

A MUSSARIC COMMENTARY ON GENESIS

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Parshat Bereishit: The Soul

Chapter 1:26-30: The First Creation Story

And God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. And they will have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of skies, over the cattle, and of all of the earth. And over all the creeping things that creep over the earth.” So God created the mankind in His own image. In the image of God,¹ he created him, male and female, He created them.²

¹ ***In the image of God*** What does it mean to be created in the image of God? What kind of responsibility does this place on humankind? What might this imply about the concept of “free will” as it relates to human drive. Concerning this verse, *Rashi* comments, “With the power of understanding and intellect” (Stone Chumash, 8). *Maimonides* explains even further: “Among all living creatures, Man alone is endowed - like his Creator - with morality, reason and free will. He can know and love God and can hold spiritual communion with Him; and Man alone can guide his actions through reason. It is in this sense that the Torah describes Man as having been created in God’s image and likeness” (Stone Chumash, 9). What we come to learn from this phrase, *in the image of God* is the concept of *free will* or *choice*. Since all human life was endowed with intellect, intelligence, and free range of motion to utilize our minds in whichever way we choose, we are equally gifted with *free will*. It is in this manner that we resemble our Creator.

Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his book, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, inquires even deeper into the meaning of this verse. He writes, “There is no doubt that the term ‘image of God’ refers to man’s inner charismatic endowment as a creative being. Man’s likeness to God expresses itself in man’s striving and ability to become a creator. Adam, who was fashioned in the image of God was blessed with a great drive for creative activity and immeasurable resources for the realization of this goal, the most outstanding of which is the intelligence, the human mind, capable of confronting the outside world and inquiring into its complex workings” (The Lonely Man of Faith, 12).

In the first chapter of creation, human life is created with the gift of reason. It is on that point alone, that Rabbi Chaim Moshe Luzzatto explains in the chapter “The Purpose of Creation” in his book, *The Way of God*: “God’s purpose in creation was to bestow of His good to another. God alone is true perfection. His wisdom therefore decreed that the nature of this true benefaction be His giving created things the opportunity to attach themselves to Him to the greatest degree possible for them. They can thus derive pleasure from that true good to the greatest degree possible for them. God’s wisdom, however, decreed that for such good to be perfect, the one enjoying it must be its master. He must be one who has earned it for himself, and not one given it accidentally [or by chance]. By clinging to the elements of perfection, this unique creature would make itself resemble its Creator” (37-39).

In Mussar, we come to understand that the impetus for connection with God comes about by way of *choice* through the *free will* that all human beings possess. For Luzzatto, the elements of *perfection*, which he refers to, are “intellect and his positive character traits.” Moreover, the more elements of perfection we incorporate into ourselves, the more attributes we choose to imbue in our personal character, the stronger our bond to God will be. However, with the ability to ascend towards perfection, comes the opportunity to dismiss this experience. Since each of us was created *in the image of God*, and therefore capable of making rational decisions, each person is also uniquely suited to gravitate towards “negative character traits” and “the elements of deficiency.” Rabbi Luzzatto goes on to explain; “Only man is placed between perfection and deficiency, with the power to earn perfection. Man must earn this perfection, through his own free will and desire. If he were compelled towards perfection, then he would not really be the master of it. Rather He who compelled him would be the one responsible, and God’s purposes would not be fulfilled. It was therefore necessary that man be given free will. He has the power of choice, and is able to choose, knowingly and willingly” (The Way of God, 43-45).

Therefore, to be made in *the image of God* is both to have free reign and to do as we each desire. Yet, each person also has the responsibility to strive towards perfection, to engage with the Divine presence. While human beings were given the gift of intellect, it is also our responsibility to use it in ways that bring about moral justice in the world. We were created with this capacity. For many of us, this means starting transforming *who we are currently*. It is not enough that all human life inherited the gift of reason; we must also wield it properly.

For Mussar, our intelligence should be used towards self-transformation, thereby transforming the world around us. In Mussar, one must determine the ways in which they can uniquely strive towards perfection.

² **He created them** For Mussar, what is the purpose of creation? Is human existence a stagnant, motionless drift through time? If not, what then is to be the “central thrust of our lives? Who is to claim responsibility over our lives? In Viktor Frankl’s book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he writes, “Man is *not* fully conditioned and determined but rather determines himself whether he gives in to conditions or stands up to them. In other words, man is ultimately self-determining. Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment. By the same token, every human being has the freedom to change at any instant...one of the main features of human existence is the capacity to rise above such conditions, to grow beyond them. Man is capable of changing the world for the better if possible, and of changing himself for the better if necessary” (153). For Frankl and the practice of Mussar, the concept of self-transformation, the willingness to believe that one is capable of growing, maturing, and developing, is the stepping-stone towards *perfection*. To willingly choose to take on this task, the challenge of assessing oneself, acknowledging one’s deficiencies and strengths, and ultimately striving towards perfection, is to confront the very nature of our being. However, this requires adjusting our *mindset*. Mussar requires altering our worldview and the way we perceive ourselves as instruments of positivity, love, joy, loving-kindness, and truth.

Psychologist Carol S. Dweck in her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, writes, “For twenty years, my research has shown that the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value. How does this happen? How can a simple belief have the power to transform your psychology and, as a result, your life? Believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the *fixed mindset*.... But there’s another mindset in which these traits are not simply a hand you’re dealt with and have to live with. In this mindset, the hand you’re dealt is just the starting point for development. This *growth mindset* is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way - in their initial talents and attitudes, interests, or temperaments - everyone can change and grow through application and experience. The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it’s not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives” (Mindset, 6-7). As Dweck suggests, altering the way we see ourselves is in part the impetus for change. Yet, this idea isn’t novel. Rather, Jewish philosophers suggested it over nine hundred years ago, before the practice of Mussar was ever conceptualized.

Alan Morinis, founder of the Mussar Institute and author of several books on spiritual development through the practice of Mussar, explains in his book, *With Heart in Mind: Mussar Teachings to Transform Your Life*: “The central concern of Judaism is that you and I accomplish a personal spiritual transformation in our lifetimes. At its core, the driving concern of Judaism is personal spiritual transformation. Redoing ourselves - the project of becoming a new being - is meant to be the central thrust of our lives. And should you think that you are who you are and that change is not possible, *Rambam*, also known as Maimonides, affirmed that it is squarely in our own hands to decide who we will be:

Do not even consider...that the Holy Blessed One decrees upon all people at all time of the their births whether they will be good or bad. This is not so - every person has the potential to be as righteous as Moses our Teacher, or as wicked as Jeroboam; clever or stupid, merciful or cruel, miserable or noble, or indeed to possess any of the other qualities. Nobody can force you, decree upon you, or led you into one of the ways, but you should choose a way out of your own free will...

When we realize that the process of transformation is situated at the center of our lives, then all the circumstances that we live with are revisioned as pathways for our growth. The people we relate to, the work we do, where we live, what we eat, the challenges we face, how we respond to those tests, and the rest all appear to be the pieces we are given to work with as we pursue growth. And we do grow. Just by living and having experiences and thinking and learning, we grow. [Therefore,] The proposition that lies at the heart of Mussar is that because life is inherently a process of growing and we have free will, it is within our power and capacity to direct the process of our own change” (2-6).

And God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion³ over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.” God said, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food.” And it was so.⁴ And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

³ ***Subdue it, and have dominion*** What does it mean to have “dominion” over the earth? What are the implications of this task for humanity? In Robert Alter’s commentary on Genesis, he explains that the verb used here, ‘subdue,’ “in most of the contexts in which it occurs it seems to suggest and absolute or even fierce exercise of mastery” (Alter, 5).

Similarly, concerning humankind’s ability to subdue and have dominion over the earth, Soloveitchik writes, “In spite of the boundless divine generosity providing man with many intellectual capacities and interpretive perspectives in his approach to reality, God, in imparting the blessing to Adam and giving him the mandate to subdue nature, directed Adam’s attention to the function and practical aspects of his intellect through which man is able to gain control of nature. [However,] the conative movement of attraction, which Adam experiences toward the world, is not of an exploratory cognitive nature. It is rather nurtured by the selfish desire on the part of Adam to better his own position in relation to his environment. Adam is overwhelmed by one quest, namely, to harness and dominate the elemental natural forces and to put them at his disposal” (The Lonely Man of Faith, 13).

⁴ ***And it was so*** Soloveitchik asks, “What is Adam out to achieve? What is the objective toward which he incessantly drives himself with enormous speed? How does Adam find himself? [Adam] works with a simple equation introduced by the Psalmist, who proclaimed the singularity and unique station of man in nature: ‘For thou made him a little lower than the angels and hast crowned him with a glory and honor (*dignity*) (8:5).’ Man is an honorable being. In other words, man is a dignified being and to be human means to live with dignity. The answer we find again in the words of the Psalmist: ‘Thou hast made him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands. Thou hast put all things under his feet (8:6).’ In other words, dignity was equated by the Psalmist with man’s capability of dominating his environment and exercising control over it. Man acquires dignity through glory, though his majestic posture *vis-à-vis* his environment.”

As Soloveitchik comes to explain concerning the relationship to dignity, honor, and the human effort, is that “dignity is unobtainable as long as man has not reclaimed himself from coexistence with nature and has not risen from a non-reflective, degradedly helpless instinctive life to an intelligent, planned, and majestic one. There is no dignity without responsibility, and one cannot assume responsibility as long as he is not capable of living up to his commitments. Only when man rises to the heights of freedom of action and creativity of mind does he begin to implement the mandate of dignified responsibility entrusted to him by his Maker - Dignity of man expressing itself in the awareness of being responsible” (The Lonely Man of Faith, 15-16).

The story of creation isn’t just about the manufacturing of human flesh, but how human design is situated in a position of responsibility for oneself and for other living creatures. For Soloveitchik, it is not enough to simply “subdue nature” or even “harness and dominate elemental natural forces” for the sake of our own benefit. Our task is much greater. In the words of Victor E. Frankl, “Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone’s task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it. As each situation in life represents a challenge to man and presents a problem for him to solve, the question of the meaning of life may actually be reversed. Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is *he* who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible” (Man’s Search for Meaning, 131).

Chapter 2:5-9: The Second Creation Story

Thus the heavens and earth were completed, and all their hosts. And on the seventh day God completed His work, which he had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work, which He had done. God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because on it He abstained from all His work, which God created to make.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created on the day that Adonai God made earth and the heavens - now all the trees of the field were not yet on the earth and all the herb of the field had not yet sprouted; For Adonai God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to work the ground. A mist ascended from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. And Adonai God formed mankind from the dust of the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils⁵ a living soul⁶ and man became a living being.

⁵ ***He breathed into his nostrils:*** *What does it mean that the soul is created from divine origin? What then is the relationship between divinity, intelligence, and responsibility?* “The biblical metaphor referring to God breathing life into Adam alludes to his genuine living experience of God rather than to some divine potential or endowment in Adam. [This] Adam lives in close union with God. As Nachmanides explains, ‘It is stated that God breathed into man’s nostrils the breath of life because the soul was not formed from the elements...nor did it emanate from the Separate Intelligences but it was God’s own breath’” (The Lonely Man of Faith, 22). Ultimately, we learn, “God thus made Man out of both lower [earthly] and upper [heavenly] matter: his body from the dust and his soul from the spirit (*Rashi*). In the words of the Zohar, ‘one who blows, blows from within himself,’ indicating that Man’s soul is part of God’s essence, as it were. This soul made Man *a living being*, which *Onkelos* defines as *a speaking spirit*. Accordingly, the life that is unique to man and which only God could ‘blow’ into him is the rational soul that includes the power of intelligent speech. That is what elevates a human above animal; the ability, and therefore the responsibility, to use his intelligence in God’s service” (Stone Chumash, 11-12).

⁶ ***living soul*** *what does it mean that humankind now has a soul? What does this imply about the nature of our creation and our strivings for perfection? What is the newfound relationship between the soul and self-transformation?* Alan Morinis explains, “The starting point for understanding Mussar is the verse in the Torah that tells us: ‘You shall be holy.’ The Torah here reveals in no uncertain terms what a human being’s job description. In essence, we are here on earth for no other purpose than to grow and blossom spiritually – to become holy. Our potential and therefore our goals should be to become as spiritually refined and elevated as is possible.

It is interesting that when the rabbi combed through the Torah to seek out the commandments that are the backbone for living a Jewish life, none of the major codifiers seized ‘you shall be holy’ as a commandment they told us we must follow. My thought here is based on an analysis of another piece of the Torah, the famous story of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge. There, too, we read what sounds like an explicit commandment, as God tells them, ‘Of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, do not eat.’ Rabbi Yosef Yozel Hurwitz, who founded and led the Novardok school of Mussar, writes about this episode, saying that this directive was not a commandment to Adam and Eve. Rather, it was God’s good advice to them.

The same can be said about the Torah’s bidding, ‘you shall be holy.’ Not just an injunction, this too is advice that helps us understand and act on an impulse we already feel within ourselves, which is the inner drive to make something better of ourselves. The Torah’s counsel is aimed directly at the soul. The word translated as *holy* in the phrase ‘you shall be holy’ is given in the Torah in the plural. Becoming holy is thus the task of every individual, and Torah’s advice is meant to be taken to heart by each of us” (Everyday Holiness, 11-12). Just as Luzzatto believes that the purpose of creation is to strive towards perfection, Morinis too believes that our soul is gifted to humanity in order that we strive towards holiness. Often in Mussar these two words are used synonymously, but they both point towards the idea of moral nourishment and character development through our own efforts and intellect. Just as we are responsible for using our minds in creative and responsible fashions, our soul is key that allows access for human interaction with the Divine.

Adonai God planted a garden in Eden, to the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. And Adonai God caused to sprout from the ground every tree that was pleasant to the sight and good for food; also the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.

Chapter 2: 15-25: God Forms Eve

And Adonai God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden, to work it and guard it. And Adonai God commanded the man saying, “From every tree of the garden you may surely eat; but of the Tree of knowledge of Good and Bad, you shall not eat; for on the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.”

And Adonai God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper corresponding to him.” Now out of the ground, Adonai God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call each one; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. And the man assigned names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to every beast of the field, but as for man, he did not find a helper corresponding to him.

