



What does it take to be a person who embodies chesed? We tend to associate kindness with both emotions and behaviors. I feel empathy towards someone, and I help them through action. Yet, there is an essential element to chesed that often gets overlooked: thinking. Dr. Nancy Eisenberg, a psychologist who studies the importance of prosocial behavior (what we might call chesed) argues that helping others requires several essential cognitive processes. First, we need to be able to perceive the needs of another by interpreting the situation and making inferences about what they are thinking or feeling. Then, we need to evaluate the most beneficial course of action. Finally, we have to formulate and carry out a plan to help. In short, she contends, prosocial behavior requires perception, reasoning, problem solving, and decision-making.

It should come as no surprise that when looking for a wife for Yitzchak, the servant of Avraham focuses his test on the trait of chesed. After all, his master Avraham epitomizes chesed. As we noted last week based on Rabbi Moshe Alshich, an essential component to Avraham's chesed was his ability to use his social intelligence to predict and counter all the possible worries of the angels in order to help them best. We can therefore hypothesize that as part of his search for someone with the trait of chesed, the servant of Avraham would incorporate a test related to how well Yitzchak's potential match can think as it relates to chesed.

On a simple level, the pesukim indicate that Rivka demonstrates chesed by offering both the servant to drink as well as the camels. Upon closer study, there is a tremendous depth of analysis by Rivka. Malbim highlights that Eliezer doesn't just ask Rivka to give him water, he says **הֲטִיבָא כִּדְרָךְ וְאַשְׁתָּה** – he asks that she tip the jug for him as opposed to him taking the jug from her and drinking himself. She could have responded angrily: take it yourself – I am not going to pour it into your mouth! But that is not how she reacts. She responds with wisdom, sensitivity, and perspective. She thinks to herself, why is it that he is asking me to pour for him? It must be that there is something wrong with his hands so he must not be able to draw water for himself. And if he can't draw water for himself, he must not be able to draw water for his camels! That is why she responds positively to his request and goes above and beyond what he asks for and provides for the camels as well. She is able to dig deeper and realize the real problem. Eliezer's test isn't just about chesed, it's about smart chesed.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in his commentary Beit HaLevi, also frames Avraham's servant's test as requiring Rivka to demonstrate intelligence and sensitivity in the context of chesed. The test, he argues, was not whether she would give him water. That wouldn't be so special. The test was, what will she do with the water in the jug after he drinks the water? The first option would be to take the water back to her house and give it to her family, as she was originally planning on doing before he asked for water. The problem with following through on her original goal is that to Rivka, this person is a random nomad. It would not be hygienic to allow him to drink from the barrel and then have her family drink the rest. The second option is to spill the leftover water out. The problem with this option is that it may be insulting to the person she is helping. Stuck with two bad options, she problem-solves and thinks of a great idea: she will give the water to the camels! This way nobody gets sick and nobody gets insulted. She doesn't just demonstrate that she like to help others. She is healthy, sensitive, and smart.

Chesed isn't just about doing but requires intelligence. Truly understanding the depths of what someone is asking for is essential to effective helping. Uncovering what wasn't asked is often more important than identifying what was. Thinking through options and potential consequences is required in order that we make sound and sensitive decisions. My we learn from Avraham and Rivka and not just do chesed but do smart chesed.

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