

ENGAGING IN DEEDS OF COMPASSION

Compassion is fellow-feeling, the emotion of caring concern; in post-biblical Hebrew *rahamanut* or *rachamim*, interestingly from the word *rehem*, ‘womb’, originating in the idea of either motherly love.

The Talmudic rabbis considered compassion to be one of the three distinguishing marks of Jews. A Talmudic term frequently used for God, particularly in legal discussions, is the Aramaic *Rahamana*, ‘the Compassionate.’

In Jewish teaching, compassion is among the highest of virtues, as its opposite, cruelty, is among the worst of vices. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of the people from the north country who ‘lay hold on bow and spear, they are cruel, and have no compassion’ The people of Amalek, in particular, are singled out in the Jewish tradition as perpetrators of wanton cruelty and an uncompassionate Jew is called an Amalekite.

Compassion is to be extended to animals as well as to humans. It is strictly forbidden to cause unnecessary pain to animals. There is a Talmudic rule, still followed by pious Jews, that before sitting down to a meal one must first see that the domestic animals are fed.

The Midrash remarks that Moses proved his fitness to be the shepherd of Israel by the tender care with which he treated the sheep when he tended the flock of his father-in-law.

Commenting on the law against killing an animal and its young on the same day (Leviticus 22: 26), the Zohar (iii. 92b) says: ‘Thus if a man does kindness on earth, he awakens loving-kindness above, and it rests upon that day which is crowned therewith through him. Similarly, if he performs a deed of mercy, he crowns that day with mercy, and it becomes his protector in the hour of need. So, too, if he performs a cruel action, he has a corresponding effect on that day and impairs it, so that subsequently it becomes cruel to him and tries to destroy him, giving him measure for measure.’

The people of Israel are withheld from cruelty more than all other peoples, and must not manifest any deed of the kind, since many watchful eyes are upon them.'

There is, in this connection, a revealing tale in the Talmud. A calf, being led to the slaughter, ran for protection to Rabbi Judah the Prince, but the Rabbi said to the calf: 'Go! For this you were created', whereupon the rabbi was visited with great suffering.

Sometime later, Rabbi Judah noticed his servant sweeping out a nest of weasels from the corner of his palace. 'Let them be,' he ordered, 'it is written [Psalms 145: 9] "His tender mercies are over all His works"', whereupon the suffering departed from him. The point of the story seems to be that cold calculation, even when justified, is no substitute for compassion.

Kindness is paramount in Jewish thought. When the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago, the Talmud pinpoints the cause: Jewish infighting and *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred of one another.

Hillel says: Be among the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them closer to the Torah. (Pirkei Avot 1:12)

Aaron, Moses' brother, was famous for his love of others and the way he helped people mend relationships and end arguments. Jewish tradition teaches that when Aaron saw friends or spouses divided by conflict, he'd speak with them soothingly, assuring each party that the other sincerely regretted their argument and desired peace. This wasn't a falsehood because in our deepest core each one of us longs for peace with others.

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: A person should always be careful in the way he formulates his responses. (Talmud Megillah 25b)

It's easy to speak quickly and say something that might hurt others. A truly wise person considers the effects his or her words might have on others.

Acts of kindness never die. They linger in the memory, giving life to other acts in return. - Jonathan Sacks, in From Optimism to Hope

This wise observation echoes the Jewish realization that *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*: one good deed begets another.

The Sages taught that a person should always be patient like Hillel. (Talmud Shabbat 30b)

The Jewish sage Hillel was known for his scholarship and his intensely patient nature. Even when peppered with many seemingly distracting questions, Hillel always treated each person who approached him with respect and patience. He's truly a worthy role model for us today, in our impersonal, impatient age.

Indifference, to me, is the epitome of evil. The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference. - Elie Wiesel, quoted in US News and World Report, Oct. 27, 1986.

Sometimes unkindness doesn't manifest itself in hostile words or raised voices. Overlooking or ignoring other people can hurt even more than nasty statements. Try taking the time to say a kind word to others. Even simply saying hello and asking people how they are feeling can brighten their day and lighten their load.

Shimon the Righteous was accustomed to say: The world is based on three things - on the Torah, on the service of God, and upon acts of loving-kindness. (Pirkei Avot 1:2)

Kindness isn't optional in Judaism: reaching out to others is a key part of working to make the world a better place. Being kind is integral to what it means to be a Jew.