So Adonai God cast a deep sleep upon the man and he slept; and He took one of his sides and He filled in flesh in its place. Then Adonai God fashioned the side that he had taken from the man into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And the man said, “This time it is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This shall be called woman, for from man was she taken.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they shall be one flesh. They were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed.

In David Brooks book, *The Road to Character*, “We don’t live for happiness, we live for holiness. Day to day we seek out pleasure, but deep down, human beings are endowed with moral imagination. All human beings seek to lead lives not just for pleasure, but of purpose, righteousness, and virtue. As John Stuart Mill put it, people have a responsibility to become more moral over time. The best life is oriented around the increasing excellence of the soul and is nourished by moral joy, the quiet sense of gratitude and tranquility that comes as a byproducts of successful moral struggle. The meaningful life is the same eternal thing, the combination of some set of ideals and some man or woman’s struggle for those ideals. Life is essentially a moral drama...” (262).

It is for this reason, that Morinis further explains, “The Mussar traditions are an answer to this need for inner cultivation. Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein tell us that ‘a person’s primary mission in this world is to purify and elevate his soul.’ To do that, we must walk the way of the soul, and Mussar has been developed to guide our footsteps. Sometimes they say that the purpose of Mussar practice is to helps us move in the direction of *sh’lemut*, which translates as ‘wholeness.’ The great Mussar teacher Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto discusses this notion: ‘the one stone on which the entire building rests is the concept that God wants each person to *complete* himself body and soul...’ He is tell us that we are created incomplete so that we can complete the work of our own creation” (Everyday Holiness, 14).

Chapter 3-13: The Garden

Now the serpent was cunning beyond any beast of the field that Adonai God had made. He said to the women, “Did perhaps, God say ‘You shall not eat of the any tree of the Garden’?” The women said to the serpent, “Of the fruit of any tree of the garden we may eat. Of the fruit of the tree, which is in the center of the Garden God, has said: “You shall neither eat of it nor touch it, lest you die.”

The serpent said to the women, “You will not surely die; for God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” And the women perceived that the tree was good for eating and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a means to wisdom, and she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her and he ate. Then the eyes of the both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked. And they sewed together a fig leaf and made themselves loincloths.

They heard the sound of Adonai God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and the man and his wife hid from Adonai God among the trees of the garden. Adonai God called out to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” and he said, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I am naked, so I hid myself.” And He responded, “Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten of the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me - she gave me of the tree, and I ate.”⁷

⁷ ***The woman whom you gave...and I ate*** What could we take away from the story of Adam and Eve as it relates to the concept of responsibility in Mussar? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*, explains the story of the Garden of Eden. He writes: “Adam and Eve represent the conscious birth of freedom. They do so because they are made in the image of a God who transcends nature, who creates the world out of no compulsion but as a free act of love. He gives humanity his greatest gift - that of freedom itself. Unique among created beings, *Homo sapiens* is capable of being creative. We have language, imagination, and the ability to recall the distant past and especially, use the future tense. We can frame alternatives and choose between them. But *freedom has limits*. This is the point of the command about the tree. Without limits, freedom for the strong means slavery for the weak - Freedom for the rich means misery for the poor. These limits have nothing to do with nature. The limits of nature are about power; they are about what we *can* do. The limits of God places on humankind are about ethics; what we *may* do. The birth of the moral imperative - command, prohibition, ‘Thou shalt not’ occurs at the moment *Homo sapiens* is first capable of understanding that with freedom comes responsibility.

The story of Adam and Even is not primitive science. It is an elegant statement of the first principle of ethics, which is that freedom, generates a new kind of law. Scientific laws describe, moral laws prescribe. Scientific laws predict what *will* happen, moral laws tell us what *ought to* happen. Only a free agent can understand a moral law, and only a free agent can break one. This, the bible intimates, is never without consequences; for which we are responsible. That is the knowledge conveyed by the fruit of the tree. To break a law is to taste forbidden fruit and know that one has strayed into the territory called ‘evil’, however harmless the first steps are.

This is what Adam and Even simultaneously experience and deny. The first beings to discover freedom, they are also the first to feel what Erich Fromm called ‘the fear of freedom’. Freedom *is* fearful, precisely because it involves responsibility. It is comforting and comfortable to live under someone else’s tutelage and power; to be able to say, ‘it wasn’t my fault’; to look elsewhere for deliverance. The knowledge

Chapter 3: 22-24

And Adonai God said, “Behold Man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the Tree of Life, and eat and live forever!” So Adonai God sent him out from the Garden of Eden, to work the ground from which he was taken. And having driven out the man, He stationed at the east of the Garden of Eden the Cherubim and the flame of the ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

Chapter 4:1-15: Cain and Abel

Now the man had know his wife Even, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have acquired a man with Adonai.” And additionally, she bore his brother Abel. Abel became a shepherd, and Cain became a worker of the ground. After a period of time, Cain brought an offering to Adonai of the fruit of the ground; and as for Abel, he also brought the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest. Adonai had regard for Abel and to his offering, but to Cain and his offering He had no regard. So Cain became exceedingly angry, and his countenance fell.

And Adonai said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? Surely, if you do well, will your countenance not be lifted? And if you do not do well, sin rets at the door. Its desire is toward you, yet you can rule over it.”

Cain spoke with his brother Abel. And it happened when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Adonai said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” Then he said, “What have you done? The voice of our brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground! Therefore, you are cursed more than the ground, which opened wide its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. Cain said to Adonai, “My iniquity is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have banished me this day from the face of the earth and from your face I shall be hidden. I will become a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth; whoever finds me will kill me!” Adonai said to him, therefore whoever slays Cain, before

that there are laws you can break, and for whose breach you bear the guilt *is* the exile from Eden, the loss of childhood and innocence; and that is never without pain. Hence the depth and originality of the story is not that Adam and Eve sinned (sin is rarely original) but its insight into the psychodynamics of self-deception. Their first instinct is to deny that they were acting freely at all. They deny *personal* responsibility” (135-137).

What we come to understand concerning the purpose human creation is the ethical *responsibility* placed on every human life to use the gifts bestowed upon us by our Creator for self-awareness. In Mussar, self-transformation becomes the primary focus of how an individual comes to bring about positive change in the world, but only by recognizing the ultimate freedom to strive towards maturity, holiness, and perfection.

seven generations have passed he will be punished.” And Adonai placed a mark upon Cain, so that none meet him might kill him.

Chapter 6:1-3: Man’s Thoughts are Evil

And it came to pass when Man began to increase upon the face of the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of the rulers saw that the daughters of man were good and they took themselves wives from whoever they chose. And Adonai said, “My spirit will not contend anymore concerning Man since he is but flesh; his days will be a hundred and twenty years.

Chapter 6: 5-8: God Reconsiders Having Made Man

And Adonai saw the wickedness of man was great upon the earth, and that every product of thoughts of his heart was but evil always. And Adonai reconsidered having made man on earth, and he had heartfelt sadness. And Adonai said, “I will destroy Man whom I created from the face of the earth - from man to animal, to creeping things, and to the birds of the sky; for I have reconsidered My having made them.” But Noah found grace in the eyes of Adonai.

Parshat Noah: Responsibility

Chapter 6:9-16: Noah was Perfect

These are the generations of Noah - Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations;⁸ Noah walked with God.⁹ Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And the earth was

⁸ *perfect in his generations* Why is Noah's perfection compared with others in his generation? Does that mean we should also compare ourselves to others as a measure of wholeness or perfection? What does it mean to be perfect? "There are different interpretations of this verse. Some Sages maintain that Noah was righteous even in his corrupt generation; how much more righteous would he have been had he lived in a truly righteous generation. According to others, however, it is critical of him - *only in his generation*, by comparison with is extremely wicked contemporaries, did Noah stand out as a righteous man (*Rashi*). Accordingly, the righteousness of each generation must be judged in terms of their own time" (Stone Chumash, 31). For Mussar, perfection lies with the responsibility of individuals to assess themselves on their conduct and behaviors, not compare themselves to others. Comparison provides little use since each individual is unique in one's abilities and traits. There are no definitive standards of righteousness, only the ones we set for ourselves. In building character or soul traits into our consciousness and actions, we strive for perfection. As Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto writes in *The Way of God*, "The elements of perfection which man must strive to perfect in himself are his intellect and his positive character traits" (43). According to *The Ways of the Tzaddikim*, this means, "Every man of heart must strive with all of his faculties to reach the ultimate that he can achieve of the higher qualities. And he must employ his five faculties and the abundance of his thoughts and traits only in that which must result in lovingkindness and good deeds, this being the ultimate good. So that if a man has attained a level of good, he should always desire to ascend to yet a higher level" (7).

Morinis explains this concept of *perfection*: "Mussar teaches that, because each of us will naturally find different soul-traits presenting themselves as challenges in our lives, we each have our own qualities to cultivate; and, as we ascend toward the place where our soul will blossom, the holiness that emerges in each of us has its own time, shape, and colors. As we move toward this state of completion, we don't all start to look uniform, with the same identical traits, but rather grow into a richer, more balanced, more beautiful version of who we really are. There is a story told about Zusya, a Chassidic teacher who was dying, and he was weeping:

'Why are you crying, Rebbe?' His disciples asked.

'I'm crying because after I die, I am going to face my day of judgment,' he sobbed.

'But Rebbe,' his student protested, 'You lived such a pure life! You couldn't have been more like Moses himself!'

'Don't you see?' Reb Zusya responded. 'When I stand before that heavenly court, they're not going to ask me why I wasn't more like Moses! They're going to ask me why I wasn't more like Zusya!'

That's Mussar's purpose: help us become the fullest version of the unique soul we already are" (Climbing Jacob's Ladder, 82-83). Meaning, perfection is subjective. It can only be monitored or assessed by oneself, which also requires immense awareness on our part. Alternatively, as Rabbi Luzzatto asks us, "If we do not make an effort to anchor those soul traits within our hearts, with all the power of all those means that lead us toward it, how will they exist in us? How will our thoughts be purified if we do not try to cleanse them? Who will adjust them and who us correct them, will that be necessary rigor, if not us?"

Responsibility for bettering oneself is inherent in the concept of *perfection* or *wholeness*. Perfection is not a result based on judgment, it is an ongoing, arduous process of seeking wisdom that will help us build particular character traits into our hearts and souls to make us better people. For Rabbi Luzzatto, *perfecting the heart* means that one's heart should be totally devoted to this service, not like one who lacks commitment or acts out of habit; rather, one's whole heart should aspire to this" (*Mesillat Yesharim*, 4-6).

⁹ *Noah walked with God* What does it mean to walk in God's ways? What ways are these? What is the added relationship to Noah's perfection and God? Rabbi Luzzatto says, "Walking in His ways relates to the finest traits of our character and their cultivation. As our sages of blessed memory have explained, 'Just as He is merciful, so shall you be merciful...' (*Shabbos* 133b)' - the underlying principle being that a person must conduct himself with honesty and integrity in all his various actions. Namely, all that moves toward the goal of true benevolence, meaning that results in the promotion of harmony within society" (*Mesillat Yesharim*, 5). It

now corrupt before God and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it had been corrupted. For all flesh¹⁰ had corrupted their way¹¹ upon the earth.

And God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before me, for violence has filled the earth through them;¹² and behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make for yourself an Ark¹³ of gopher wood. You will make the Ark with compartments, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you should make it - three hundred cubits for the length of the

could be said that Noah “walked with God” because he engaged with the world in positive, altruistic ways by refining his own self. Moreover, this is not a selfish act, but a holy one.

Rabbi Luzzatto teaches that when we strengthen ourselves, striving for elements of perfection by incorporating them into our being, this in a way is a means of “clinging” to God. The more elements of perfection we incorporate into ourselves, the stronger our will be our association and bond to God. He writes, “He becomes, so to speak, ‘attached’ to God Himself, deriving both pleasure and perfection from His goodness, while he is himself the master of this good and perfection, having acquired them by choosing them” (The way of God, 41). Rabbi Yisrael Salanter speaks to this issue. He says, “Our world is a world of transformation. When we are improving and refining ourselves, we are in concert with the Divine plan- fulfilling our purpose for existing in this world” (Everyday Holiness, 14).

¹⁰ **flesh** From the perspective of the Divine, our behavior did not resemble spiritual, more refined aspects of our being. Humankind is referred to in a physical way, illuminating our more animalistic, rudimentary drives and tendencies that cause violence and harm to others. Mussar seeks to distance itself from the physical, and move into a higher place of spiritual existence with God.

¹¹ **destroyed their way** The verb here, “corrupted (תִּשְׁחִית)” is in the verb formation *hiphil*, meaning the people have corrupted their own way. They have done this to themselves. The soul trait of responsibility rings heavy in this *parsha*, because it is God who delineates responsibility for the corrupt, violent state of affairs in the world - It’s the people that live there.

Morinis explains, “It is unquestionable that we are all responsible and we are all held responsible. The spiritual dimension of early responsibility is concerned with a person's relationship with *other* people. Our personal spiritual advancement takes place not separate from but rather right in the midst of our relations with others. It was Rabbi Yisrael Salanter who stated that the foundation of a spiritual life lies between a person and his friend. We are handed the challenge of making our human relationships into the primary focus of our spiritual efforts.

In this *parsha*, it can be said that what the world lacks is care for others. As Elie Wiesel says, “The emphasis on the *other* is paramount in Judaism: *Achrayut*, responsibility, contains the word *Akher*, the Other. We are responsible for the other” (Everyday Holiness, 199; 206). In *parshat* Noah, the corruptness that God refers to is the depraved treatment of people towards their neighbor. God calls out the irresponsibility of his children in regarding others without dignity. This however is not a responsibility that falls on God, but one he relinquishes to humanity.

¹² **fills the earth through them** While humanity has filled the earth with violence, God decides to fill it with water. Through human actions, violence occurs. Human beings are instruments of knowledge and peace, but also of violence and hatred.

¹³ **Make for yourself an Ark** What does it mean to make an Ark for ourselves like Noah does? The ark that Noah makes allows Noah and his family to weather the fiercest storms imaginable. Like Noah, it is on each of us to fortify our consciousness so that we too are mentally able to rise above the chaos going on outside. Mussar is not a practice that encourages withdrawal from reality and the issues that plague humanity. Rather, its goal is to help construct behaviors and pathways of thought that build awareness of the Self - to reflect on the weak points in our character and build on our unique strengths. God asks Noah to build for *himself* an ark.

