

Special Delivery: Chesed

By: Benji Zoller, Feb. 18, 2015—Parshat Shmini 5775

The idea of chesed is one that in many ways describes the Jewish people as a whole. In contrast to tzedaka, which translates to "righteousness" and refers to when someone does something because it is morally right, chesed means doing something out of the goodness of your heart. Additionally, it means going above the call of duty. Doing an act of chesed essentially means that you're doing something for someone, whether they ask or not, with the greatest ability that you can.

In this week's parshah, Parshat Shmini, we learn about kosher animals. Surprising, however, is the fact that when it comes to the kosher and non-kosher birds, there is no clear translation. The Torah lists the names of the species, but doesn't provide any other information as to what type of bird it is. Thus, it is crucial to rely on the commentaries to help us understand what these birds are.

Interestingly, one of the non-kosher birds is called a "chasida." Rashi explains that this is referring to a stork, because it displays kindness toward others of its species by sharing food with them. However, the question can then be asked why, if this bird is one of kindness is it not kosher? To this the Rizhiner Rebbe answers that it is because the stork displays compassionate acts towards its fellow stork, but doesn't help other species. This, in turn, skews the idea of chesed. Whereas we think of chesed as being generous to all, the stork simply gives to those selective few of its kind.

The reason the stork is not kosher is because it limits its chesed. Even though it has the potential to be great, it doesn't. We, as humans, on the other hand, can change, reform ourselves, and do great things. Unlike the bird who is limited to habit, we are great in the sense that we are limitless. We want to change, we can change. We want to help more people, we can help more people.

It is not enough to only be kind to those in our circles, rather we must go out of our way to help everyone. Just as we are God's chosen people, and thus have the extra obligation of keeping kosher on our shoulders, we also have the obligation to make the world a better place. Whether this means to be a "light unto the nations" in terms of ethics, helping those in need, or volunteering to make active change around the world it is our duty, as Jews, to make the world a better place.

In that light, we must emulate God by giving to all those who need, and even those who simply need a hand. It is our job, not only morally but also fundamentally, to help out those who need us. It is our responsibility to do chesed, thus lending our hand in the where it's needed, making the world better every day.

Shabbat Shalom!

Benji Zoller—Chicken

Quote for Shabbos: "Let us not be satisfied with just giving money. Money is not enough, money can be got, but they need your hearts to love them. So, spread your love everywhere you go."—Mother Teresa