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FLOW CHART OF GOODNESS

THE SAGES PRESENT “KINDNESS” AS A CENTRAL VIRTUE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE¹. Abraham, the hero of the Sedra², together with his wife Sarah, is a paradigm of kindness. One sees their hospitality to wayfarers at the beginning of the Sedra, and we also see Abraham pleading with G-d on behalf of the people of Sodom³.

In connection with this discussion, G-d says that He loves Abraham because “he will instruct his household after him to keep the way of G-d, doing charity and justice”⁴.

“Charity and justice” signify acts of kindness. The Talmud cites this verse when it declares that there are three distinguishing features of the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham: they are humble, they are merciful, and they do acts of kindness. “Anyone who has these qualities,” adds the Talmud, “is fit to join the Jewish people”¹.

There are different opinions among the Sages as to whether these qualities are natural to the Jewish people or are special “gifts” from G-d⁵. It is also clear that they are ideals that each person has to struggle to attain and express in his or her personal life.

At first sight, humility might not seem to be a basic Jewish trait. The Talmud comments that, in fact, the Jews are the most forthright, or impertinent, of nations⁶. In daily experience, the concept ‘chutzpa’ (a rough colloquial translation is ‘cheek’) is a particularly Jewish feature of a person’s character.

Despite this, the Sages tell us that when we were at Mount Sinai, receiving the Torah, faced with a revelation of the infinite greatness of the Divine, the contrasting quality of humility was implanted in us as well⁷. From then on, together with the 'chutzpa', there is also a sense of awe in the soul of every Jew.

A further source for humility is from Abraham himself, as we see in this week's Sedra. Pleading with G-d about the people of Sodom, Abraham declares 'I am dust and ashes'⁸. This quality too is inherited by his descendants, linking with their experience at Sinai.

Now, considering all these three qualities together, humility, mercy and kindness, one sees a pattern, a kind of flow-chart.

Humility might begin, very spiritually, in terms of one's relationship with G-d. But it also has a crucial effect in one's relationship with others. The effect of inner humility enables one to empathise with another person's problems, arousing one's heart to mercy. The obvious effect of mercy is to encourage practical acts of charity and kindness. We see Abraham himself embodying each of these stages. From the soul, to the heart, to the hand.

Yet there is a further step, pointed out by the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Sometimes an act of kindness can lead to a feeling of haughtiness and pride. "I have done you a favour - so I am on top!" On the contrary, says the Rebbe, the kindness inherited from Abraham is intended to lead back to mercy and love. It does this because it is triggered not by pride and power but by humility. The kindness is really the outer expression of inner humility, and therefore it arouses yet further mercy and love in the heart of the one who is being kind. The flow chart expresses a cyclic process. Being humble, one feels mercy, and is kind; and this leads to yet more humility and mercy, becoming yet more kind.

At least, this is the ideal, to which we can aspire. This ideal is one of the legacies from Abraham, inherited by the Jewish people⁹.

1. Yevamot 79a. 2. Genesis chs.18-22. 3. Gen. 18:17-33. 4. Gen.18:19. 5. The Babylonian Talmud, in Yevamot 79a, presents these qualities as inherent in the Jew, while the Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 4:1, describes them as gifts from G-d. See the full discussion in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.30, pp.61-67. 6. Beitza 25b. 7. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol.30 p 62, citing the Maharsha to Yevamot 79a. 8. Gen.18:27. 9. Based freely on the source by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in n.5.

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SEDRA VAYERA

REAL HOSPITALITY

Rachel, Benjy and Dina were doing their homework when their mother came into the room.

“Dina do you remember me telling you about Uncle Bernie coming to stay here for a few days next week?”

“Yes, why?” Dina asked.

“Well I just remembered that Uncle Bernie finds it really hard to climb stairs, and there are a lot of stairs to the guest room... so, since your room is on the ground floor, I was wondering if you could sleep in the guest room, and Uncle Bernie could have your room.”

Dina was dismayed at this idea, and showed it. “Mummy, no please! It’s not fair! I hate moving my stuff, and I don’t like the guest room. I’m sure Uncle Bernie can climb those stairs - there aren’t that many.”

Her mother was disappointed, but merely said “Well, Dina, I cannot force you. If you aren’t willing to move out, than Uncle Bernie will have to sleep upstairs.”

Dina glowered at her exercise book as her mother left the room. Suddenly she couldn’t concentrate on her work anymore. She tried to excuse her behaviour in her mind but she knew she was wrong.

Why, just a few days ago at the Shabbat table, she remembered, their father had been telling them about Abraham - who was feeling really ill after having been circumcised at the age of 99 but, when he saw that some guests were coming, he jumped up to meet them.

Not only that, but at the time that Abraham saw the guests he was actually being visited by G-d Himself in a spiritual vision. But Abraham loved having guests so much that he asked G-d to wait while he went and saw to their needs.

Dina recalled a saying of the Sages her teacher had told them: "The deeds of the fathers are a lesson to the children." Everything that Abraham and Sarah did are a lesson to us, their children, she had explained.

If Abraham had been so excited to have guests even when he was ill, even when it wasn't a convenient time, surely she could put up with a little inconvenience like moving out of her room for a few days for such an important thing...

"Hi, Uncle Bernie!" she greeted her uncle a few days later, as he was helped out of the car by Dad. Her uncle beamed at her.

"Hi Dina! What a fine young lady you're becoming!" (Dina turned a bit red at this).

"And I hear you're being kind enough to give up your room for your old uncle. That's what I call real hospitality - just like Abraham!"

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