



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

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The Covenant and the Love

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Chessed is the highest achievement of the moral life.



PARSHAT EIKEV IN A NUTSHELL

In Eikev, Moses continues his speech to the Israelites, preparing them for life in the Land of Israel and for a future without him as their leader. He reminds them of the general rules of the covenant (the responsibilities that they have towards God and that God has towards them, as it is written in the Torah), and what it means to be a chosen nation in a Promised Land.

If they keep the covenant, they will be blessed, both with material things (such as wealth and financial security) as well as spiritual blessings. But they must not forget God's lovingkindness and think that their success is because of their own efforts or because they are righteous. Moses reminds them of all the times they made mistakes and

sinned as a people during the wilderness years, including the Golden Calf, the Korach rebellion, and other similar stories. He reminds them, too, of God's forgiveness. Remembering their history, they must love and respect God and teach their children to do the same. This entire set of beliefs is summarised in what we call the second paragraph of the Shema (Devarim 11:13–21) which is found in the parsha. The clear message to the people is that Israel's fate depends on Israel's faith.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think Moses wanted to remind the Israelites of all these details again?



THE CORE IDEA

There is an interesting phrase found at the beginning of this week's parsha, and together with a similar phrase at the end of last week's parsha, they are the only places where it appears in the Torah. The phrase is *et ha-brit ve-et ha-chessed* (Devarim 7:12): "If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep the *brit* and the *chessed* with you, as He swore to your ancestors."

The phrase is strange. The relationship between God and Israel is defined by the *brit*, covenant. That, basically, is all the content of the Torah. What then is added by the word *chessed*?

A covenant is essentially mutual. Two people or two groups promise something to one another and enter into this mutual agreement, the covenant. This is how it was defined by God at Mount Sinai: "Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My

treasured possession, for all the earth is Mine." (Shemot 19:5). This means: *If you are My people, I will be your God. If you serve me, I will bless you. Every covenant has an 'if-then' quality to it.*

Chessed, in contrast, is not conditional. It is given out of the goodness of the giver, regardless of whether the recipient is deserving. What we learn from these words, carefully chosen, "the Lord your God will keep the *brit* and the *chessed* with you" is that God acts with *chessed* towards us even when we do not deserve it.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Can you think of examples when you have done *chessed*? Why did you do it?
2. Why does God do *chessed* in cases where it is undeserved?



One of the possible treatments for Covid-19 that scientists are developing involves using plasma from the blood of recovered patients, as this contains the antibodies that the body uses to fight the virus. But this method depends on the willingness of recovered patients to donate their plasma.

In America, thousands of recovered patients are now donating their blood to plasma clinics in the hope that it can be used to treat other people struck down by the virus. Dr. Michael Joyner of the Mayo Clinic, said, "By far the largest group of plasma donors is our Orthodox friends in New York City." In fact, they number more than half of all plasma donors. Orthodox Jews from New York are "punching way above their weight when it comes to donating" said Dr. Shmuel Shoham, from Johns Hopkins University.

The Jewish community of New York City has been hit particularly hard by Covid-19. Members of the community see their recovered health as a blessing that they feel a responsibility to share with others. Several grassroots initiatives have sprung up in the local community, with the word spreading via synagogues and community newsletters. "The community has taken a tragedy and turned it into a superpower" says Dr. Shmuel Shoham.

So many community members have volunteered, New York blood banks can no longer keep up with demand, and donors have been asked to travel for many hours to make their donations out of state. "There were probably never so many Hasidim in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in the history of the world, and here they're riding in literally to save lives," said Mordy Serle, an Orthodox Jewish lawyer who travelled from Brooklyn to a bank in Pennsylvania last month to donate blood and who has helped organise donations.

Rabbis in the community have even given halachic rulings allowing their followers to drive to blood banks on Shabbat to donate if these are the only available appointments, because this act is saving lives. Saving a life is an ultimate value in Judaism.

Avrohom Weinstock, who organised a program through Agudath Israel to organize volunteers said "I think that it comes from our education and the way we're raised, the idea of kindness, or *chesed*, as being one of the foundations of what the world is built on and how it is sustained".

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why are so many Jews donating their plasma?
2. Why is *chesed* so important during the time of Covid-19?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The phrase *the brit and the chessed* is rare in Tanach, but it does occasionally make an appearance at key moments in Jewish history. For example, it figures in King Solomon's great prayer at the consecration of the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:23):

"Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in Heaven above or on Earth below—You who keep *the covenant and love* with Your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way."