Ark; fifty cubits its width; and thirty cubits its height. You shall make a window (light)¹⁴ for the Ark, and to a cubit finish it from above. Put the entrance of the Ark in its side; make it with bottom, second and third decks.

Chapter 6:17-18: The Flood

For behold, I will bring the flood waters upon the earth to wipe away all flesh under the sky in which there is the breath of life. Everything on earth shall perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will come upon the ark with your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives. And from every living being, from all flesh, two of each will you bring into the Ark to keep alive with you; they shall be male and female. From each bird according to its species, from each animal according to its species, and from each thing that creeps on the ground according to its species, two of every one will come with you to be kept alive.¹⁵

Chapter 7: Go Into the Ark

Then Adonai said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have discerned you to be righteous before me in this generation." For in seven more days, I will make it rain upon the earth for forty days and forty nights and I will wipe out all existence that I have created from upon the face of the ground.

¹⁴ **window** *Why might God ask Noah to put in a window into his ark?* A window is both used to see outside, and for others to see in. Building an ark means bearing witness to what is happening outside of our own worlds. If we become too inwardly focused, we lose focus of the happenings around us. It's often the case that we become preoccupied or consumed with our own busy lives. We give our attention to our own thoughts, emotions and feelings. A window for Noah was a reminder of the destruction that God brings to the world. He is not privy to ignore the end of all life on earth. He is asked by God to not ignore the world outside his ark.

In bringing the outside world in, like sunlight shining through a clear living room window on a sunny afternoon, we allow ourselves to be changed by the world and by other people. To make an ark for ourselves means building into our hearts and minds the soul traits that encourage responsibility for those outside our metaphorical arks. Mussar encourages growth for oneself, and in reflecting upon ourselves as partners in our many different relationships with siblings, coworkers, family, and neighbors, we move towards perfection. As Hillel asks us in *Pirkei Avot*, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? (1:14)"

¹⁵ **to be kept alive** *What does Noah's attempt to save the animals of earth mean for Mussar? What type of responsibility does this place on humanity? For both animals and human beings?* An attribute of Mussar that is exhibited by Noah in this *parsha* is the attribute of *Loving God's Creatures*. As Rav Kook writes, "The love of all beings precedes everything else. Afterwards comes the love of all humanity. After that comes the love of the people of Israel."

Morinis explains, "We live on a beautiful and diverse planet, and our own development of our spiritual potential depends on loving the creatures we live among. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says so clearly, 'And as for the human being, his heart has been created so tender that it feels with the whole organic world so that if nothing else, the very nature of his heart must teach him that he is required above everything else to feel himself the kin of all beings, and to recognize the claim of all beings to his love and benefice.'

When we treat animals as nothing more than a resource to be exploited, we not only do harm to those animals, we cause the heart within us to become shriveled and hardened. It is to counteract that consequence that we are encouraged to practice loving other creatures. Only the tender heart is receptive to the transformative possibility that is called acquiring Torah. From the exercise of loving the animals, we move on to the greater challenge of loving God's human creations" (With Heart in Mind, 172).

And those that went in, male and female went as God commanded him; And Adonai closed¹⁶ [the ark] behind him. When the flood was on the earth for forty days, the waters increased and raised the ark so that it rose above the earth. And the waters surged, and they increased greatly upon the earth, and the ark sailed upon the surface of the waters. And the waters were strengthened more and more upon the earth and all mighty mountains under the entire heavens were covered. Fifteen cubits upwards did the waters strengthen and they covered the mountains. All creeping flesh on earth perished, among the birds, the animals, the beasts, and all the swarming creatures that swarm upon the earth, and all mankind. All in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life (נִשְׁמַת רוּחַ חַיִּים), everything on dry land, died. God washed away all existence that was upon the face of the earth, from man to animal, to creeping things and to the bird of the sky; and they were washed out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

Chapter 8: God Remembers

And God remembered Noah and all the animals and all the beasts that were with him in the Ark, and God caused a spirit to pass over the earth¹⁷, and the waters subsided. And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the Ark, which he had made.

God spoke to Noah saying, “Go forth from the Ark;¹⁸ you and your wife, your sons, and your sons’ wives with you. Bring forth every living being that is with you, from all flesh - of birds, of animals, and all creeping things that creep upon the earth, that they may swarm on the earth and be fruitful and multiply on the earth. So Noah went forth, and his sons, his wife, and his sons’ wives with him. Every living being, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that creeps on the earth left the ark according to their families.

Then Noah built an altar to Adonai and took from every clean animal and from every clean bird and offered a sacrifice upon the altar. And Adonai smelled the pleasant aroma, and Adonai said in his heart: “I will no longer continue to curse the ground because of mankind,

¹⁶ ***closed the ark behind him*** In building and fortifying our arks, we also ask that God help us with this process. For Noah, a man that walked with God meant that God was an active participant in helping Noah build and secure the life on the ark.

¹⁷ ***caused a spirit to pass over the earth*** The only way to calm the physical turmoil on earth is through this divine breath of God. In direct correlation to the physical realm, is the spiritual presence that God sends onto the earth to release the toxic waters that poured from the heavens.

¹⁸ ***Go forth from the ark*** The *Gutnick Commentary* reminds us, “A person might be tempted to lock himself away in an “ark” of personal spirituality. The Torah, however, teaches a Jew that he must “go out of the ark...” and take responsibility for the world around him” (53). Part of the work of Mussar is leaving our comfort zones of inner spiritual development, and engaging with the world around us in responsible ways. One must use their growth to positively affect the world in which we all take part.

for the intentions of man's heart are evil¹⁹ from his youth; I will never again smite every living being as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

Chapter 9:1-13: The Covenant

And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." And the fear of you and the dread of you will be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird in the heavens, in everything that moves on earth and in all the fish of the sea; in your hand they are given²⁰. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; like the green herb, I have given you everything. But flesh; with its soul and its blood [intact], you shall not eat. But I will demand your blood of your souls; at the hand of every beast I will demand it; even at the hand of mankind, at the hand of every man's brother, I will demand the soul of man. Whoever spills the blood of man; by man shall his blood be spilt. For in the image of God he made man.

And behold I establish my covenant with you and your seed after you. And with every living being that is with you - with the birds, with the animals, and every beast of the land that is with you; From all who left the Ark, to every beast of the land. And I will establish my

¹⁹ *the intentions of man's heart are evil* Morinis says, "At the Heart of Mussar is the belief that, because we are all created in God's image, we are inherently pure. Goodness is expected of us. But if we accept that our inborn nature inclines us to do good, why are there so many apparently moral, respectable, and responsible people who do bad, destructive - one might even say evil - deeds, or knowingly engage in activities that damage themselves or others? For Mussar the answer lies in a force called the *yetzer ha-ra*. Mussar sources tell us that *yetzer ha-ra* does its work by closing the heart and disconnecting us from a life of soul.

While the *yetzer ha-ra* features in each one of us, it is not generally considered to be an aspect of the soul. Rather, it is described as an innate attribute of human nature that has more vitality than a soul-trait because of it is a dynamic force - Just like its opposite, the urge to do good, the *yetzer ha-tov*. Despite its' siren call, it is not inevitable that we follow the *yetzer ha-ra*. Our work is to tame it by strengthening our will to resist, affirming, commitments we will not breach, and erecting barriers against temptations to evil which we be different for each of us, according to the state of our individual soul." Meaning, we are pulled between two forces that seek our undivided attention, yet we can choose how to respond to those forces.

Morinis explains, "Awareness is the first line of resistance to the *yetzer ha-ra*. When the mind is not trained to be aware, it tends to get sucked into the swirling torments of emotion and knee-jerk reactions that spring up in response to whatever happens in our lives. As a result, too often our lives are directed by unnoticed interior states and unrecognized ways of being. Mussar wakes up to the tyranny of negative impulses so that we can take steps to give ourselves more room in which to exercise our freedom of choice. When we foster awareness, we gift ourselves with spaciousness to choose the course that is good for the soul" (Climbing Jacob's Ladder, 95-106).

As it says in *Mesillat Yesharim*, "a person must always and at designated times when he is by himself, reflect upon the true path that a person must follow in accordance with the laws of the Torah. And afterwards he should reflect upon his deeds: do they conform to this path or not? For in this manner it will certainly be easier for him to purify himself from all wrongdoing and to rectify all of his ways, as Scripture says (*Mishlei* 4:26); "Align the course of your feet, and [thereby] all your ways will be corrected," and also (*Eichah* 3:40): "Let us seek out our ways and examine them, and return to the Eternal" (*Mesillat Yesharim*, 21).

²⁰ *in your hand they are given* God passes off responsibility for the earth to Noah. It now falls on Noah and his offspring to govern the earth with sensibility and respect for all living creatures.

covenant with you; never again will the waters of the flood cut off all flesh, and never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant which I give between Me and you, and between every living being that is with you, for generations forever. I have placed My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth

Chapter 9:18-26: The Vineyard

And the sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth - And Ham was the father of Canaan. These were the three sons of Noah, and from these, the whole world was scattered. And Noah became a man of the earth²¹ and planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father’s nakedness and told his two brothers outside. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both of their shoulders, and they walked backwards, and covered their father’s nakedness; and their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness. Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him. And he said, “Cursed be Canaan! He will be a servant among servants to his brothers.” And he said, “Blessed is Adonai, God of Shem, and may Canaan be a slave to them! May God enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be their servant.

²¹ **man of the earth** What does it mean that Noah becomes a man of the earth? Why describe Noah in such a way, given that human beings are created with both the divine breath of God and the tangible earth? As it says in the chapter “Human Responsibility” in *The Way of God*, “man consists of two opposites; a body and a soul. It is obvious, however that the physical is dominant in man, and its influence is very strong. The physical does not relinquish its influence and stop inclining the individual towards its way. The only means by which one can overcome the physical is by growing in wisdom, by fortifying one’s self to following his intellect, one can overcome his physical nature and keep the physical desires in him firmly bridled” (*The Way of God*, 61).

As we are also taught in *Mesillat Yesharim*, “The Holy One blessed be He has placed man in circumstances where many factors can distance him from the Blessed One, these being the bodily desires; for if one is drawn toward them he progressively distances himself from the ultimate good. The result is that one really finds himself planted in the midst of a fierce battle, for everything in this world, whether for good or bad, is there to test man” (*Mesillat Yesharim*, 9).

Since Noah has spent time away from the ground on which he walks, carried off to sea in ark, he finds himself acquainted with the earth once again. One might say that he is attracted to the pleasures of the earth, given that this is in part the very nature of humankind. Noah does not restrain himself from the physical, but becomes enticed by his *yetzer ha-ra* to take part in the pleasures of God’s earthly realm.

As Rabbi Luzzatto teaches, “Even though the soul is intrinsically pure and lofty, as soon as it associates itself with the physical body and becomes entangled [with the material world], it becomes divorced from its true nature and is influenced toward something that is precise opposite. As long as man is in this world, however, he is in a state where his physical nature is very strong. Man must therefore make every effort to make his soul overcome the physical, and thereby improve his condition and elevate himself to his rightful state” (*The Way of God*, 63).

Parshat Lech Lecha: Compassion

Chapter 12:1-3; 10-13: Go For Yourself

Adonai said to Abram, “Go for yourself,”²² from your land, from your relatives and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse; and through you all the families of the earth²³ shall be blessed.”

There was a famine in the land, and Abram descended to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, “She is his wife,’

²² ***Go for yourself*** Rashi notes, “the seemingly superfluous *lech*, for yourself, means go for your own benefit and for your own good” (Stone Chumash, 55). Ultimately, Mussar starts with the self, and it stems from role modeling. One engages with God for themselves and searches for the divine for their benefit. As Morinis notes, “Mussar is a path of spiritual self-development. It means working on yourself, but not for the sake of yourself” Meaning, we can only control our own actions. We can only speak for ourselves, yet, that is not to say that an individual cannot be an active change agent in the world. Only, change will arrive when we model the actions and behaviors we want to see in the rest of the world. This type of change occurs when we can control ourselves. In Mussar, self-transformation begins with bringing holiness to one's self and then emanates outwards onto others. It is a mentality that encourages self-reflection before the judgment of others.

For Abraham, transformation of what will eventually become the entire nation of Israel begins with one person’s devotion to God and the prospect that he will come to father a righteous nation that brings justice and peace to the world. “When the Chafetz Chaim was asked how he had such an impact as a great sage and leader in the twentieth-century Jewish world, he answered, ‘I set out to try to change the world, but I failed. So I decided to scale back my efforts and only try to influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there, too. So I targeted the community in my hometown of Radin, but achieved no great success. Then I gave all my effort to change my own family, and I failed at that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself, and that’s how I had such an impact on the Jewish world’” (Everyday Holiness, 15; 16).

²³ ***all the families of the earth*** Robert Alter notes that the Hebrew term for family, *bet ‘av*, literally meaning “father’s house,” is a fixed term for the family social unit” (50). Similarly noted by Naomi Steinberg in *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, “The household, the *bet ‘av*, represents the daily life depicted in the Genesis narratives. One can speak of the *bet ‘av* as the primary unit of analysis in the ancestral stories, recognizing that heirship to the *bet ‘av* confers both residential and lineage rights. Viewed in this way, the Genesis family stories are metaphors for answers to the question of who the true Israel is - that is, answering the question of identity.” These texts reflect an ideology whereby kinship relationships expressed through family lineage establishes who belongs inside the group and who is to remain outside it” (20-22; 146-147).

In *parshat Lech Lecha*, discovering who falls within the boundaries of Israel will come to define how those outside the clan will be dealt with or treated. Personal and familial identities will play a distinct role in teasing out the soul-trait of compassion, and it all starts with Abraham. As it says in *The Ways of the Tzaddikim*, “The trait of mercy is a sign of the seed of Avraham our father, the seed of Israel, as it is written in Deuteronomy, (Deut. 13:18): ‘And He will give mercy to you and be merciful to you, and he will multiply you’” (145).

they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister,²⁴ that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.”