Acts of kindness are greater than charity since they can be done for both the rich and poor... Charity can only be done with one's money, while acts of loving-kindness can be performed both personally and with one's money. - Rambam (Hilchos Aivel 14:1)

The Medieval Jewish sage Rambam explained that acts of loving kindness can include visiting the sick, inquiring how other people are doing, helping to facilitate weddings and funerals, and treating everyone with warmth. He even prescribed the way we should say goodbye to guests at the end of a visit, walking them to

our door and saying goodbye with warmth. Nobody should feel alone and uncared for.

The Sages taught...One who judges another favorably is himself judged favorably. (Talmud Shabbat 127b)

Judaism demands that we give other people the benefit of the doubt. In our internet-fueled age of instant “likes” and “dislikes” it’s important to keep an open mind and remind ourselves that we don’t know the whole story and that other people are grappling with circumstances and challenges we know nothing at all about.

Rabbi Akiva taught: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18). This is the most important rule in the Torah. (Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 30b)

Without love, it’s impossible to treat others as they deserve. Each person is likened to an entire world in Judaism. Remembering this helps us to see the value in each and every person we come across and can help us remember the key Torah commandment to be kind.

PROVIDING FOR THE WEDDING COUPLE

Providing for a bride’s material needs for her wedding and “gladdening a bride and groom” at their wedding celebration ensure that the bride and groom know that the community wants them to have a happy start in married life

AD ON THE INTERNET:

Getting married and hosting a wedding is an exciting, momentous event in anyone’s life. But it can also be a huge expense.

While most families are able to find a way to manage that expense, poor families in Israel often just can’t bear it. And an occasion that should be one of great happiness and excitement becomes marred by disappointment and anxiety over mounting bills.

But Yad Eliezer’s Gitty Perkowski Adopt-a-Wedding Program changes that.

Our program invites Jewish couples from around the world to share

the joy of their happy occasion by sponsoring the wedding of a poor couple in Israel on the same date as their own.

Not getting married right now? You can still bring joy to couples in need by sponsoring their wedding. Dates can be chosen from the *Yad Eliezer Wedding Calendar*, and sponsorships can be made in the merit of a *refuah shleima*, in honor of an anniversary or *yartzheit*, or for a myriad of other events and purposes. Giving *tzedaka* to this program is the perfect way to do the incredible *mitzvah* of *hachnosas kallah*.

Your very generous donation to our Adopt-A-Wedding program will make a real difference in the lives of so many. You will be replacing their worry and concern over wedding expenses, with happiness, excitement, and great relief. Imagine their joy as they reach their *chuppah*, able to fully celebrate one of the biggest moments of their lives.

Participating in the wedding feast and rejoicing with the bride and groom, to cheer them and gladden their hearts on this special day, is a great *mitzvah* and found in the . The *mitzvah* of gladdening the bride and groom is found in the Talmud, in *Brachot* 6b. The Talmud relates that the greatest of our sages set aside their diligent non-interrupted Torah study for the sake of entertaining the new couple with song and dance.

On their wedding day, as well as during the entire following week of *Sheva Brachot*, the bride and groom are treated like a royal couple. They are wined and dined, and their every wish is catered to. It is considered a privilege to serve them.

According to the *Zohar*, it is proper to invite poor people to the wedding feast. No joyous occasion is complete unless it is shared with those who are less fortunate. It is also of great importance that the establishment of a Jewish home be based on kindness and compassion. Following this reasoning, it is sometimes encouraged to place a charity box on the head-table of the wedding.

What does it mean to gladden a bride and groom? Really, this answer varies greatly, depending on a number of factors - such as one's relationship to the bride and groom.

For instance, the mere presence of a close friend who has traveled a great distance may give the bride or groom immense joy. Many people, however, take this mitzvah quite seriously and work hard to make certain that the dancing during the reception is *leibadik* (Yiddish, meaning heartfelt, but is often used to imply high-spirited and energetic).

Thus, at a traditional wedding one might see people dressing up in costume to make the bride/groom laugh, jumping rope, performing amateur acrobatics and even lighting their hats on fire.

The tradition of happily making a fool of one's self to bring joy to the bride and groom is an ancient one. Indeed, the Talmud (*Ketubot* 17a), mentions Rabbi Samuel the son of Rabbi Isaac who was known for juggling myrtle twigs before the bride. While his peer, Rabbi Zeira, felt that this debased the scholar's honor, Rabbi Shmuel was greatly honored for his efforts to fulfill the mitzvah of *simchat chatan v'kallah*.