When, after the Babylonian exile, the nation gathered in Jerusalem and renewed the covenant, Ezra and Nehemiah said: "Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps *His covenant and love* ..." (Nehemiah 9:32)

At these critical moments, when Moses renewed the covenant on the banks of the Jordan, when Solomon dedicated the Temple, and when the people in Ezra and Nehemiah's time rededicated themselves, they took care to define the relationship between God and the people as one of *brit and chessed*, covenant and love. It seems that both are necessary, or they would not have used this language on these three defining occasions many centuries apart.

What is the true meaning of *chesed*? Significantly, Rambam dedicates the penultimate chapter of *The Guide for the Perplexed*

to the analysis of three words: *chesed*, *tzedakah* and *mishpat*. On *chesed* he says: "In *Pirkei Avot* (5:7) we have explained the expression *chesed* as denoting excess. It is especially used of extraordinary kindness. Loving-kindness is practised in two ways: first, we show kindness to those who have no claim whatever upon us; secondly, we are kind to those to whom it is due, in a greater measure than is due to them ... The very act of creation is an act of God's loving-kindness: "I have said, 'The universe is built in loving-kindness'" (Tehillim 89:3)

The difference between the three terms is that I am *legally* entitled to *mishpat*. I am *morally* entitled to *tzedakah*. But to *chesed*, I am not entitled at all. When someone acts toward me in *chesed*, that is an act of pure grace. I have done nothing to deserve it. Rambam notes, citing the phrase from Tehillim that creation was an act of pure *chesed*. No one ever creates something because it deserves to be created. Creations do not exist before they are created.

We can define this in human terms more precisely. The book of Ruth is known as purest example of a story of *chesed*. There are two key scenes in the book. The first occurs when Naomi, decides to return to Israel alone. She says to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the

Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me ...” She was telling them that they had no further obligations toward her. You owe me nothing, she is saying. You have been kind, you have been good daughters-in-law, but now we must go our separate ways. Yet Ruth goes even further in love and kindness, and continues her journey with Naomi.

Then, when Ruth gathers grain in the field of Boaz, he treats her with great care and consideration. She asks him: “Why have I found such recognition in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” The two key words here are “recognition” and “foreigner.” “Recognition” means that you have behaved toward me as if you had obligations to me. But “I am a foreigner.” The word used here is not “stranger,” i.e. a resident alien to whom certain duties are owed. It means, a complete outsider. Ruth is saying to Boaz, you do not owe me anything.

That is what makes Ruth the supreme book of chessed, that is, of good done to another who has no claim whatsoever upon you. What Ruth does for Naomi, and what Boaz does for Ruth, are not *mishpat* or *tzedakah*. They are pure *chessed*.

Now let us return to the question with which we began. Why did Moses, and Solomon, and Nechemiah define the relationship between the Jewish people and God not in terms of a single concept, covenant, but added to it a second idea, namely *chessed*, meaning an act of love.

Covenant is essentially reciprocal. Two people or entities pledge themselves to one another, each committing to a responsibility. Every covenant has an if-then quality to it. Therefore, every covenant is inherently vulnerable. That is what Moses emphasised throughout Devarim. Don’t take the land or its blessings for granted. If you do well, things will go well, but if you do badly, great dangers lie in store.

That is covenant. *Chessed*, in contrast, has no ‘if-then’ quality. It is given out of the goodness of the giver, regardless of the worth of the recipient. When Moses, Solomon and Nechemiah referred to *chessed* in addition to the covenant, they were

making an implicit request of God of the most fundamental significance. Even if we fail to honour the covenant, please God be gracious to us, for You are good even when we are not, and You do good even when we do not deserve it,— *ki le-olam chasdo*, for His *chessed* is eternal.

The verses in our parsha sound conditional: “If you pay attention to these laws ... then the Lord your God will keep the *brit* and the *chessed* ...” This suggests that we will be shown *chessed* if we deserve it, but if not, not. But it isn’t so. At the end of the curses in Bechukotai, God says: “Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, *I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them: I am the Lord their God.*”

God will never break the covenant, even if we do, because of His *chessed*. Tanach describes the relationship between God and Israel in two primary ways: like a spouse, and like a parent and a child. Between spouses there can be a divorce. Between parent and child there cannot be. They may be estranged, but the parent is still their parent and the child is still their child. Marriage is a covenant; parenthood is not. Do not forsake us, we say to God, because whatever we have done, You are our parent and we are Your children. *Chessed* is the kind of love a parent has for a child, whether they deserve it or not. *Chessed* is unconditional grace.