Chapter 16: Hagar the Egyptian

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, who had not borne him a child, had an Egyptian handmaiden named Hagar. And Sarai said to Avram, “Please see²⁵ that Adonai has restrained me from childbirth; Go to my handmaiden, it may be I may be built up through her;²⁶ and Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. At the end of ten years of Abram’s dwelling in the land of Canaan, Abram’s wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her handmaid and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He came to Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became unimportant in her eyes. And Sarai said to Avram, may my wrong be upon you; I placed my handmaiden in your arms, and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despicable in her eyes. Let Adonai judge between me and between you! But Avram said to Sarai, “Look, your handmaid is in your hands. Do unto her, which is right in your eyes. And Sarai afflicted her and she fled from her²⁷.”

²⁴ **my sister** One might ask, how could Abraham say that Sarah was his sister to save his life, placing her at direct risk of being captured or taken? At this point in the narrative, we arrive at a moment of compassion, and its direct affiliation with the family, since compassion is rooted in family. As God says to Abraham, blessings only come through one’s affiliation with family, not individually or through personal means. For Abraham, he may have believed that by saying Sarah was his sister, the Egyptians may have shown greater mercy, empathy or compassion for Abraham, and spared his life. While it could be an act of self-preservation on the part of Abraham, it could also be an intuition that compassion is channeled through the womb, through shared physical and spiritual energy. In fact, as Morinis points out, “The Hebrew term for compassion - *rachamim* - shares its linguistic root with the word *rechem*, which means ‘womb.’”

²⁵ **Please see** This phrase could be read as a plea by Sarah to ask Abraham to understand how she feels. She requests of her husband to grasp that God has personally shut her womb and that she might feel closed off from Abraham’s promise from God. So far, God has only guaranteed that the covenant will exist through Abraham, meaning Sarah has not yet been explicitly mentioned in the covenant. So far there is no agreement of greatness passing through Sarah. That may be why she asks Abraham to have compassion, empathy, and understanding for her reality, for her narrative. After all, she risks becoming excluded from Abraham’s family lineage. God says to Abraham, “you will be inherited by someone who comes out from within you (Gen. 15:4),” but so far nothing of Sarah’s offspring. She has been supportive of Abraham through his trials, and now she too is asking to be supported, listened to.

²⁶ **build through her** Essentially, Sarah wants to build a family of her own, but becomes anxious that God will not provide her with offspring. Or even worse, that she may become destitute since she cannot produce offspring for Abraham. Responding to these fears, Sarah uses her servant with the hope that she could fulfill God’s promise to her husband, and conceivably secure her future.

²⁷ **she fled from her** Why would Sarah treat Hagar in such a manner? What has happened to allow this story to escalate in such a cruel way? Why would our matriarch act with malice towards Hagar, to the point that Sarah will eventually ask Abraham to throw her and her son out into the wilderness? For Sarah, Hagar and her son are now a threat. After all, Ishmael and Sarah share no blood relation. They are no family of hers. To Sarah, this person is an outsider, a danger to her family. So, what might this complicated situation explain to us about human nature, connectedness, and compassion? Morinis expresses that “The primary barrier to being compassionate is the sense that you and I are separate from each other. We have our separate family, a personal name, our own property, and more fundamentally, the sensibility of being an autonomous entity. Our personal life so easily becomes a preoccupation - seeking only what the ‘I’ wants and needs - So

And an angel of Adonai found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said to her, “Hagar, handmaid of Sarai, from where have you come and to where are you going?” She responded, “I am fleeing from Sarai, my mistress.” And the angel of Adonai said to her, “Return to your mistress and humble yourself²⁸ under her will. The angel of Adonai said to her, “I will greatly increase your offspring, and they will be too many to count. And an angel of Adonai said to her, “See now that you are pregnant and will soon bear a son; and you will name him Ishmael, for Adonai has listened to your affliction.”²⁹

much so that we come to live in a walled fortress called Self. When we live in this separateness - You in your fortress, me in mine, how could we possibly identify with the Other? Compassion then appears to depend on upon the internal connectedness that arises from a sense of shared identity, as the you and the me are mingled in a oneness that transcends our perceptions of separate identities. Identity with the other as the basis for compassion is precisely what the Torah invokes when it hands down the commandment to be loving to the stranger in your midst. The rationale for doing so is our shared identity as strangers: ‘You shall love the stranger because you have been strangers in the land of Egypt’” (Everyday Holiness, 83; 79-80).

What we can learn about the *midah* of compassion as it relates to our *parsha*, is that the relationships between me and others are structured around overcoming discrepancies of identity and ego. It’s reaching out to a stranger as quickly and as compassionately as you would your sister, mother or father. If that sounds daunting and almost impossible, it probably is. After all, it’s a lot easier to be compassionate when you see your same eyes staring back at you, or when you see yourself in the face of another. Meaning, compassion comes from a place of inner identification by recognizing another person as if you shared the same blood, the same mother. However, like as Sarah did with Hagar and Ishmael, “we slip into judgment more easily than we rise to compassion” (Everyday Holiness, 83). Our default setting is to perceive others and ourselves as separate from one another. We approach them with eyes of judgment. We see someone vying for the same limited resources and power. We often don’t honestly see the person in front of us, we sometimes only see a complete stranger. Or even worse, a threat; a hindrance to what we want, and what we need. That is why compassion must be practiced and repeated if it is to become part of one’s behaviors and actions. Compassion is not easy, but understanding its source will help to identify how to practice it with others who are unlike us.

²⁸ ***humble yourself*** Why might God have asked Hagar to humble herself? Often compassion is related to the soul-trait of humility. When we practice compassion, we do not see ourselves as greater than others, but equal. This requires incredible patience and empathy for others who are facing their own set of difficulties. However, “being humble doesn’t mean being a nobody, it just means being no more of a somebody that you ought to be” (Everyday Holiness, 47). In this case, it means for Hagar to act with dignity and respect for others, even after receiving the blessing of a child while her mistress has not. It means returning to Sarah and Abraham in peace. As it says in *The Ways of the Tzaddikim*, humility can manifest itself in the intensity of one’s anger. If we are greatly shamed by word or deed and we are in a position to take revenge, but control ourselves and forgive others for the sake of the blessed Creator - this is a sign of humility. As it is also taught, “Many good things sprout from the root of humility. The humble man is patient, and patience leads to peace. For by means of humility one stills the wrath of the one who is angry with him, as it is written (*Mishlei* 15:1): ‘A soft answer turns away wrath’” (63; 73).

²⁹ ***for Adonai has listened to your affliction*** In the Book of Kings, when God asks Solomon to choose what he wished for himself, Solomon requests a “heart that listens” or often translated as “an understanding heart.” As the verse says, “Give your servant an understanding heart, to judge your people, that I may discern between good and evil” (I Kings, 3:9). In this *parsha*, even the name “Ishmael,” meaning “God listens,” is associated with an action so inherent in compassionate care - listening. The Torah is relaying that the act of listening is vital for compassion on both the part of both God and humankind. American educator and author Stephen Covey writes, “To relate effectively with a wife, a husband, children, friends, or working associates, we must learn to listen. Listening involves patience, openness, and the desire to understand - highly developed qualities of character.” However, it’s not just active listening where one simply pays attention to the words that are being spoken, but a higher form of listening called empathetic listening. “Empathetic listening

And he will be a wild beast of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone against him. And among the faces of all his brothers he will dwell. And she called him in the name of Adonai who spoke to her, "You are a God of vision," for she said, "I have truly seen here who looks after me." Therefore the well was called "*Be'er Lachai Roi*," behold it is between *Kadesh* and *Bered*. And Hagar bore for Avram a son. And Avram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. And Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram

Chapter 17:1-5; 9-11: The Covenant

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, Adonai appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai; walk before me and be complete.³⁰ I will place my covenant between Me and you, and I will increase you exceedingly...Your name shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations

God said to Abraham, "Now My Covenant - you and your progeny after you will keep it throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep between Me and you and your progeny after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin and it will be a sign of the covenant between Me and you."³¹

gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel. In this form of listening, you listen with their ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your heart. You're focused on receiving the deep communication of another human soul" (The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, 37; 240-241).

³⁰ **complete** *What is it that turns empathetic connection into compassion? What is the relationship between compassion and completeness?* The answer resides in the Jewish insistence that inner qualities only reach a state of *sh'lemut*, "wholeness," when they are brought out into the world of action. Meaning, to elevate our soul-traits we must put them into action. The emphasis here is the action that you take which will turn a relationship or shared emotion into compassion - joining ourselves to the other person and sharing their feelings" (Everyday Holiness, 81-82). In this inner state of identification, feelings will be shared mutually since the other is no longer other. Like a baby in its mother's womb, individualism and selfishness are replaced with interconnectedness and love. Through actions of compassion, we experience life beyond the physical realm of separateness and isolation and begin to connect deeply with other human beings.

³¹ **between Me and you** *Why was Abraham to be perfect, complete? What might circumcision teach us about the idea of perfection or completeness in Mussar?* Rashi explains that God was telling Abraham to "Walk before Me with the mitzvah of circumcision, and through this, you will be perfect." Ultimately, as Rabbi David Kimhi, a medieval rabbi, and biblical commentator understands it, "by removing some of his skin through circumcision - an apparent contradiction to physical perfection - man would become perfect because this slight diminution of an organ would be the symbol of his covenant with God. Such closeness can be achieved only through man's own efforts; had he been born that way, the lack of a foreskin would be meaningless." Similarly, Talmudic scholar and Jewish mystic Judah Loew ben Bezalel teaches, "By commanding Israel to circumcise its male children on the eighth day, God taught that the Jew's ability to remove the barriers to his spiritual ascent transcends the natural order of life" (Stone Chumash, 73; 75).

In Mussar, life is a process of growth and transformation, and it is well within our power and capacity to direct and shape that process - even if it's only for our own benefit. As human beings, no matter the gender, there will be times when we will need to put forth significant efforts towards growing and maturing as compassionate individuals. Furthermore, it is primarily through our actions and efforts that we strive for

Parshat Vayera: Loving-Kindness

Chapter 18:1-15: The Three Guests

And Adonai appeared to him by the Oaks of Mamre, and he [Abraham] was sitting at the opening to the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his and he saw! And behold, three men were standing towards him. When he saw, he ran to greet them³² from the entrance of the tent³³ and prostrated himself to the earth.³⁴ And he said, “My Lords, if I have found favor in

wholeness in this way. Morinis teaches the highest and best use of life is to aim toward either *shleimut*, (meaning “wholeness”) or *kedusha* (“holiness”). The more we become living embodiments of our ideals, the more we transition from our partialness (even brokenness) toward becoming more whole, and in wholeness we become vessels for holiness itself. The Mussar masters tell us that this is the open secret that makes sense of the journey of life” (With Heat in Mind, 4).

³² ***ran to meet*** What can we learn about the expedited way in which Abraham greets his guests and the manner in which receives them? What soul-trait does Abraham exhibit through his actions with these angels? Morinis explains, “Abraham was the paragon of what it means to pursue *chesed* because the Torah tells us that he actually ran to do kind acts for others. When the three strangers happened by his tent, he invited them to stay. He offered them bread, water, and a little rest. The Torah uses verbs meaning ‘run’ and ‘hurry’ a total of four times in relating this brief story. Abraham didn’t sit passively waiting for a chance to do good but charged after the opportunity to render kindness to others. Abraham was not someone who just did deeds of *chesed*, but rather he was a soul who was so infused with the spirit of *chesed* that this quality defined his very outlook on the world” (Everyday Holiness, 189).

In *parshat Vayera*, the attribute of **Loving-Kindness** also referred to as *Gemilut Chasadim*, “acts of loving-kindness,” is integrated deeply into the thoughts, speech, and actions of Abraham, God, Abraham’s visitors, and Lot. In different ways, each one demonstrates attentiveness to others and labors for their benefit. While there are questionable actions that occur, including the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the sacrifice of Lot’s daughter’s to an angry mob, Sarah and Abraham’s banishment of Hagar, and the *Akedah*, there are also moments that illustrate compassion in action. Meaning, cultivating heartfelt compassion must be done with the intention of outward expression in the form of *chesed*. That is what makes this attribute unique. *Chesed* is performed in actions that, as Morinis reminds us, “*sustain the other*.”

He says, “In the Jewish view, it isn’t enough to hold warm thoughts in our heart or to wish each other well. We are meant to offer real sustenance to one another, and the ways in which we can do that are innumerable. It’s too easy to think good thoughts and say the right things but then just continue to be stuck in the same old ways. Action is required. Then, through experience, the heart learns and opens, setting off a chain reaction of hearts opening and connecting, leading right up to the openness and connection to God. In acts of *chesed*, a spirit of generosity motivates our sustaining action. You are not obligated to do it, you aren’t repaying an act done for you, you don’t hope to get anything in return - you are generously reaching beyond those limited acts to give of yourself in a spirit of honest and selfless generosity. True *chesed* involves offering with any expectation of return, even of gratitude” (Everyday Holiness, 186-187).

In Mussar, the attribute of *chesed* is putting our words into action. It’s training the heart to stand up and reach out to help others in moments that may not be comfortable or easy. *Chesed* is an attribute performed almost like a knee-jerk reaction. It’s developed in the same way we utilize muscle memory in sports. It’s a skill like any other that requires practice and dedication. Just as a quarterback learns to recognize open receivers on the crowded field, passing them the ball with accuracy in mere seconds, we can also learn to respond to others with such quickness. As Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher writes:

“When people come to you for help, do not turn them off with pious words, saying, ‘Have faith and take your troubles to God.’ Act instead as though there were no God, as though there were only one person in the world who could help — only yourself” (*Mishkan Tefillah*, 13).

³³ ***from the entrance of the tent*** The text mentions twice that Abraham was at the opening of the tent. Abraham leaves his dwelling place, the comfort of his home, to run out to greet these strangers. Similarly, we

your sight, please do not pass by your servant. Let a bit of water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves beneath the tree. And I will fetch a piece of bread, that you sustain yourselves and go on - inasmuch that you have come your servant's way.” And they replied, “Do so as you have said.”

And Abraham hurried to the tent to Sarah and said, “Hurry! Three *se'ahs* of meals of fine flour! Knead and make cakes! And Abraham ran³⁵ to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant-boy who hurried to prepare it.³⁶ He took curds and milk the

too must also be willing to leave our safe spaces to perform acts of loving-kindness. *Chesed* usually doesn't happen in the places we feel most comfortable, but in situations that require us to bravely enter a chaotic and unpredictable world. Loving-kindness can imply both to open our dwelling places wide enough to let others in, or simply leaving altogether to meet people where they are on their journey. In *Pirkei Avot* we are taught:

“Shimon HaTzadik of the Great Assembly used to say:

On three things the world stands;

On the Torah

One divine worship,

And on acts of loving-kindness.”

