

70 PERSPECTIVES BUT ONLY ONE TORAH

by Dr. Meir Tamari

Why did Avraham send to Padan Aram for a wife for Yitschak? The people there were idolaters just as the people of Canaan were, so he could just as well married one of the Canaanites. "Idolatry is an error of the mind whereas midot tovot are inherited from family. There was chesed and hachnasat orchim in Avraham's family, so their daughter would inherit these and make a suitable wife for his son" (Shem MiShmuel). It is surely significant that Abarbanel, Rabbi Hirsch and this Chassidic Admor, all saw chesed in that family rather than tzedaka; many philosophies and faiths teach the importance of tzedaka but we teach also chesed which is an additional element in religion's attitude to human relations.

Tzedaka-charity is rooted in tzedek justice and so it is benevolence, as a duty imposed by Hashem. It is an obligation on the giver rather than a right which accrues to the beneficiary. Furthermore, throughout the generations and throughout the halakhic literature, it is surrounded with limitations on the recipient. "It is not the purpose of charity to enrich the poor person but merely to support him and to meet his needs" (Hilchot Matnot Aniyim 7:3). Rambam (chapter 8) rules that one collecting charity from householders is to receive a loaf of bread; if he lodges, he receives a bed

roll, and if he remains for Shabbat, bread for 3 meals, olive oil, soup and fish. This and other limitations are re-echoed by the Codes. It is true that Orech HaShulchan writes that this strict ruling applied only in previous generations and even modern medicine and mental health authorities claim that more is required; neither opinions abrogate the Jewish concept of limitations on charity. The idea of a means test of eligibility is upheld by halacha and this opposes universal benefits whereby rich and poor are eligible for public funding. The Chatam Sofer believed that shame was the price the poor paid for charity. Any danger of creating a welfare mentality through charity is avoided through Chazal's teaching that, "a person should flay a horse in public [degrading work] rather than take charity."

Charity does nothing to break the poverty cycle; the descendants of the recipients remain poor. However, a normal and productive world is created through gemilut chasadim, acts of loving kindness; charity saves from death but chesed builds worlds. So the highest form of tzedaka is chesed; to give a person a job or to give them vocational training, to lend them money interest-free or advice to start their own business. Conservative governments under Thatcher and Reagan discovered this age-old Jewish wisdom and translated it into their social policy against poverty. However, our chesed of the interest-free loan was never adopted. In contrast, for instance, Jewish immigrants in the last two centuries were able to establish

themselves through gemilut chesed funds to avoid financial collapse or to provide financing unavailable from the banks. At present, these funds support a financial system of such magnitude in Israel that Bank of Israel has attempted to bring it under control as part of Israel's banking system. So deeply rooted in Jewish experience is this idea of gemilut chesed funding, that in its early years, socialist Israel made cheap subsidized credit the basis of its monetary system.

Chesed is not only done with money but applies to all the actions and thoughts in life. The Torah begins with chesed and ends with chesed; at the beginning Hashem clothes Adam and Chava and at the end He buries Moshe. Bikur cholim is chesed, hachnasat kala of poor brides is chesed, and appropriate burial is chesed. Providing hospitality to the stranger and the traveler is chesed. Avraham Avinu is not the Jewish role model of charity but of chesed and his hachanasat orchim teaches the basic ideas behind our chesed. The strangers who appear before him in Vayeira seem to be very ordinary people and they are not depicted as poor or as deserving. They do not approach him or ask for anything. On his own initiative he recognizes their needs, he runs to offer his hospitality, involves his whole family in this chesed while he himself serves as the waiter.

R' Levi Yitschak of Berdichev once came to a village and since no one recognized him, he was not offered hospitality. In the morning word spread

of his presence and the invitations came rapidly. "I now understand why Lot who gave hachnasat orchim in S'dom where this was punishable by death, is not our symbol of this chesed but rather Avraham who was a free king in his own camp and surrounded by servants and wealth. Said the Admor, "to Avraham came 3 people while the Torah writes 'the angels came to Lot'; hachnasat orchim of angels is not a great chesed."

If chesed is so important why was the destruction of S'dom introduced in the time of Avraham, midat hachesed, and not of Yitschak, the mida of din? "To teach Avraham that unlimited chesed can lead to evil; chesed has to be monitored by justice" (Shem MiShmuel).