I believe that *chessed* is the highest achievement of the moral life. It is what Ruth did for Naomi, and Boaz for Ruth, and from that kindness came David, Israel’s greatest king. **Reciprocal altruism – I do this for you, and you do this for me – is universal among social animals. *Chessed* is not. In *chessed* God created the universe. In *chessed* we create moments of moral beauty that bring joy and hope where there was darkness and despair.**

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why is *chessed* a higher moral value than *mishpat* (law) or *tzedakah* (justice)?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

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. Unlike a contract, it is an open-ended relationship lived toward an unknown future.

To Heal a Fractured World, p. 45



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What do these historical moments all have in common: Moses on the banks of the Jordan; Solomon dedicating the Temple; and Ezra and Nehemiah at the end of the Babylonian exile?
2. Why is the Book of Ruth known as “the supreme book of *chessed*”?
3. Why do we think of our relationship with God both as a spousal relationship, and a parent-child relationship?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. There are two approaches that can be taken to this question. On the one hand this is a new generation that did not experience the stories Moses is relating here, and this generation was not at Sinai to hear the giving of the Torah. So Moses is making sure they have internalised the lessons and national experiences from their parents' generation. A second approach is that this was Moses' chance to leave the people with the most important lessons and core values he had to impart before he died. This involved the retelling of various national narratives and important laws.

THE CORE IDEA

1. Often, we find ourselves doing acts of kindness because it feels good, or because we know it is the right thing to do. But an individual act of kindness is not performed because of an obligation. It is beyond the obligation of the citizen to do this (for if this were not the case, then the law would require it). Acts of *chessed* go beyond obligations, even if they can be considered "the right thing to do".
2. God acts in kindness because He is the God of Love. He acts with *chessed* towards us because He does not limit His relationship with us to just a covenant – what He is obligated to do. The God of Love goes beyond His obligation to us, to perform acts of lovingkindness (the preferred translation of *chessed*) and we should imitate this model.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The reasons found in the story include a sense of gratitude for their own health, and a sense of responsibility to help other people recover theirs; because the value of life is a core value in Judaism; and finally because a Jewish education leaves you with a clear sense that the value of *chessed*/lovingkindness is central to the world's existence.
2. The world is currently going through a painfully difficult time, leaving so many vulnerable. whether economically, emotionally, having lost loved ones or experiencing other loss, or from struggling with health. The institutions that normally work hard to care for people in these situations are stretched to breaking point. Individual acts of kindness and *chessed* have become even more critical during this period than ever before.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. *Mishpat* and *tezedakah* are legislated, both in Torah law, and in civil law in the country in which you live. But *chessed* goes beyond that. Individual citizens are not obligated to perform such acts. A society built on private acts of lovingkindness is the highest of moral societies, one that the Torah encourages, but cannot obligate.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. These were all watershed moments in Jewish history where the nation renewed its relationship with God and re-committed to the covenant of the Torah and the values contained therein. This is why the language of *Brit v'Chessed* was important at these times, because it summed up God's relationship with the Jewish nation.
2. The narrative in the Book of Ruth revolves around two great moments of *chessed*. The first when Ruth commits to following Naomi – she had every right and reason to return to Moab, but instead stands by Naomi. The second is when Boaz shows kindness to Ruth, despite her status as a foreigner in the land. He has no legal obligation to her, yet he goes beyond this to show her *chessed*.
3. A marriage is a contractual relationship where both parties commit to care and love each other. This represents the Torah as covenant, whereby God and the Jewish people have entered into a relationship that is conditional on the behaviour of the other, and is enforceable in law. This contractual relationship can be terminated (through divorce). However, a relationship between a parent and child, although the law does protect the rights of the child, is an intimate and private relationship based not on a covenant or contract, but on love. This relationship cannot be terminated (although if there is an absence of love there can be estrangement. But this is never final). God tells us that while there can be exile and punishment if the covenant is broken, there will always be a path back, because He will always love His people. These two relationships are expressed through *Brit v'Chessed*.