Meaning, “Acts of loving-kindness represent a person's interrelationship with other human beings. The goal of life is not be a recluse, but to participate generously in the well-being of others - in authentic relationships with fellow human beings” (The Koren *Pirkei Avot*, 4).

³⁴ **prostrated himself** Why does Abraham greet these complete strangers in such a way? If Abraham doesn't know these men, why would he show such deference to strangers? It could be said that Abraham saw that these men were more than mere men, but angels in human form. He greets them with such vigor because Abraham recognizes the holiness inherent in human form. This *parsha* deals not only with acts of *chesed*, but the mindset of *chesed*. This attribute becomes embodied in our speech and the way we approach the other. We begin to see the divine image of God in the eyes of those that pass by us. As Buber reminds us, “A divine spark lives in every living being” (Way of Man, 5). Developing the mentality of *chesed* is how we come to regularly do or practice *chesed*. It is not necessarily ingrained in our behavior, but something we can teach others and ourselves. In the Talmud, we are taught:

“Three young disciples of R. Elazar were late for their study with the mater. He said, ‘Where were you?’ They replied, ‘we were occupied in performing a mitzvah.’ He replied, ‘as worthy as that is, were there no others to do it so that you could not attend to the mitzvah of Torah study?’ They said, ‘no for the man was a stranger.’ With that, R. Elazar knew he had taught them well (Yer. Pes. 3.7)” (The Jewish Moral Virtues, 48).

³⁵ **Abraham ran** Medieval Spanish philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol teaches, “Act with kindness both with him who deserves it and with him who deserves it not. For if he is deserving, you bestow it in its proper place; and if he is not deserving, you will deserve it, for God commanded humanity to do good and practice kindness” (The Jewish Moral Virtues, 51). In this instance, there's a bit of excitement and urgency involved in loving-kindness. Abraham doesn't second-guess himself or his guests intentions, he simply runs to them to help.

If we procrastinate, over-analyze, or become hesitant, acts of *chesed* might never be performed. We begin talking ourselves out of committing time or energy for the sake of others. We might justify passivity or laziness, asking questions like, “Would this person do the same for me if I was in this situation? Why is it always me who has to help? Can't someone else do it?” Here, we observe the steadfastness of Abraham, which we should also adopt in our Mussar practice. *Chesed* is taking the initiative to do what is right, and not necessarily for the right person.

³⁶ **took the calf...gave it to the servant boy** Why does Abraham participate in preparation rather than passing on the tasks to others? Abraham is a man chosen by God to father many nations, yet here, no service or

calf that had been prepared, and he placed it before them. He stood by them³⁷ beneath the tree while they ate. And they said to him, “Where is Sarah, your wife?” And he replied, “Behold! She is in the tent.” Then one said to him, “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son! And Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.

And Abraham and Sarah were old, well on in their years. Sarah was past childbearing age. So Sarah laughed to herself,³⁸ saying, “After I have become worn out, there will be for me delight? And my husband is old!?” And Adonai said to Abraham, “Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying, “Shall I really bear a child, though I am old?” Is anything too difficult for Adonai?! At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah will

task is beneath him. He quickens his step like a short-order chef and runs to provide sustenance for his guests. While he may be taking a leadership role, he also hurries just as he urges his family and servants to.

One commentary adds, “His manner of service was through being kind to people, thereby drawing them into his orbit so that he could inspire them with his example to learn about and serve God. In response, God sent him three angels in the guise of people, and Abraham ran to invite them in and serve them personally, despite his age and illness. For education of the young must be practical; theoretical preaching about kindness will fail to achieve the desired result unless it is accompanied by acts of kindness”

Meaning, loving-kindness is infectious, but we must first exemplify it for others. The foundation of Mussar is leading by example - it's showing, not telling. As we are told by Rabbi Luzzatto in *The Way of God*, “Human beings, act and exert influence on individuals” (Stone Chumash, 79; 93). Similarly, Morinis explains, “By refining and elevating your inner life and nourishing the soul, you clarify your inner light and thus become a lamp shedding light into the world. The task is to fill yourself up with wisdom and knowledge until you brim over, and the overflow spills out of you and into the adjacent vessels, who are other people” (Everyday Holiness, 15-16). As such, if we are to preach *chesed* and ask others to join in our efforts, we must also be willing to demonstrate our commitment to strengthening this soul-trait in ourselves. Therefore, in following a path of spiritual self-development and embodying *chesed*, we, in turn, build a better world for others.

³⁷ ***He stood by them*** Why does Abraham take the time to stand by his guests as they eat? Why wait around? These acts represent a passion not just for giving our due diligence to someone in need and then walk away. Rather, we are commanded to stand by the recipients of our service and wait with them until they are healthy and ready to go on their way once more. It's not a matter of fulfilling a task and moving on to the next as quickly as possible. Loving-kindness involves patience and readiness to see out a job we have honored to perform.

³⁸ ***Sarah laughed to herself*** While it can be helpful to acknowledge a bit of humility and truth in one's age and years, becoming aware of our abilities and weakness, it can also diminish inspiration and hope. One might say that as time pass and the year's roll by, we often let our age define our capabilities. We start to lose a sense of wonder in our capacities as human beings. While small children play in the yard, they dream of soaring through clouds and performing the impossible. They play as if there are no boundaries, no limits to what they can achieve. However, over time, we become cynical of our facilities. Our physical form deteriorates and muscles tense. Our skin cracks and eyes grow dim. We become more aware of our mortality and physical nature.

Here, Sarah laughs to herself, as the text says, but not out-loud. She acknowledges the reality of her age with a bit of laughter. She understands she is old, beyond the age of welcoming children into the world. Yet, God sees something very different than what Sarah notices about herself. Meaning, God recognizes our potential when all we notice is doubt. What we can learn from Sarah is that age is just a manifestation of the physical form - our spirit is enduring, capable of performing magic and wonder.

have a son. But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was frightened. And God responded, “No, but you did laugh”

Chapter 18:15-22: Sodom and Gomorrah

The men arose from there, and gazed down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to send them off. And Adonai said, “will I hide from Abraham what I do, seeing that Abraham will become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed by him? For I have loved him,³⁹ that he may command his children⁴⁰ and his household after him, and keep the way of Adonai by performing righteousness and justice,⁴¹ so that Adonai

³⁹ **For I have loved him** Why might the text have relayed God’s feelings concerning Abraham? What might this explain about the attribute of *chesed*? Rashi explains, “Literally, the word (וָאֵהָבָה), ‘I have loved him,’ refers to *knowledge*, not *love*, but the Torah often uses love as its secondary meaning, for one who loves another brings him close and seeks to know him well” (Stone Chumash, 83). Conversely, the more understanding we have for others, the better we can relate to them and understand their unique perspective and needs. If we do not really *know* another, how are we possibly able to *love* them as we love ourselves? How often is it the case that after a long, constructive dialogue with someone of opposing traditions, faiths, theologies, or beliefs, that we start to understand their perspectives and learn to care for them as we would ourselves. Learning about another’s personal journey or life story simply makes it easier to love them. It helps reveal the divine, holy element imbued in every human being. With more understanding, differences of opinion become less important than recognizing others as sharing in the same reality and human experience.

⁴⁰ **that he may command his children** What is the relationship between instruction and ethical behavior? Why might the verse explain that God loved Abraham because he would ways convey God’s teaching to his offspring? We are taught, “One reveals his values by what he teaches his children. For one to preach morality but not inculcate it in one’s own family reveals that preaching is less than sincere. In summing up the greatness of Abraham and the reason he was entitled to a role in the Divine conduct of the world, God said that it was because of what he would teach his children” (Stone Chumash, 83). Similarly, we are taught also in the Gate of Mercy that, “There are different types of mercy, quite disparate from each other. But the best and worthiest mercy of a father to his son is that which brings him to Divine service, as it is written (*Yeshayhu* 38:19): “A father will educate his sons to Your truth” (*Mesillat Yesharim*, 143).

⁴¹ **performing righteousness and justice** Why does the text specifically delineate “performing” righteousness and justice? What does this teach us about the emphasis of action? We are taught, “The Israelite nation is distinguished in three ways: They are compassionate, shy, and benevolent. The last of these traits is derived from our text; *to do charity* (*Yevemos* 79a). We must therefore practice the commandment of charity more than any other, because it is the characteristic of the true descendent of Abraham” (Stone Chumash, 83). What we learn from Abraham in this *parsha* is the difference between understanding *chesed* and justice, and striving towards it through our actions. We are commanded to conceptualize righteousness or hold intentions about *chesed* in our hearts, but we shall also pursue it. As it says in *In Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of our Fathers:

“Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya used to say:

To what may one whose wisdom exceeds his deeds be compared?

To a tree with many branches but few roots

When a wind comes, it uproots and overturns it

To what may one whose deeds exceed his wisdom be compared?

To a tree with few branches but many roots

Even if all the winds of the world come and blow against it,

They cannot dislodge it from its place (2:22)”

As the commentary explains, “It is not enough to feel empathy for the poor or to wait for a needy person to ask for help; rather, one must ‘walk,’ actively pursue opportunities to help others” (The Koren *Pirkei Avot*, 82). In performing acts of *chesed* we build strong roots of behavior and thought, which in turn, help to sustain us and repeat those actions. We become fixed in our ways, unable to be deterred from doing *gemilut chasadim*, no

may bring to Abraham that which was promised him. So Adonai said, “Because the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become so great and their sin so grave! I will go down and see: If they have acted altogether in accordance with their outcry that has come before me. And if not, I will know.”⁴² So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before Adonai.

Chapter 18: 23-33: What if?

Then Abraham came forward and asked, “Will you also destroy the righteous (innocent) along with the wicked (guilty)?⁴³ What if there are fifty righteous people within the city?

matter the challenging winds that may steer us away. The emphasis is not wisdom, but deeds. This is how we grow and flourish spiritually.

⁴² ***I will go down and see...I will know*** Why must God first go down and see before destroying the city? What does God’s insistence on observing first-hand tell us about judgment? In addition to **Loving-Kindness**, the attribute of **Judging Others Favorably** is an equally important character quality we find in this *parsha*. Before drawing judgment and enacting a sentence, God witnesses for God’s self the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. God demonstrates that judgment is comprehensive, not impulsive. We too must take caution when making a judgment about other people, and attempt to see a broader picture of a situation or individual than just our own. While Sodom and Gomorrah may be corrupt, God tries to observe these cities from the perspective of Abraham and the angels. There is no rash decision made by a single party. Both Abraham and God will benefit by voicing their ideas of justice and Loving-Kindness and listening to the opinions of one another.

As Morinis teaches, “We are to give others the benefit of the doubt because our conclusions are so often mistaken. Generally, most of us tend to have a general outlook that is critical, and here we are being guided to cultivate a positive view of life, especially in regard to other people. Negative judgment separates us from other people and closes our hearts to them, making it impossible to develop the love and closeness we want and need. Our tendency is to assign guilt and to condemn without even considering any alternative - especially innocent - possibility. That we are so often wrong in our assessment of others is enough reason to tilt the balance of our judgment to the side of merit.

We learn a practical tip on how to tilt the balance of judgment toward the positive in *Pirkei Avot 1:6*. The teaching is, ‘*Hevei dan et kol ha’adam l’khaf zechut*,’ which translates as ‘Give everyone the benefit of the doubt.’ But the phrase ‘*kol ha’adam*,’ which usually translates as ‘everyone,’ can also mean ‘the whole person.’ Irving Bunim points out that if you take into account the whole person, in his or her entirety, you are bound to find that there are redeeming features that out to factor in, and maybe even displace your impulsive negative judgments” (With Heart in Mind, 208).

⁴³ ***Will you also destroy...with the wicked?*** What does this scene reveal to us about God’s perspective of judgment versus Abraham’s? What does God’s perspective of judgment relate to the concept of communal responsibility? In *The Way of God*, Rabbi Luzzatto teaches:

“When an individual is judged, Providence takes account of his state and level with respect to what precedes him, what follows him and what is associated with him. Each man is thus judged in relation to his forbears who preceded him, his descendants who follow him, and the people of his generation, city and community who are associated with him. In a similar manner, it is possible that good or evil befall a person because of the place where he lives or because of the group, which he is associated. As our Sages teach us, ‘All Israel are responsible for one another.’ As a result of this, each individual is bound to everyone else, and no man is counted separately. God’s Attribute of Good is the stronger, however, and if the guilt for sin is shared by others, this must certainly be true of the merit associated with good deeds” (The Way of God, 121).

While it may not always be fair or just, it is simply the reality of life that we are judged in part by the company we keep and those who surround us. And because we are often prone to judge in such a way, Abraham’s

Would you still destroy the entire place rather than spare it for the sake of the fifty righteous people who are in it? It would be profane to you in doing such a thing like this. To slay the righteous along with the wicked; so that the righteous will be considered as the wicked. It would be profane to you! Will the Judge of all the earth not enact justice?⁴⁴ And Adonai said, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous people in the city, then I will spare the entire place for their sake.”

Abraham answered and said, “Behold, here I ventured to speak to my Lord, although I am but dust and ashes. “What if there are five men missing from the fifty righteous men? Will you still destroy the entire city for the lack of those five? He said, “I will not destroy it if I find there forty five.” Abraham pursued further to speak to Him and said, “What if forty are found there?” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” Then Abraham said, “Please do not be angry my Lord, and let me speak. What if thirty are found there?” He answered, “For the sake of thirty I will not do it.” And Abraham said, “Behold, here I

response to God is a reminder to dive deeper to find righteousness in humanity wherever it can be found, and cherish it.

