

HEALED BY KINDNESS



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT VAYERA
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

When experiencing intense or chronic pain a common and logical response is to decrease activity and to focus on the self. Yet, research indicates that people in pain who focus outside themselves by, for example, volunteering, reap benefits such as a decrease in pain and other depressive and disability symptoms. The same is true when it comes to ageing. People generally tend to focus on the needs of the self and decrease their activity, while similar data suggest that volunteering as an older adult is associated with improved well-being, lower mortality rates, and may even decrease the general functional decline that comes with ageing. In one fascinating study, researchers measured how quickly older adults walked and climbed stairs both before and after a year's worth of volunteering and found that those that volunteered had improved walking and stair climbing speeds by years end.

When portraying the scene of Avraham welcoming the angels disguised as unidentified nomads, the Torah provides a detailed account of how Avraham interacted with them in preparation and execution of the *mitzvah* of *hachnassat orchim*. In fact, Radak suggests that the primary purpose of the entire story is to provide for us a paradigm for how to perform acts of kindness. Even a cursory reading of the *pesukim* leaves the reader in awe of the speed Avraham exhibited in performing the *mitzvah*. For every task, Avraham doesn't just walk - he runs. The preparations are done with zest and vitality. His actions are even more impressive, as the Ramban points out, since he was old, weak, and in pain from the recent *brit mila*, and that he had a household full of servants ready to assist. Yet, Avraham teaches us importance of doing the *mitzvah* with alacrity and making sure to do most of the *mitzvah* on one's own.

Delving even deeper into the text, we can glean additional lessons. To perform acts of *chesed* properly, we need a degree of social intelligence. By being aware of the probable mindset of others, we can behave in a way that is more effective. Alshich suggests that there are several reasons a guest may feel uncomfortable accepting an invitation. Primarily, they don't want to be an imposition on their hosts. This could manifest in terms of the financial burden incurred by hosting, as well as the time and energy required by the host to clean the house or to tend to the guests needs. In addition, the guests themselves may be in a rush and don't want to get caught up in a long layover at the host's home. Avraham uses strategic language in speaking to the guests to allay these fears. He tells them that he has people who can help so it won't be such a burden, and that they can stay under the tree, so they don't have to worry about intruding inside the house. He also tells them that he will just bring out a little water and a slice of bread so that they don't feel bad, but then brings out entire meal so they can be satiated. Finally, part of the reason he moves so quickly, is that in case they were in a rush, he doesn't want to make them feel uncomfortable if they needed to leave.

On a *midrashic* level, Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi points out that *Chazal* write that one of the angels came on a mission to heal Avraham. Yet, it doesn't explicitly indicate anywhere in the *pesukim* when or how that occurred. Rabbi Ashkenazi suggests that the healing was a blessing that came as a direct consequence of the *chesed* that Avraham performed. When the angels acquiesced to his request to stay, he was healed. His pain decreased, and his speed, alacrity and vitality increased. After committing and commencing an act of kindness, Avraham—old, weak, and in pain—was healed.

May we all learn from Avraham, the paradigm of *chesed*, and personally commit to passionately perform acts of kindness, with nuanced social awareness and sensitivity, and by so doing, live a life of health, happiness, and vitality.

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