

The National Jewish

Post & Opinion

Volume 74, Number 4 • November 7, 2007 • 26 Cheshvan 5768 Two Dollars
www.jewishpostopinion.com

ONE HAS TOLD YOU WHAT IS GOOD

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

If there's one goal we all share in life, it's our search for "happiness." Of course, happiness is difficult if not impossible to define with any unanimity or consensus.

Most of us can agree, however, on the essentials of our persistent *unhappiness*. Regardless of whether we turn to family, friends, therapists, or even God, we tend to share two kinds of experiences that we associate with our unhappiness—only one of which we want to consider here.

More than almost anything else in our lives, we need the experience of having that part of ourselves which is uniquely in the image of God to be lovable and loved. When it is not, we experience existential loneliness—not the belief or feeling that we are ultimately alone, but the experiential *fact* that no one else in our lives truly knows and loves what the Creator uniquely implanted within us, which has the effect of incrementally destroying our self-esteem and self-confidence.

(The second source of unhappiness that many of us have in common is our experience that "it's a cold, cruel world.")

What is the "*answer*" to this seemingly impenetrable loneliness?

There are certainly no simple, or quick solutions to loneliness, which is lifelong for many of us. But there is wisdom in our Torah tradition that can help us diminish the worst effects of loneliness.

In the Torah reading Chayei Sarah, the life of Sarah, Abraham is "advanced in age" and concerned about finding a suitable wife for his son Isaac.

In what sense might we imagine he is concerned about "suitability"?

The woman who would be acceptable to become his son's wife would have to accept the idea of one God and the primacy of extending hospitality to strangers, which were the hallmarks of his own life and represented extraordinary innovations in his time.

Abraham summons his "manager," Eliezer, the man who runs his household and all his other worldly affairs. He instructs Eliezer to return to Haran, the land from which Abraham emigrated, to get from his kindred, from his own family, a wife for his son. (Genesis 24:1-4)

Eliezer swears to Abraham that he will carry out his wishes. He then travels to the city where Abraham's brother, Nahor, lives with his family. Eliezer takes with him ten of Abraham's camels and a "deed of gift" to all of Abraham's possessions. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) tells us that he does this to ensure that Nahor's family "should be eager to send [to] him [Abraham] their daughter."

When Eliezer arrives at the outskirts of the city, he stops at a well of water. He prays to God that the young woman whom he will ask for a drink of water, and who will offer water, not only to him but his camels too, that she will be the one "appointed . . . [by God] for Isaac." (Genesis 24:11-15) As Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches us, "He would recognize her not by her wealth, nor by her physical charms, nor by her intellectual accomplishments, but only by her character,

by the humanity and morality of her heart, by her readiness to help others—in short, by her *גמילות חסד* . . .” (*gemilut chesed*—loving-kindness). Rabbi Hirsch goes on to say, “The maiden . . . would know how to express her compassion not in idle sentimental phrases, but by prompt vigorous action, taken on her own accord, without first being asked to do so.” (Hirsch on “The Jewish Woman,” in the *Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch*)

Soon after Eliezer finishes his prayer, Rebecca—the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham’s brother—comes out to the well. (Rebecca was Isaac’s second cousin.)

The Torah then reads: “And the servant [Eliezer] ran to meet her and said: please give me a drink, a little water from your pitcher. And she said, drink my lord; and she hurried and she let down her [water] pitcher on her hand, and she gave him to drink. And done giving him drink she said: also for your camels, I will draw [water] until they finish drinking.” (Genesis 24:17-19)

What can we learn from this encounter?

When Eliezer asked Rebecca for a drink of water, he was testing her character, measuring the capacity of her compassion for suffering, her commitment to showing kindness to strangers. She responded without thinking, as if to share with a stranger in need was the most natural thing to do. She was, in that sense, a “chip off the old block” of Abraham and Sarah. Recognizing how thirsty he was, she didn’t engage him in conversation or ask him any questions—she simply lowered her water pitcher.

She had loving-kindness for the animals too, although she knew the hard labor that would be required to water the ten camels, the many trips back and forth from the well to the watering trough. She also knew that their thirst was as great a trial to them as her own was to her.

So the test of suitability for Isaac’s wife was her capacity for loving-kindness.

It’s rare in contemporary life to find anyone who affirms the *primacy* of active loving-kindness in the people they are considering as prospective mates. We look for many other qualities: we ask ourselves if prospective mates are fun, friendly, fair, even fashionable; if they are from the same class, educational background, or even (occasionally) religion; and, of course, we ask

ourselves if we are “in love” with them and if they are “in love” with us.

But none of these criteria contemplate how a relationship with the person we are considering as a life-long partner will address our existential loneliness.

And, as far too many people can attest, marriage *per se* doesn’t necessarily cure this loneliness. We cannot “cure” the experience of being unloved and unlovable if kindness does not form the foundation of our relationships. This is the legacy of Abraham and Sarah and our tradition.

Maybe one of the reasons that nowadays loving-kindness for many of us is not a priority in prospective mates is that often what we note in the relationships of others around us is its absence, especially in times of stress and tension. Then, too, extending kindness is often at the expense of one’s immediate self-interest. It not infrequently entails forgoing comfort, convenience, or control.

How then are we to maintain kindness in our relationships under such conditions?

The prophet Micah (6:8) tells us, in effect, how loving-kindness is sustained. He says: “One has told you, human, what is good, what Adoshem requires of you: only to *do justice* and *love kindness*, and to *go humbly* with your God.

Kindness, it would seem, resides between justice and humility—it is sustained by them. We suggest that if kindness is the *sine qua non* of relationships that conquer existential loneliness, it is justice and humility between the partners that make such kindness possible.

There is no kindness in a relationship in which either person is, in Martin Buber’s words, an “it,” an object for the other’s gratification, rather than a “thou,” another sentient human being—which fundamentally is an issue of *justice*.

And there is no kindness in a relationship in which either person is not learning from the other—which fundamentally is an issue of *humility*.

In short, our tradition is teaching us what our Creator requires in our relationships with one another to ensure that the unique image of God that is in each of us is lovable and loved.

Nothing is more important than kindness, and nothing makes it more possible than justice and humility.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of *Gather the People* with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here](#)!