sisters.

A Letter in the Scroll, pp. 120–122

Tzedek and *mishpat* belong to morality. *Chessed* and *rachamim* belong to ethics. The former are about justice, the latter about loving attention, for which the simplest English term is care. Justice is and must be impersonal. 'You shall not recognize persons in judgement', says Devarim (16:19). The beauty of justice is that it belongs to a world of order constructed out of universal rules through which each of us stands equally before the law. *Chessed*, by contrast, is intrinsically personal. We cannot care for the sick, bring comfort to the distressed or welcome a visitor impersonally. If we do so, it merely shows that we have not understood what these activities are. Justice demands disengagement (Adam Smith spoke of adopting the standpoint of an 'impartial spectator'). *Chessed* is an act of engagement. Justice is best administered without emotion. *Chessed* exists only in virtue of emotion, empathy and sympathy, feeling-with and feeling-for. We act with kindness because we know what it feels like to be in need of kindness. We comfort the mourners because we know what it is to mourn. *Chessed* requires not detached rationality but emotional intelligence.

To Heal a Fractured World, p.51

1. From your understanding of a society based on social contract, and a society based on a social covenant, in which do the values inherent in *mishpat* more naturally belong?
2. In which of those societies does *tzedekah* more naturally belong?
3. In which of those societies does *chessed* more naturally belong?

4. *Chessed*, according to Rabbi Sacks, is more naturally shown to members of our own family. Why do you think this is?
5. How, then, does he suggest we make our society a place where *chessed* is found between all people, even strangers?
6. Make two lists of defining characteristics again – this time for *mishpat/tzedek* on the one hand, and *chessed* on the other. Do these two new lists fit neatly under the lists you previously made for social covenant and social contract?

Share your analysis: Come together as a class, and share your answers to the questions, including the lists that you have made for the terms social covenant, social contract, *mishpat/tzedek*, and *chessed*. Listen carefully to the perspectives of your classmates. Did anyone take a different approach to the texts from you? Does their approach resonate with you?

Stories of *Chessed*

Exploring the core concepts through stories of *chessed*: Together with your *chavruta* join another pair to form a small *chabura* (study group). Your teacher will assign you one of the stories below. Read through the story and consider the following questions:

1. Who is the hero of the story?
2. What values did you find modeled in the story?
3. What did the agent of *chessed* hope to achieve by the act of *chessed* they performed? Do you think they achieved it?
4. How do you think the recipient of the act of *chessed* felt at the end of the story?
5. According to this story, how would you define *chessed*?
6. Can you find any of the ideas you considered in the story about *chessed* within the opening text from Rabbi Sacks?

In your *chabura* prepare to tell the story to the rest of the class, followed by your analysis of the story and responses to these questions.

STORY 1: A POOR MAN'S FUNERAL

Once two Jews died in Brisk on the same day. In the morning a poor shoemaker who had lived out his life in obscurity died, while about noontime a wealthy prominent member of the community passed away. According to the *halachah*, in such a case the one who dies first must be buried first. However the members of the burial society, who had received a handsome sum from the heirs of the rich man, decided to attend to him first, despite the fact that he had died later, for who was there to plead the cause of the poor man? When Rav Chaim [of Brisk] was informed about the incident, he sent a messenger of the court to warn the members of the burial society to desist from their disgraceful behavior. The members of the burial society, however, refused to heed the directive of Rav Chaim and began to make the arrangements for the burial of the rich man. Rav Chaim then arose, took his walking stick, trudged over to the house of the deceased, and chased all the attendants outside. Rav Chaim prevailed – the poor man was buried before the rich man.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halachic Man*, p. 95

STORY 2: AND MAYBE EVEN HIGHER

Every Friday morning before dawn, the Rebbe of Nemirov would disappear. He could be found in none of the town's synagogues or houses of study. The doors of his house were open but he was not there. Once a Lithuanian scholar came to Nemirov. Puzzled by the Rebbe's disappearance he asked his followers, 'Where is he?' 'Where is the Rebbe?' they replied. 'Where else but in heaven? The people of the town need peace, sustenance, health. The Rebbe is a holy man and therefore he is surely in heaven, pleading our cause.'

The Lithuanian, amused by their credulity, determined to find out for himself. One Thursday night he hid himself in the Rebbe's house. The next morning before dawn he heard the Rebbe weep and sigh. Then he saw him go to the cupboard, take out a parcel of clothes and begin to put them on. They were the clothes, not of a holy man, but of a peasant. The Rebbe then reached into a drawer, pulled out an axe, and went out into the still dark night. Stealthily, the Lithuanian followed him as he walked through the town and beyond, into the forest. There he began chopping down a tree, hewing it into logs, and splitting it into firewood. These he gathered into a bundle and walked back into the town.

In one of the back streets, he stopped outside a run-down cottage and knocked on the door. An old woman, poor and ill, opened the door. 'Who are you?' she said. 'I am Vassily,' the Rebbe replied. 'I have wood to sell, very cheap, next to nothing.' 'I have no money,' replied the woman. 'I will give it to you on credit,' he said. 'How will I be able to pay you?' she said. 'I trust you – and do you not trust God? He will find a way of seeing that I am repaid.' 'But who will light the fire? I am too ill.' 'I will light the fire,' the Rebbe replied, and he did so, reciting under his breath the morning prayers. Then he returned home.

The Lithuanian scholar, seeing this, stayed on in the town and became one of the Rebbe's disciples. After that day, when he heard the people of the town tell visitors that the Rebbe ascended to heaven, he no longer laughed, but added: 'And maybe even higher.'