⁴⁴ ***Will the Judge of all the Earth not enact justice?*** What does Abraham’s cutting remark to God reveal to us about justice and the process of discerning guilt from innocence in a city or possibly for an individual? What can we learn about *chesed* from both God and Abraham in this heated discussion about ethics and responsibility? Morinis teaches, “In the Torah, where thirteen attributes of God’s compassion are listed, among them is ‘abundant in kindness.’ The medieval commentator Rashi explains that the phrase ‘abundant in kindness’ tells us that God shows kindness to all those who are in need of sustenance, even those who are not deserving of this help. Here we find our model for *chesed*. When we act with sustaining generosity to others not because they deserve it but because we are being kind, beyond any calculation of what they have earned from us or what we can get in return, then we are doing kindness in emulation of God’s way of loving-kindness. Rabbi Cordovero brings this lofty teaching down to our level by giving us instructions on how to implement it. He tell us to look beyond what a person might deserve so that our kindness extends into the realm of *chesed*:

A person should emulate this attribute [*chesed*] in his own conduct. Even if one is aware that another person is doing him evil, and this angers him, if that person has some redeeming quality, for example, he is kind to others, or he possesses some other virtue, this should be sufficient cause for one to dissipate his anger and find the other person pleasing, that is, to delight in the kindness he does. One should say, ‘It is enough for me that he has this good quality.’ A person should say to himself with regard to every man, ‘It is enough that he has been good to me or to someone else in such-and-such a way, or that he has such-and-such a positive quality.’ In this way, one should delight in kindness.

Rabbi Cordovero hands us an extreme situation in which to do *chesed*, when a person is actually doing us evil. The Rabbis understood that *chesed* represents so primary a force of the soul that it needs to be cultivated regardless of logic and circumstance” (Everyday Holiness 192-193).

Here, we see Abraham asking God to outweigh righteousness and innocence over guilt and wickedness. For Abraham, the entire city should be granted mercy because there are still those that act with decency - on their account, the entire city with all its inhabitants should be spared. While the odds of there being an abundant number of righteous people may be slim, there is still righteousness in a wicked city. There is a dwindling remnant of goodness that should also be considered in God’s judgment. *Chesed* is frame of mind that persuades us to see even those that do us evil as if they are not entirely evil, as if they possess some positive qualities. *Chesed* is being able to look past negativity - to believe that even the most horrid of people deserve the opportunity for life and *teshuvah*, repentance. As we have learned, there exists within everyone a *yetzer ha-tov* and *yetzer ha-ra*, an inclination to do Good and Evil. Which inclination we observe in others will influence our eagerness to perform *gemilut chasidim* and how we experience humanity as a whole.

ventured to speak to my Lord. What if twenty are found there?” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” Then he said, “Please do not be angry my Lord and let me speak just this once: What if ten are found there?” And He said, “I will not destroy it on account of the ten.” And Adonai left when He was done speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

Chapter 19: Destruction

And two angels arrived to Sodom in the evening and Lot was sitting in the Gate of Sodom; when Lot saw them he arose to meet them, and prostrated himself, face to the ground. And he said, “Behold now, my lords; please turn aside unto your servants house; spend the night and wash your feet. Then you may rise up early and go your way.” And they said, “No, rather we spend the night in the town square.” But he urged them strongly, so they turned toward him and come to his house; he made a feast for them and baked matzos and they ate.

Before they laid down, the townsmen, Sodomites, surrounded the house, from young to old, all the people from every end. And they called out to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them.” And Lot went out to them at the entrance, and shut the door after him, and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. See now, I have two daughters who have never known a man. I will bring them out to you and do to them as you wish. Only to these men do nothing seeing as they have come under the shelter of my roof.” And they said, “Stand back!” Then they said, “This one came to sojourn and would act as a judge? Now we will treat you worse than them. And they charged exceedingly against the man, especially Lot, and approached to break down the door.

But the men [angels] stretched out their hand and brought Lot back into the house with them and shut the door. And the men who were at the entrance to the house were struck with blindness, both small and great, and they tried vainly to find the entrance. And the men [angels] said to Lot, “Who else do you have here? - A son-in-law, your sons, or your daughters? All that you have in the city, bring them out of this place! For we are about to destroy this place; for their outcry has become great before Adonai, and Adonai has sent us to destroy it.”⁴⁵ So Lot went out to speak to his sons-in laws, who were to marry his daughters and said, “Get up! Leave this place! For Adonai is going to destroy the city.

⁴⁵ **Adonai has sent us to destroy it** *How and why might God have decided to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? What might this reveal about our tasks as individuals in cleansing evil within ourselves and in the world? In The Way of God, Luzzatto teaches, “It is a fundamental principle that God does not judge the world according to His own knowledge, but according to the system that he desired and designed for this purpose. God set these angels as Agents to oversee each thing that exists in the world, These Agents each testifies regarding the things that it perceives as well as what is revealed to it. It is only after all this testimony is heard that the case is brought to judgment. The angels who are given the task of overseeing and testing about every aspect of the universe are called the ‘eyes of God’” (The Way of God, 159). At the end of the parsha it is clear that God has heard the testimony of his angels and their horrific experience among wicked*

But to his sons-in-laws, he appeared to be joking. And just as dawn was breaking, the angels urged Lot saying, “Arise! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away by the iniquities of the city. Still he delayed, so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the mercy of Adonai upon him, and they brought them out and set him outside the city. And as they led them outside, one said, “Flee for your life! Neither look back nor stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills lest you be swept away. And Lot said to them, “Please no my Lord! Please see that your servant has found grace in your sight, and the *immense kindness* that you have shown to me by saving my life;⁴⁶ but I cannot escape to the hills lest the evil cling to me and I die.

Behold, please, this city is near enough to escape there and it is small. I will flee there. Is it not small? - And I will live.” He replied to him, “Behold, I also grant you this favor, that I will not overturn the city of which you spoke. Flee there quickly, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there.” Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar. The rose upon the earth and Lot arrived at Zoar.” And Adonai had rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and

men. Through the eyes of these angels God witnesses an evil that must be cleansed from the world. God has made a clear judgment to destroy this city given the appeal from Abraham whose optimism cannot sway his creator’s final decision. This story, as frightening it is, also explores a deeper meaning about the persistence of good and evil, both our inclination towards either and their existence in the world. As Luzzatto explains:

“Included in God’s decree that he would contain both good and evil, He also decreed that evil would be found throughout Creation in every degree and level possible, and the task was given to man to combat evil, and prevent it from ruling and acting in any way at any level. The design thus was that there be created levels that are good for God’s creatures. Their opposite was also created, and his is the [the essence of] Evil. It would therefore be possible for evil to exist, so that, through his efforts, man would be able to remove it from his own Essence as well as from creation in general. In doing so, he would permanently establish good, both in himself and within the universe as a whole, forever and ever. (207)

For Mussar, each life on earth is precious, and as such, individuals should concern themselves with embodying goodness in whatever ways they can. However, this is no easy task. There will always be challenges in acting with love and kindness towards all people, and especially us. It is not only important that we judge others favorably, but also our own lives - that we look favorably upon our abilities, improvements, and strengths. It is important to always remind oneself that each divine soul is capable of establishing good both in themselves and within the universe as a whole. God has created the world with both qualities of good and evil, yet there remains a responsibility to make choices that foster righteousness for oneself and for others. Each second of each day there are decisions to be made as to how we will behave, act, and think.

⁴⁶ *Please see...saving my life* As Rabbi Luzzatto teaches concerning the Gate of Mercy in *Mesillat Yesharim*, “Mercy is an extremely noble trait. It is one of the thirteen traits attributed to the Holy One Blessed be He, as it is written (*Shemos* 34:6): ‘Merciful and gracious.’ All that one can do in cultivating this trait, he should exert himself to do. Just as one would want to receive compassion in his time of need, so should he have mercy for others who are in need, as it is written (*Vayikra* 19:18): ‘And you should love your fellow man as yourself’” (141). What we can learn from Abraham as well as God in this *parsha* is the attribute of *chesed*. While God is the ultimate judge and arbiter, God also shows immense kindness to Lot and his family. God acts with patience and flexibility as Lot pleads with God to escape to a Zoar. Despite the urgency of the angels, God grants favors to Lot and allows him to escape where he feels most safe. God takes into account his anxieties and acts accordingly. A part of establishing *chesed* as a soul quality is learning to be patient with those we help. While we may need act with quickness to provide *chesed* to those in need, we should also be understanding and tolerant of each person’s unique needs. Just as we would want others to take time in caring for us, so should we for others.

fire from Adonai out of heaven. And He overturned those cities, and the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the soil. But Lot's wife glanced behind him and she became a pillar of salt. And Abraham arose early in the morning to the place where he stood before Adonai. And he gazed down upon Sodom and Gomorrah and the entire surface of the land of the plain; and saw that - look! Smoke of the earth had arisen like the smoke of a furnace. And so it was when God destroyed the cities of the valley that God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out into the midst of the upheaval when He overturned the cities that Lot had lived in.

Chapter 21:1-20: The Birth of Isaac & The Banishment of Hagar

And Adonai visited Sarah as he said, and Adonai did for Sarah as he had spoken. And Sarah conceived and bore a son unto Abraham in his old age at the appointed time, which God had spoken. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him - whom Sarah had born to him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh at me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have born a son in his old age!"

And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, who she had born of Abraham, mocking. So she said to Abraham, "Banish this slave woman with her son for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit with my son Isaac!" And the matter overwhelmed Abraham with sadness regarding his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be disheartened over the boy or your slave woman; Whatever Sarah says to you, heed her voice, for through Isaac will your offspring be named. But I will also make a nation of the son of the slave women since he too is your offspring. So Abraham awoke early in the morning, took bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar, placing them on her shoulder along with the child, and sent her off.⁴⁷ She departed, and wandered through the desert of *Be'er Sheva*. When the water in the skin was finished, she cast off the child beneath one of the shrubs. She went and sat

⁴⁷ *sent her off* What more can we learn about this disturbing act of Abraham, sending his own child and wife out into the wilderness? Yehiel b. Yekutiel teaches, "What is loving-kindness - that one be friendly and benevolent to everybody, rich and poor, living and dead. If you include in this drawing close to those who are distant; how much the more so should you do it to your close ones? (*Sefer Maalot Hamiddot*)" (The Jewish Moral Virtues, 51). In our *parsha*, while *gemilut chasidim* are abundant, we also encounter moments such as this in Genesis that force us to confront sorrow and tragedy. While the family dynamics of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael are complicated; there are limits of appropriateness and human decency. While Abraham stands as role model for righteousness, every reader of Torah must also grapple with the collective decision by Abraham, Sarah, and God to send Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness. While there are many lessons to be learned, one in particular that stands out is the treatment of those that are close to us - our family members, children, wives, and husbands. In every relationship there will be difficulties, and just as we might treat a stranger, we must treat the ones that are close to us with equal amounts of Loving-Kindness.

herself down far away, the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not see the death of my child.” So she sat facing away from him, lifted her voice, and wept. When God heard the voice of the boy, an angel of God called out to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you Hagar?”⁴⁸ Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the youth⁴⁹ where he is. Arise, lift up the boy and hold your hand with his, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert archer.

⁴⁸ ***What troubles you Hagar?*** Often, acts of *chesed* don’t need to be extravagant or complicated. They can be as simple as saying “hello,” or approaching those who appear to be in pain and ask, “What’s wrong? Are you okay?” This too is *chesed*. *Chesed* doesn’t mean solving the problems of others, but simply supporting them emotionally, physically, and spiritually on their journey. What we learn from God in this moment is the power of our words. Each one has the ability to provide love and nourishment during the toughest moments of our life. All it can take to bring joy into someone’s life is to notice that person and listen.

⁴⁹ ***God has heeded the cry of the youth*** “According to the Midrash, the angels pleaded with God not to perform a miracle for Ishmael, because in the future his offspring would persecute and murders Jews, but God responded that He would judge Ishmael only according to his present deeds and not according to what would happen in the future (Rashi)” (Stone Chumash, 97). Here too we learn more concerning the attribute of *Judging Others Favorably*. As Morinis teaches, “If negative judgment is human nature, we need to teach and condition ourselves to give the benefit of the doubt” (With Heart in Mind, 207). Meaning, we must encounter people, as they are, not what they might become. Every soul is capable to reaching to extraordinary spiritual heights.

Parshat Chayei Sarah: Honor

Chapter 23

And the life of Sarah was a hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah Died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan; And Abraham come to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her. And Abraham arose from before his dead, and spoke the children of Heth, saying, “I am a stranger and a sojourner among you;⁵⁰ Grant me possession of a burial site so that I may bury my dead⁵¹ out of my sight.” And the

⁵⁰ ***I am a stranger*** What does it mean that Abraham introduces himself as a stranger before asking for a burial site for Sarah? One commentary explains, “The tension in the story lies in Abraham’s contradictory status. On the one hand, he is but a *resident alien* without hereditary land-rights or a secure place in the social and legal order. On the other, he is *the elect of God* (v. 5), to whom the whole land has been promised. Elsewhere in the Tanakh, the entire people of Israel is described as resident aliens, living on land owned by God (Lev. 25.23), and the same terms are used to describe the transience of human life and the unworthiness of human beings in the face of God’s bounty (2 Chon 29.15)” (Jewish Study Bible, 47).

Correspondingly, another commentary adds, “He phrased his request in terms that illustrate his extraordinary humility. Abraham expressed the dual role that every Jew must play. On one hand, he is a resident of his country, and as such we must work and pray for its welfare. But on the other hand, the Jew in this world is always an *alien*, for his allegiance is to God and his goals are set forth by the Torah. A Jew must always be ready to be a lonely alien, resisting the culture that surrounds him and maintain his unique responsibility (*Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik*)” (Stone Chumash, 107).

In this instance, Abraham does his best honor to those that he dwells among, while holding his own dignity and responsibilities. The soul-trait of ***Kavod***, meaning respect or honor, is a unique balance of distancing oneself from honor or pride as an act of humility, while simultaneously providing the honor that is due to others. In *parashat Chayei Sarah*, we observe Abraham and the Hittites attempting to respect the stranger in their midst. While it may not always be the case that we are, as Rav Soloveitchik says, “resisting the culture that surrounds us,” we are however obligated to respect it and those that we live among.

It could be said that Abraham strips himself of pride and places on himself a title that allows for mutual dialogue and respect. If Abraham were to announce himself with words of arrogance and self-aggrandizement, he might not have been received in the manner he was. As mighty and important as the “Father of Nations” is in the eyes of God, to Children of Heth, Abraham is merely a “stranger.” It could be said that he acknowledges and recognizes the equality that exists between all human beings, all of us sojourners on earth, and thusly all of us worthy of *kavod*.

