

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt”l

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Parashas Vayeitzei

“AND HE [YAAKOV] SAID: ‘... IT IS NOT YET TIME TO BRING THE LIVESTOCK IN ... GO ON GRAZING’” (BEREISHIS 29:7)

They were still responsible to perform their jobs

THE TORAH DEMANDS of every Jew to do *chesed*, not only to individuals, but to society as a whole. We are even obligated to do our part to improve the local community when we are strangers, visiting from another country. The Ralbag highlights this concept as seen in the actions of Yaakov Avinu, as he arrived at the well at the end of his journey to Charan. He came upon a group of shepherds standing by, while the flocks were lying down near the well. Yaakov assumed that the shepherds were preparing the flocks to return to their homes. He first greeted the shepherds, and then reminded them that the day was yet young and they were still responsible to perform their jobs and continue grazing the sheep. The Ralbag (ibid., lesson 3) explains that we learn the following lesson from Yaakov’s actions: One should try to correct and direct others towards the path of good behavior in any way possible, because by helping others act appropriately, we improve the entire community.

The Ralbag goes on to point out an extra bonus from Yaakov’s type of behavior: it increases the love between the members of the society when they see that certain members try to help others conduct themselves in the most perfect manner. Simply put, if I notice that you are taking an interest in me and helping me improve, I will be grateful and love you in return.

How could this ever benefit the other citizens of Charan?

How would this last point apply to Yaakov? Yaakov was a foreigner, who had just arrived. In addition, Yaakov was only talking to a very small segment of the community. How could Yaakov’s actions affect the entire city of Charan? Imagine you are a shepherd, relaxing with your flock by the well. Along comes Yaakov, a stranger you have never met before, and he tries to encourage you to be more diligent in your work. You might feel a degree of love for Yaakov because of his demonstration of caring for you, but how would this affect the rest of your community? How could this ever benefit the other citizens of Charan?

All this was triggered by the actions of one man

Hashem created every human being to be inherently upstanding, sensitive and caring. As Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest of men, put it, “Hashem made man *yashar* – straight, upright” (Koheles 7:29). That natural, built-in goodness is present in every human being, waiting to be tapped and brought to the fore. When you show someone that you care about him, that love is naturally reciprocated. Both of you – now fortified by these mutual acts of *chesed* – interact with others, activating the potential within them, and these ripples of caring and compassion flow outward in ever-widening circles, eventually spreading to your entire community. The increased love the shepherds felt overflowed to influence and improve their behavior towards each other and then to the entire community. All this was triggered by the actions of one man – Yaakov Avinu.

What magnificence is vested inside every one of us! Hashem has etched into our beings a powerful drive for truth, for kindness, for goodness. Like the tiny atom, which can be split to release untold megatons of nuclear power, every human being carries inside him a lofty potential that can be a catalyst to set off chain reactions of *chesed* and love in entire communities. In these dark, wintry days of our exile, let us reach inside ourselves to care for others and thereby ignite the hearts of our fellow Jews into one massive torch of *ahavas Yisrael* that will light up the way to the coming of *Mashiach* and the final redemption.