

Lessons from the Chassidische Parsha

The teachings of the Alter Rebbe in Torah Ohr and Likkutei Torah

Shielding our kindness

ד"ה אנכי מגן לך - פי' מגן אברהם

פרשת לך לך

Lech Lecha 5782

The first Bracha of Shemoneh Esrei is the Bracha of Avos. We mention our Forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, to recall their merit. The Bracha ends with the words ברוך אתה ה' מגן אברהם, blessing Hashem who is the "Shield of Avraham". Why do we describe Hashem in these terms?

This phrase is borrowed from Parshas Lech Lecha. Hashem comes to Avraham in a vision and tells him that he will have many descendants. He says "Do not fear Avraham, I will be your shield" אנכי מגן לך

On the literal level, the "Shield of Avraham" refers to how Hashem protected Avraham in the War of Kings (Ibn Ezra), or that Hashem would protect Avraham from punishment for having killed people in battle (Rashi).

In the Chassidische Parsha, the Alter Rebbe presents a deeper insight on the meaning of this blessing.

Avraham embodied the Divine attribute of Chesed - loving kindness. Chesed was his very nature and was expressed in how he would serve Hashem and relate to his fellow man.

Like the Divine attributes, Avraham's Chesed was unlimited; Everyone was good in his eyes and he would shower them with unbounded love, whether they deserved it or not. Even the wicked; sinners and idolaters, were recipients of Avraham's kindness.

Avraham had a son Yishmael who was sinful and corrupt. Yet when Avraham was told that he would father a son together with Sarah, he implored Hashem "if only Yishmael will live before You." Avraham knew who his son Yishmael was, yet he davened that Hashem bless him with His infinite kindness, so that he too will live and prosper.

Pure unadulterated kindness without discerning whether it is deserved or not, is not necessarily a good thing. In the absence of discipline and expectations, unlimited kindness only serves to foster negativity and negative behaviours.

Our sages teach that "Yishmael went out from Avraham". To a certain extent, Yishmael and his behaviour was a product of Avraham's unlimited kindness and tolerance.

The ultimate purpose of Creation is that negativity will be eradicated from the world. A world run with pure Chesed will not allow negativity to be uprooted. For this we need Din - judgement, strictness and discipline.

And so after Avraham came Yitzchak, who embodied the attribute of Din. But strictness and discipline that is too intense and intolerant, also leads to undesirable results. Just like "Yishmael went out from Avraham", "Eisav went out from Yitzchak" as a result of his intense Gevurah.

The proper approach is balance; a synthesis of kindness and discipline operating in tandem and harmony. This balance was embodied in Yaakov, the attribute of Tiferes. Unlike the results of the approaches of Avraham and Yitzchak, Yaakov merited that all of his children followed in his righteous ways.

In the macro-sense this is true as well. Hashem sustains all existence with His attribute of kindness. Even the forces of negativity receive their vitality from Hashem. However they only receive a limited life-force, sufficient enough for them to exist, so that we can transform them through our Avodah.

If Hashem would bestow His infinite, unadulterated kindness to the forces of negativity, they would be strengthened and we would not be able to remove them to perfect the world.

And so each morning, when the attribute of Avraham - Hashem's kindness flows into the world, we make the blessing Magen Avraham. Like a shield which covers its bearer, we ask Hashem to shield and limit this Chesed, so that it does not flow in its full intensity to the forces of negativity.

There is a Torah obligation for us to emulate the ways of Hashem. The message of this Bracha is relevant in many areas of our personal lives. One application is in our approach to parenting.

We love our children infinitely. We want to shower them with pure Chesed, see only the positive and give them everything. But the approach of unlimited kindness and permissiveness ultimately fails our kids. Chinuch requires being able to say no, to set limits and to have expectations. Negative behaviours and Middos need to be addressed with discipline so that they can be uprooted.

At the same time, overly-strict discipline without empathy, is not healthy either.

Our paradigm should be like the "Shield of Avraham"; To give genuine love and Chesed, but to make sure that it is appropriately shielded so that the warmth and light shines through, in a constructive manner, that will be of greatest benefit to our children's overall development.