Morinis teaches, “Honor, respect, and dignity are due to each and every human being not because of the greatness of their achievements or how they have behaved, but because they are home to a soul that is inherently holy. Nobody created their own soul; everybody has been gifted with a rarefied essence. This is a teaching of Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, a forerunner of the Mussar movement, who explains that one should honor all people simply because they are the handiwork of God. The respect that is due to others is due not because we are perfect, or even great, or even good. Your greatness is not attached to your identity but rather to the fact that you are human and your essence is a gift of incomparable beauty and majesty.” Therefore, we are encouraged not to not to seek honor for oneself, but to go out of our way to honor others. As Morinis reminds us, “Not seeking honor for yourself reflects humility; so too does honoring others” (Everyday Holiness, 109-110).

⁵¹ ***that I may bury my dead*** What is the relationship between *kavod* and the burial of our loved ones? Why is this *mitzvah* one of honor or respect? “The rabbis in the Talmud open up this subject for us by sketching a hypothetical scenario. It’s the evening of the festival of Purim and you are walking to synagogue to hear the tradition reading of the Megillah (“scroll”), the Book of Esther. Along the way, you have the misfortune to come across a corpse lying in the road. Jewish law obligates us to give a dead body a proper burial, no matter whether it is a Jew or non-Jew or a stranger or a criminal. But burying a body takes time, and if you stop to fulfill this commandment, you will surely be unable to fulfill that other commandment, to hear the Megillah reading. What to do? Do you stop to bury the body or continue on to the synagogue?”

children of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him: “Hear us my Lord, you are a prince of God within our midst⁵² - in the choicest of our burial sites bury your dead,⁵³ any of us will not withhold his burial place from burying your dead.”

The answer in the Talmud is that you should bury the body. The reason given is that the honor due to a human being is so great that it suspends even a negative precept of the Torah. What the rabbis are trying to teach us here is that every human being - even a dead one - is due honor. Now if the obligation to honor the humility that resides even in a corpse is so compelling, imagine how much more we should honor a living person” (Everyday Holiness, 108).

The point Morinis makes is part of a much larger conversation about the burial of the deceased in our community and its relationship to the soul-trait of kavod. Ultimately, honoring others is so important that it takes precedence over other mitzvot, personal status, and even our ego. In *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, author Isaac Klein notes, “Proper burial is considered so important, the community as a whole is held responsible for the proper burial of an unclaimed body; a Kohen is permitted to defile himself to carry out such a burial. For this reason, an unclaimed body is called a *met mitzvah* [mitzvah for the dead].

The purpose of burial is to return the body to the earth in conformity with the verse ‘for dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return’ (Gen. 3:19). The prescribed practice is that burial should not be delayed. In former times, this meant that the burial, whenever possible, took place on the day of the death. According to some scholars, this was a hygienic measure necessitated by the warm climate of the region in which the custom originated. It would seem, however, this was actually an element of *Kevod Hamet* [respect for the dead], since leaving a corpse unburied was considered to be a humiliation of the dead. Because of the importance of Kevod Hamet, a delay in burial was permitted only if it was for purposes of honoring the dead, such as to provide time for procuring the shrouds and coffin or to await the arrival of relatives” (A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, Klein, 297; 277-278).

What we learn from Abraham and from our tradition is the true value of honor. We bring holiness to ourselves, others, and God, by bringing honor and respect to all living beings who have been endowed with a divine soul, both living and dead. This is no easy task - it takes diligence in recognizing a holy life force in every person. As Morinis recounts, “I have worked to foster honor by holding a phrase in mind and then turning my mind to the phrase whenever I encounter someone. I’ve used a phrase I’ve created - ‘each one a holy soul’ - as well as one drawn from Proverbs: ‘The soul of man is the candle of God.’ Calling a phrase like this to mind is a very effective way to instill a sense of honoring others” (Everyday Holiness, 96). Like Abraham we too must give honor to those living and deceased with our words, actions, and thoughts.

⁵² *a prince of God within our midst* One commentary explains, “The Hittites treated Abraham with the utmost respect. Contrary to his modest description of himself as only an alien and a resident, they addressed him as a prince of God, so respectfully, that they offered to surrender to him even personal, family burial places” (Stone Chumash, pg. 107). Likewise, another commentary remark, “The Hittites address Abraham with a respectful title. The courtesy, respect and ready response of the Hittites allows Abraham to specify that he is particularly interested in the cave within the plot of Ephron, and that he wishes to purchase at whatever price they acquire” (A Woman’s Commentary, 114).

Respect for others can happen in many ways. Often times, it’s recognizing the human connection to God that resides within each of us, as Morinis reminds us. Moreover, we respect others when we use words and titles that give others worth and value. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik makes an important remark concerning the concept of respect and the way in which we convey it to others. He writes, “To recognize a person is not just to identify him physically. It is more than that; it is an act of identifying him existentially, as a person who has a job to do, that only he can do properly. To recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him. The Halakha equated the act of publicly embarrassing a person with murder” (Koren Pirkei Avot, 47).

In this instance, we find that the Children of Heth publically honor Abraham and provide him with a title that is worthy of his devotion to God and the journey Abraham has taken to create a relationship with God and become the seedling from which the Jewish people will grow. “The way we speak to one another, then, is a critical part of how we can destroy worlds if we use language badly or build and support them if we use it well. We often think of “fixing the world [*tikkun olam*],” in more concrete actions taken to aid others, the way we speak to people is at the forefront of our tradition’s concerns for how to build a better world. Like every other

Then Abraham arose and prostrated to the people of the land, to the Children of Heth. He spoke with them saying, “If it be your will to bury my dead from before me, heed me, and intercede for me with Ephron son of Zohar. Let him give to me the Cave of Machpelah which is his, which is in the end of his field; let him grant it to me for its full price, within your midst, as an possession for a burial site.

Now, Ephron was sitting in the midst of the children of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the children of Heth, for all who came to the gate of his city, saying, “No my Lord, heed me! I have given you the field and the cave that is in it, I have given it to you; in the sight of the children of my people have I given it to you; bury your dead.”

And Abraham prostrated before the people of the land.⁵³ He spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the *members of the council*, saying, “Rather if you would only heed me. I will give the

capacity that we have, the ability to speak is morally neutral; it gains moral character according to the way we use it” (The Way Into Tikkun Olam, 104).

⁵³ *in the choicest of our burial places bury your dead* Why do the Children of Heth offer up their “choicest of burial places” for Abraham? What is the repeated emphasis on burial and honor? In the Talmud, we are taught, “Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: What is the meaning of the verse, ‘You shall walk behind the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 13:5)? [It means that] a person should imitate the righteous ways of the Holy One, blessed be God...Just as the Holy One, blessed be God, buried the dead,...so too you must bury the dead. Just as the Holy One, blessed by God, comforted mourners,...so too you should comfort mourners” (Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah 14a*).

Concerning any act of honor or kindness one does for the deceased, Rashi also notes, “An act of loving-kindness that one does for the dead is an act of loving-kindness of truth (*chesed shel emet*, an authentic act of loving-kindness) because one does not expect to be repaid [since the dead cannot do that]” (The Way into Tikkun Olam, 165). Ultimately, the concept of honor defies any sense of logic of repayment of a deed well done. To honor others is simply something one does for the sake of others, and the creator that provided them life. There is nothing to be gained or earned from those no longer living - only the honor and respect we can provide for them and their loved ones in kind words and actions. Through these altruistic actions we continue to strengthen our connection to God and foster character traits that will enhance the quality of our lives and the even the world.

Morinis sums this concept of honor as it ties in with other attributes of Mussar such as loving-kindness, humility, and compassion, when he writes, “One of the greatest gifts Mussar has given us is its detailed descriptions of all the human virtues, those traits of the cultivated soul that reflect the Divine attributes. High up on every list of these virtues is love, and of the main possible kinds of love, the highest of course, is love of God. But that can be an abstract and remote ideal, and Mussar, in its practical realism, shows us how to work with our own experience in order to model and develop this virtue.

We are told to love people not for our own gratification nor for theirs, but because people are cast in the image of the Divine, so that when we love another person, we are also practicing for the ultimate act of love. When we love our dear ones, we honor them, and the One in whose image they are made, and that helps to foster love for the One” (Climbing Jacob’s Ladder, 175-176). We fulfill the highest potential of our soul when we bury our loved ones and honor their memories. This is how we live out the ideals of Torah, and follow in the footsteps of God. There is nothing to be lost in elevating the soul of another. Respect and honor take nothing away from us.

price of the field; accept it from me, that I will bury my dead there. And Ephron answered to Abraham, saying to him, “My Lord, heed me. Land worth four hundred silver shekels – between you and I – what is it? Bury your dead.”

Abraham heeded Ephron⁵⁵, and Abraham weighed out to Ephron the price, which he had mentioned in the hearing of the children of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the current weights among the merchants. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing east of Mamre, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan.

⁵⁴ **Abraham prostrated before the people of the land** *What more can we learn about honor and the demeanor of Abraham? Why might he have prostrated himself, in a similar manner to the way we engage the Divine, given that Ephron isn't necessarily doing what Abraham has asked of him - to buy from him a piece of land instead of receiving it as a gift?*

“We have been taught (*Pirkei Avos* 4:1): “Who is honored? The one who treats others with Honor.” And [the Sages] also said (*Pesachim* 113b): ‘From where do we know that one must respect a peer even if one knows that his peer is great than him in only a single matter?’ Furthermore, we have been taught, one’s obligation to respect his peers relates to speech and deeds. And the Sages of blessed memory have already given an account (*Yevamos* 62b) of the twenty-four thousand disciples of Rabbi Akiva who died as result of the disrespectful manner they adopted toward one another” (*Mesillat Yesharim*, 161).

Given the situation Abraham finds himself in, he grants honor to Ephron, a man who seemingly disregards Abraham’s request to buy from Ephron a piece of land, who will later ask for a substantial price. With his actions and words, he honors the presence of others. Given all that Abraham has gone through, and even in his period of mourning, he maintains decency. As spoken by our First Lady Michelle Obama at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, “How we explain that when someone is cruel or acts like a bully you don’t stoop to their level. No, our motto is: when they go low, we go high.” In this case, Abraham goes high.

⁵⁵ **Abraham heeded Ephron** *What can we learn from Abraham concerning this difficult process of procuring a land from Ephron? What might Abraham’s patience and willingness to proceed in buying for his wife a burial plot reveal about the value of kavod?* One commentary remarks, “Ephron’s public generosity was a sham. He not only had no intention of making a gift, he hypocritically implied to Abraham that he expected an outrageously high price for the plot” (*Stone Chumash*, 108). Also, “while Abraham makes it clear that he does not want a grant or gift; Ephron takes advantage of the situation and demands an exorbitant sum. Yet, Abraham does not haggle, but hastens to pay the required sum, high as it might be” (*Women’s Commentary*, 115).

Yet, with all of this taken into account Morinis tells us, “Like every other soul-trait, honor is both a state of awareness and a deed. Soul-traits are virtues in action. It is not enough to *feel* reverence; one must *act* reverently. We act with honor when we honor the other (as well as ourselves) by treating all beings with the utmost respect and dignity. We act with honor when we listen carefully to the needs of another and respond; when we look beneath surface differences to see the shared ground upon which all beings stand. Honoring others requires that we make an effort to elevate people in our eyes” (*Everyday Holiness*, 113).

While Abraham may have felt cheated or lied to, Abraham’s commitment to honoring his wife took precedence over the Ephron’s behavior. While Ephron’s manner of business could be deemed unscrupulous, Abraham remains respectful to someone who did not reciprocate honor or respect. Even in mourning, Abraham holds true to this value. He manages to listen to the needs of another and respond in a cordial way. Abraham does not undermine Ephron, but simply pays the price as necessary. Money becomes no issue when it comes to honoring Sarah. The worth of a silver coin goes unmatched with the value of honor.

Parshat Toldot: Truth

Chapter 25:19- 34: Two Nations in Rebekah's Womb

And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac.⁵⁶ Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan-aram,

⁵⁶ *Abraham fathered Isaac* “The Torah devotes much less space to Isaac's life than to the lives of Abraham and Jacob. On the one hand, Isaac seems to be but a bridge between his father and his son; on the other hand, he had the task of drawing the line between good and evil - as represented by Jacob and Esau - because the emerging nation of Israel could not be a mixture of good and evil. In contrast to Abraham whose primary characteristic was *chesed*, or kindness, Isaac's was *gevurah*, or strength. One requires strength to differentiate between good and evil” (Stone Chumash, 125). In *parshat toldot*, honest judgment and discernment between falsehood and truth are the elements that are most clearly conveyed in Jacob's interactions with his father, brother, and mother. Jacob will confront moral dilemmas and will learn to better understand his own strength of judgment and find inner truth. This *parsha* is especially challenging because there are certain truths are withheld from Jacob, and a certain order that the line of Abraham will follow. While it should be Esau that carries forth the Abrahamic covenant, Jacob will in fact supplant his brother Esau and win his birthright through both merit and deceit. Esau will eventually marry outside of his family follow a very different path of both theology and values.

Concerning Esau, one commentary asks, “How could Yitzchak, our righteous Patriarch, have a son whose very nature even in the womb was inclined towards idol worship? God can either make a person's disposition naturally good or naturally bad. However, even if a person has a natural inclination to evil that does not mean that he is evil *per se*, for he is given free choice. Rather, the reason why he was given such a inclination was to rise to the challenge and overcome it. Thus Eisav was given a natural tendency to evil so that he could excel in the Divine service of “quashing” the evil inclination” (Gutnick Chumash, 157).

As such, our *parsha* concerns not necessarily ultimate truth, but the process of judgment and discerning right from wrong. This is a gift inherent in human nature, and used as the foundation for Mussar praxis. Our ability to think conceptually, morally, ethically, and practically, allow us to uniquely discover the truth about our own lives and the world we live in. We also maintain the ability to make statements that honor those discoveries. However, this responsibility of judgment comes with it's own set of challenges in determining what truths are appropriate tell, how to convey them, and what the consequences are of speaking or acting falsely. We are also confronted with the notion of subjectivity and the fact that each person's' perception of life or reference frame is unique. Seemingly, our lives coexist all together in the same world, and obey all the same rules, yet we observe life differently than others - even our own family members.

