

Echoes of Eden

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Deconstructing and Reconstructing Avraham

In Jewish tradition, Avraham is seen as the archetype of *hesed*; he is known not merely as the best example of loving kindness, but as the mortal reflection of this attribute of God. *Hesed* is often understood as “giving”, and Avraham’s reputation is built largely on the Torah’s description of his enthusiasm in catering to the needs of his guests. Rabbinic tradition adds even more details of Avraham’s yearning to perform acts of kindness and his eager anticipation of wayward travelers.

These sources notwithstanding, a closer look at some of the other episodes of Avraham’s biography recorded in the Torah, paint a portrait that may seem incongruous with the trait of *hesed*.

First, Avraham deserts his elderly father; he puts his wife in a precarious situation – not once but twice. He parts ways with his orphaned nephew Lot, whom he had once considered his own heir. He becomes embroiled in regional conflicts and goes to war. He capitulates to Sarah’s demands and banishes his maid, whom he has

impregnated. Later he casts her, and their child, out of his house. He performs circumcision on his entire household. Even when he negotiates with God to save the city of Sodom, he does not seek mercy for the sinners. His argument is that it would be improper to kill the righteous along with the wicked. Last but certainly not least, he is prepared to slaughter his own beloved son. While each of these episodes can and should be studied and analyzed, the

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sum total of his life's work may not appear to justify his reputation as the man of *hesed par excellence*. So many of his actions and reactions seem to be incongruous with the spirit of kindness.

How can we reconcile the Avraham that arises from these episodes with the traditional view of his character? Let us make a few suggestions:

We can postulate that at the core level Avraham was, in fact, as kind as we have always been led to believe. The situations of conflict in which he so often found himself were not of his own choosing but rather were tests, designed to elevate him, to hone and clarify his personality and bring new facets to light.

Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, we may be forced to reconsider our

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understanding of *hesed* itself. What constitutes *hesed*? While we may judge actions or motivations, these do not always dovetail: some acts that may seem kind may be motivated by something else altogether, and some kind intentions may have results that are far from kind. A case in point is Avraham's decision to go to war in order to free innocent captives. Here is an important moral lesson for those who see *hesed* as synonymous with non-violence and pacifism: The Torah definition

of *hesed* is not that espoused by Gandhi, who advised the Jews to go as sheep to the slaughter and opined that fighting – even fighting Nazis - is “immoral” just as any and every war is immoral. Avraham, the archetype of kindness, knew – and not just in a theoretical sense – that at times one must fight for peace. When he fought to liberate Lot, both his motivation and the results of his actions were *hesed* even though the means used to achieve this goal may seem to us to be at odds with our own perception of what *hesed* means.

Perhaps a better description of Avraham's personality would be that he was deeply engaged and involved in the lives of others. He displayed, in every one of the episodes mentioned above, an overarching concern for the welfare of others. He sought to better the world – one person at a time. He was not content with his own personal insight, understanding, revelation; he did not seclude himself or disengage from those who did not share his worldview. In this, he stands in stark distinction to Noah, who, when told that destruction was at hand, that the impending storm would be catastrophic, did not reach out to others, did not raise his voice to God or his fellow man in protest or warning. Noah did not impact another living soul.

The Gemara teaches that a real turning point for the world took place in the fifty-second year of Avraham's life. Born in the year 1948, Avraham was 52 years old when the new millennium arrived. Thus, the first 2000 years of human history are characterized as years of "*tohu*" – void, emptiness, self-absorption. From the year 2000, when Avraham began to teach his ideas, the years of revelation – Torah - begin. This, then, is the real nature of the *hesed* of Avraham: His care for others, his deep engagement with the world around him, spurred him to share his insight, to teach and impact others with truth. The driving force of this *hesed* was the desire to fulfill the will of God; this may be seen as Avraham's *hesed vis a vis* heaven.

Our ability to discern the *hesed* in all the episodes of Avraham's biography often requires nuanced thinking, yet careful examination of Avraham's words and deeds can empower us to live his legacy of *hesed* toward our fellow man and toward our Creator. True *hesed* is not pacifism, nor is it moral relativism that seeks to attain peace at the expense of truth. *Hesed* can only be meaningful when it springs from the deep desire to emulate God's attributes and share God's blessings with others.

<http://echoesofeden.rabbiarikahn.com>

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/10/lectures-and-essays-lech-lcha.html>