

Lessons from the Chassidische Parsha

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

How do you judge others?

ד"ה ארדה נא

פרשה לך לך
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So, you're driving down the highway and someone cuts you off. How do you react?

We can choose to be Melamed Chovah, to ascribe fault and lay blame, interpreting it as an act of malice; "They are selfish, reckless, inconsiderate" etc. Choosing to see it this way will make us angry.

Or we can choose to judge them favourably and be Melamed Zechus. Perhaps there was an emergency or maybe they just did not see us. If we look at it this way, we will not be angry. On the contrary will feel compassion and understanding.

Every time someone does something that affects us, we have the choice of how we interpret it.

Judging others favourably is an expression of Chessed (kindness). When the "offender" is someone close to us, a friend or relative, we tend to be Melamed Zechus as our first instinct, even if we know that they have done wrong; "It can't be true", "I don't believe it", "there must be a reasonable explanation" or "another side to the story".

But for strangers and certainly towards people we dislike, our first instinct is likely to respond by being Melamed Chovah, to ascribe fault and condemn - an expression of Din.

Sometimes two people may do the exact same thing, yet, depending on who they are, we will interpret their actions very differently.

Before the Flood, the Torah tells us that Hashem was going to erase man from the face of the earth because "the inclination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil." Yet this very same reality became the reason why Hashem said that he would never again destroy the world on account of man, "because the inclination of the heart of man is evil from his youth."

Before the Flood, Hashem judged the reality of man's evil through the attribute of judgment, as a reason to punish. But after the sacrifices of Noach, the attribute of Chessed was aroused to judge man favourably, with compassion.

Chassidus explains that Chessed operates מלמעלה למטה, from above to below. "Above" refers to the giver, "below" refers to the recipient. Chessed seeks to give kindness to all, whether the recipient (below) is deserving or not.

Gevurah on the other hand operates מלמטה למעלה, from below to above. Gevurah judges based on what is happening

"below". Whether the recipient is deserving will determine the response from "above".

Kabbalistically, Chessed is associated with the sense of seeing and Gevurah with hearing.

Before destroying the cities of Sodom and Amora. Hashem says "ו, ארדה נא ואראה הכצעקתה הבאה אלי עשו כלה", "I will descend and see; if they have acted in accordance with the outcry that has come to Me - then destruction".

From here our sages (as quoted in the commentary of Rashi) teach that a judge in a capital case may not rule on the case without first seeing. The intent is not that the judges have to witness the crime - that is the role of witnesses. Rather, it means that the judges must examine the case carefully. But why do the sages use the word "seeing"?

The Torah tells us that the cries from Sodom of cruelty, violence, murder and idolatry came up before Hashem. The Torah describes their evils coming before Hashem as "rising up" from below, in the form of cries - something that is "heard". As described above, "hearing" and rising from below to above, reflect the attribute of Gevurah, which urges swift justice and punishment.

In response, Hashem says I will "go down" and "see", using the terms associated with Chessed. Perhaps, by approaching the case with the attribute of Chessed, it may be possible to be Melamed Zechus; to judge them favourably and not have to punish them. Only if their sins are so great that even the attribute of Chessed cannot be Melamed Zechus for them, will they have to be punished.

This is what it means that a judge cannot judge without "seeing". Like Hashem, a judge must approach each case with Chessed, to try to be Melamed Zechus.

Every time someone does something, we are the judge. Before passing judgement and jumping to conclusions, we should try to judge favourably, with kindness. Perhaps there is a justification or mitigating factor to explain their actions. Perhaps they are not as bad as we may initially think.

If this is how Hashem treated the people of Sodom whom the Torah describes as people who are exceedingly wicked and sinful, certainly we can all do the same in our relationships and interactions with others. After all, this is how we would want others to judge us.