Adapted from a short story by Y.L. Peretz

STORY 3: THE KINDNESS OF A STRANGER

In 1966 an 11-year-old black boy moved with his parents and family to a white neighborhood in Washington. Sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. They were not. Passers-by turned to look at them but no one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later, writing about those first days in their new home, he says, 'I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here . . .'

As he was thinking those thoughts, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children and with a broad smile said, 'Welcome!' Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and cream-cheese and jelly sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment – the young man later wrote – changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. It made him realize, at a time when race relations in the United States were still fraught, that a black family could feel at home in a white area and that there could be relationships that were color-blind. Over the years, he learned to admire much about the woman across the street, but it was that first spontaneous act of greeting that became, for him, a definitive memory. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends.

The young man, Stephen Carter, is now a law professor at Yale, and he eventually wrote a book about what he learned that day. He called it Civility. The name of the woman, he tells us, was Sara Kestenbaum, and she died all too young. He adds that it was no coincidence that she was a religious Jew. 'In the Jewish tradition,' he notes, such civility is called '*chessed* – the doing of acts of kindness – which is in turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God.' He adds, 'Civility itself may be seen as part of *chessed*: it does indeed require kindnesses toward our fellow citizens, including the ones who are strangers, and even when it is hard.'

Stephen Carter, *Civility*, pp. 61–71

STORY 4: THE HEALING POWER OF KINDNESS

In late summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a television program about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. Outside every church was a NATO tank. At the start of the conflict it had been the Serbian Christians who had attacked mosques. Now they feared reprisals from the returning refugees. The mood was tense. Murders were taking place every night. Revenge was in the air. The most important task was to establish order and a return to civil peace.

I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what 'my people' had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city's 23 primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city's welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. That, he said, we owe to the Jewish people. Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently in Pristina. His answer? Eleven.

The story, as I later uncovered it, was fascinating. In the early days of the conflict, the State of Israel had, along with many international aid agencies, sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. Immediately they noticed something others had missed. The aid agencies were concentrating, not unnaturally, on the adults. There was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, they were running wild.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Virtually every youth group in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, sent out teams of youth leaders at two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organizing summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and everything else they could think of to make their temporary exile feel like a summer holiday. At all levels it was an extraordinary effort. The Kosovan Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith. Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations children's organization. It was in the wake of this that 'the Jewish people' – Israel, the American-based 'Joint' and other Jewish agencies – were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me many things: the force of *chessed*, acts of kindness; the beauty and healing power of kindness extended across the borders of faith; and the way young people can rise to great moral achievements if we set them a challenge. The entire relief effort in Kosovo was a wonderful convergence of many people and agencies, from many faiths and nations.

Rabbi Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, pp. 94–95

STORY 5: DARCHEI SHALOM, 'THE WAYS OF PEACE'

April 2002: another suicide bomb had exploded in Israel, and I had been interviewed for my reactions by the BBC. A few days later I received a letter from a lady in Kent. This is what she wrote:

Having listened to you on the radio today, and hearing your concern for your people, I felt prompted to write you a letter of comfort.

You see, I am a gentile. I was born in 1943 and [years later] I met a Jewish woman who made a great difference in my life.

I was then in my mid-twenties, the victim of a broken marriage and with a small son to care for. I was seeking employment in South London as a hairdresser to pay for our rooms, and a child-minder.

The unemployment agency sent me to a salon. A large motherly woman greeted me at the interview. Her first words were, 'Are you in trouble, my dear?'

I was given employment in her salon. Then she offered to house us in the rooms above the shop, furnishing them with carpets and furniture from her own home. She thought – then she employed two girls from Leeds to share the flat and so reduce my rent. She also found a very kind child-minder for my son. This Proverbs 31 lady [the famous chapter beginning, 'A woman of worth, who can find?'] also spoke wisdom into my life. I shall always remember her kindness.

On the television news we all saw the dreadful pictures of the bus destroyed in Jerusalem on the eve of the Sabbath. At the sight of the plaited loaf lying in the dust, I felt as if a knife had gone through me as tears ran down my face – for the loaf represents family, unity, the common humanity we all share and which is oh, so fragile.

Please Rabbi Sacks, accept an outstretched hand to you: peace within your borders, comfort for your people, security within your walls. These are my prayers.

Ibid, pp. 97–98

Share your analysis: Come together as a class and share the stories you read, together with your analysis. Discuss what the stories all had in common. What did you learn about *chessed* from these stories? Did you find any of these ideas within the opening text from Rabbi Sacks?

The Assignment

Part 1: Tell your own *chessed* story: Working in small groups allocated by your teacher, write your own story about when you performed an act of *chessed*. But this cannot be a story from your past. It must be about an act of *chessed* performed after studying this unit. Firstly, together with your friends, plan an act of *chessed* worthy of a story to be told to your class. This could be within your school community, or in the wider community. Then, after you have done this act of *chessed*, sit down in your group and write all the details of the story, from planning to execution, reflecting on how your act was received and the impact it made.

Part 2: For bonus points, prepare a list of questions for Rabbi Sacks on any of the topics we have studied in this unit. Send your questions to your teacher, who will forward a number of insightful questions from the class to Rabbi Sacks. Rabbi Sacks will respond to a selection of the questions he receives for each unit from students around the world. Visit www.RabbiSacks.org/TenPaths to see his responses.

Jonathan Sacks

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