Concerning the soul-trait of **Truth**, Morinis explains, “The soul and society both require that we make a commitment to truth, but not in a rigid or naive way. The Mussar tradition offers us more mature and down-to-earth guidance based on the recognition that in this complex life, different values can compete with one another in any situation, and literal truth isn't' always mean to be the victor. It is given over to us, in our humanity, to use our judgment to define truth and to decide how to apply it. - truth demands judgment. Truth isn't outside of us, be merges within us, as an outcome of our acts of judgment.

Despite the pitfalls, “executing the judgment of truth” is preferable to adhering to an ironclad loyalty to the facts. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains that this idea reflects the core Jewish views on truth: “Truth is not something we discover at one time. That is how things are for God, but not for us. For Judaism, truth - as understood and internalized by humanity - is a developmental process. That is why so much of the bible is narrative and so many of its books are works of history.

We have to let truth emerge from our judgment and to accept that that puts the onus on us to maintain a very strong inner compass. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler gives us hope here because he tells us that our human hearts come ready-equipped for the task. If we listen to our own heart of hearts with sensitive ears, we will receive guidance that directs us to ‘where the real truth lies.’ Mussar tells us that one of the primary tasks on the spiritual journey is to cultivate and exercise that implement of skillful discernment, the wise heart. Only then we will become the masters of truth, with all the judgment, discernment, fearlessness, and wisdom that mastery implies” (Everyday Holiness, 170-171).

sister of Laban the Aramean, as his wife. And Isaac entreated Adonai on behalf of his wife because she was barren. And Adonai answered his prayer, and Rebecca conceived. And the children struggled together within her,⁵⁷ and she said, “If this is so, why do I exist?” So she went to enquire of Adonai. And Adonai said to her:

“Two nations are in your womb,
And two peoples from within you will be divided;
One nation shall be mightier than the other,
And the elder shall serve the younger.”⁵⁸

When her days to give birth grew full, then behold! There were twins in her womb. The first one came out red, all his body like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. Afterward, his brother came out with his hand grasping Esau's heel, so they named him Jacob; Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

As we learn in the *Gate of Truth* in *The Ways of the Tzaddikim*, ““And this was King David’s intent in (*Tehillim* 15:1-2): ‘O Hashem, who will abide in Your tent? Who will dwell on Your holy mountain? He who walks uprightly and performs righteousness and speaks the truth in his heart.’ Reflect upon: ‘And speaks the truth in his heart.’ It is not written ‘speaks the truth with his mouth,’ the idea being that the truth must be implanted and fixed in a man’s heart” (399).

⁵⁷ ***the children struggled together within her*** “*Gur Aryeh* explains that this embryonic Jacob-Esau struggle was not influenced by their personal Good and Evil inclinations, for they are not present before birth. Rather, Jacob and Esau represented cosmic forces in Creation, forces that transcend the normal course of personality development, and that existed even before birth” (Stone Chumash, 125). In *parshat toldot*, Jacob and Esau will continually struggle with one another as they both develop and mature. They will both learn how to accept one another for who they are, and eventually make peace given their unique dispositions in life. These “cosmic forces in Creation” that exist in the world could be interpreted as the soul-traits in Mussar, which exist in each of us differently. No two people are identical in their spiritual makeup. That is why the purpose of Mussar is to better understand and refine these cosmic forces that exist in each of us. As Morinis notes, Mussar is summarized in the phrase *tikkun midot ha’nefesh* - improving or remedying the traits of the soul. The message is that each of us is endowed at birth with every one of the full range of traits that live in each of our souls. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, who did so much to mark the way of the soul, speaks to this issue: “The Midrash teaches (*Bereishis Rabbah* 11:6), ‘Everything that came into being during the six days of Creation requires improvement- for example, the mustard seed needs to be sweetened...also a man needs rectification.’ Our world is a world of transformation. When we are improving and refining ourselves, we are fulfilling our purpose for existing in the world” (Everyday Holiness, 21; 14).

⁵⁸ ***went to inquire of Adonai...shall serve the younger*** What does it mean that God speaks frankly to Rebekah and informs her of the future of her offspring? What might this interaction teach us about the consequences of our words? One commentary understands this communication between God and Rebekah as a case of formal consultation. It could be said that since the “text pointedly omits any mention of mediated communication, [this] suggests that Rebekah address God directly, and that God responds to her with equal directness. God replies to Rebekah, informing her - not Isaac - about their son’s future.”

However, while this information may be truthful, as God reveals the future of her children to our matriarch in a moment of existential crisis, it also complicates the story. This sort of honest communication is one that we would expect from those we love, but God has revealed to Rebekah a truth that could influence how she will later interact with her children. It could be, “Her preference may be related to how she interprets God’s words; she favors the son she thinks has been selected by God” (A Woman’s Commentary, 136-137). This small story reveals the hefty weight of truth and the consequences of revealing truths to others they have not discovered yet for themselves. While God is not accustomed to lying, there remains the question of how we choose to convey truths to others and the repercussions our words have.

As the young boys grew older, Esau became a man skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a wholesome (טָם) man,⁵⁹ dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau for his game was in his mouth; but Rebecca loved Jacob.

When Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stew for I am exhausted.” (Therefore he was named Edom). Jacob said, “On this day, sell me your birthright.” Esau said, “I am going to die. What use is a birthright to me?” Jacob said, “On this day, swear to me”; so he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and got up and went off; thus, Esau spurned the birthright

Chapter 26:1-11: Abimelech and Jacob’s “Sister”

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the first famine that was in the days of Abraham; and Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines, to Gerar. And Adonai appear to him and said, “Do not descend to Egypt; dwell in the land that I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your offspring I will give all these lands, and establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father...because Abraham obeyed My voice, and observed my safeguards, My commandments, My statutes, and my Torah’s.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ **wholesome man** *What does it mean that Jacob was wholesome? What does it mean to be whole? How does this personal characteristic relate to the notion of Truth?* While the adjective, *tam* (טָם), used here to describe Jacob can mean “simple-minded” or “innocent,” it also has the connotation of “wholesome, full,” or “integrity of mind” (Brown Driver Briggs, 1070). While these might be contradictory interpretations of Jacob’s character, I would like to believe that Jacob was not simple-minded at all. Rather, he possessed the ability to maintain integrity and see a broad spectrum of perspectives.

In *The Jewish Moral Virtues*, Eugene Borowitz and Frances Schwartz write, “The Torah describes the patriarch Jacob as an *ish tam*, a pure-hearted soul. The rabbis interpret this unexpected phrase as a description of his extraordinary love for learning” (Jewish Moral Virtues, 214). It could be said that Jacob sought out the Truth’s of the world as an avid learner. When we learn, we begin to encompass and integrate new ideas and thoughts into our worldview, and begin seeing things from new perspectives. In doing so, we make ourselves “whole,” more complete. After all, the soul-trait of Truth is really the process of understanding and standing witness to how other people perceive the world in which all of us live. Almost like putting the pieces of a giant, constantly moving puzzle together - Each person a uniquely formed puzzle piece, and the more pieces we can connect together, hopefully the wider our perspective of Truth and reality will be.

As Morinis notes, “Our job here is not to resolve philosophical arguments but to be on the lookout for an assignment that we can find embedded in this issue that applies in the real circumstances of our lives. Hillel says that we need to challenge ourselves to see truth not only through our own eyes but also through the eyes of another person who is tied into the situation. Hillel’s position guides us away from our typical tendency to see things only from our own singular perspective. He encourages us to stretch ourselves to see things through the eyes of other people. Truth involves not only speaking accurately, but even more important and earlier in the process, seeing accurately. And since truth are often multiple, so must be our perspectives. Seeing a situation from the vantage point of others who are involved is one principle we need to apply to truth” (Everyday Holiness, 168).

As it says in the *Gate of Truth*, “One should not be ashamed to accept the truth from anyone. Even if one is the smallest of the small and completely spurned, still accept the truth from him for a precious pearl, even in the hands of the small and despised, is still a precious pearl” (The Ways of the Tzaddikim, 403).

So Isaac settled in Gerar. When the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” for he was afraid to say “my wife” - “lest the men of the place kill me because of Rebekah,” for she was beautiful in appearance.⁶¹ And as it came to pass, as his days were lengthened, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw - behold! Isaac was laughing with his wife Rebekah. So Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, “But

⁶⁰ ***Abraham obeyed My voice...and my Torah's*** What might we learn about human nature and our connectedness to God, Torah, and Truth? What is the correlation between Torah, mitzvot, commandments, God, and Truth? In the *Gate of Truth*, we are taught, “Truth: The soul is created from the place of the Holy Spirit, as it is written (*Bereshis* 2:7): ‘And he breathed into his nostrils the soul of life.’ It is hewn from a place of purity and created from the Celestial Radiance, from the Throne of Glory. And there is no falsehood above, in the place of the Holy of Holies, but all is truth, as it is written (*Yirmeyahu* 10:10): ‘And Hashem God is truth’

God made man to be just, and (*Shabbos* 55a): ‘the seal of the Holy One Blessed be He is truth.’ When one occupies himself with truth, falsehood does not cleave to truth. And where there is truth, it is as if His habitation in heaven were suspended over men. One who merits reflecting upon these things, upon the souls’ being hewn from the source of truth, will conduct all of his affairs in truth and will not bring falsehood into the place of the holiness of truth. There is no quality greater than speaking the truth, for the reward for truth is very great. One should therefore accustom himself to walk in truth, and he should study Torah to know the truth in order to be able to perform the *mitzvos* truthfully” (The Ways of the Tzaddikim, 395; 397; 403).

As Morinis explains, “Very salient within his Mussar perspective is the affirmation that, at its core, the soul you are is already holy and pure. How could it be otherwise, since we are told in no uncertain terms that in the Torah that we are made ‘in the image’ and ‘likeness’ of God? Yet in the reality of our lives, that radiant inner being is often hidden. Unbalanced soul-traits act as “veils” that block the inner light. The issues is never the inner qualities themselves - Mussar tells us that all human qualities, are not intrinsically “bad”, but when a soul-trait persist within us in an extreme of either excess or deficiency, then our innate holiness will be obscured. Fulfilling the Torah’s injunction to become holy doesn’t mean running here or there to acquire this or that. Instead, what is needed is that you make an effort to uncover the holy purity that is innate within you” (Everyday Holiness, 19-20).

What we learn from this verse is in part the essence of Mussar itself, which is to create a connection to Torah study, mitzvot, and *The Way of God*, and through these, we learn to better ourselves and let the pure soul that God has bestowed within us shine even brighter. Connection to Truth happens through a connection through the soul, our divine tethering to God and the heavens.

⁶¹ ***I would be killed because of her*** Why might Jacob have lied in this instance? What can we learn about falsehood and it’s connection to fear and Truth? Morinis explains, “Peel back the behavior and you are almost sure to discover that the source of the lie is a fear of one thing or another. We lie because we fear facing someone else’s disappointment, or having disappointment ourselves, or fear of shame, or loss, or any number of other possibilities. These are the root issues, and they tend to operate beneath the threshold of our consciousness. Hillel tell us that we should not be primarily concerned with how our words correspond to verifiable reality, but rather for the impact our statement will have on another person...so where does that leave us? Are we supposed to view truth in speech as an absolute...Or are there circumstances where it is justified - or maybe even better - not to tell the truth, such as when the goal is to serve a higher purpose?

We face this problem all the time as we choose what to say, and what not to say, in our every interaction. What guidelines do we follow? Are we supposed to speak the bald and honest truth at all times, regardless; or is it better to adopt a more relativistic position, changing what we say according to the circumstances and perspective?” (Everyday Holiness, 167). From this perspective, Morinis brings up an important detail in the soul-trait of Truth. Telling the blatant, honest truth at all times is not always the right thing to do. There are moments in Jewish history, such as the Holocaust, where deception helped save lives. That is why we must pay attention not only to truth, but rather how our speech impacts others. There will be times in our lives where telling the truth will not always be right decision. However, determining how to wield speech and understanding the impact of our speech is what is most important.

look! She is your wife! How could you have said, ‘she is my sister?’” Isaac said to him, “Because I thought I would be killed because of her.”

Abimelech said, “What is this you have done to us? One of the people has nearly lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.”⁶² So Abimelech warned all his people saying, “whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.”

Chapter 27:1-15

And it came to pass, when Isaac was old and his eyes dimmed from seeing, that he called Esau his older son and said to him, “My son.” And he said to him, “Here I am.” And he said, “See, now, I have aged; I do not know the day of my death.” Now take, if you please, your weapons, your sword and your bow - and go out to the field and hunt game for me. Then make me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I will eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die.”

Now, Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau; and Esau went to the field to hunt game to bring. But Rebekah spoke to her son Jacob, saying, “I heard your father speak to your brother Esau saying, ‘Bring me some game and make me delicacies to eat, and I will bless you in the presence of Adonai before my death.’ So now, my son, obey my voice as I command (מצוה) you⁶³. Go now to the flock and fetch me from there two choice young

⁶² *you would have brought guilt upon us* Morinis reminds us that we are to “Be sensitive to the results that spring from our ‘truth.’ The Chafetz Chaim, a twentieth-century Jewish sage who codified the laws concerning right speech, didn’t set ‘truth’ as the highest standard for speech. Just because something is true does not give us license to say it, because saying things that are true can still do enormous harm, and it is *the potential for harm* that is ultimate guideline that the Chafetz Chaim puts to us to help us direct our speech.

This latter principle lies behind the Talmud’s judgment that “it is permissible for a man to deviate [from the truth] on account of peace.” this dictum has come to be interpreted as meaning that one may speak something other than truth for the sake of peace or another ethical imperative (such as humility, modesty, and sensitivity)” (Everyday Holiness, 169). What we learn from this interaction with Abimelech and Jacob is that our words have unforeseeable consequences. Our words can do harm to others, and in fact, bring guilt upon the innocent. This is why we must be sensitive to the *results* of what comes out of our mouths. We must think beyond ourselves, and try to understand how our words may impact others in the future.

⁶³ *obey my voice as I command you* Why might Jacob have gone along with the deception Rebekah had planned? Why does Jacob honor Rebekah’s command to lie to his father? What might we learn from this moral “test” placed upon Jacob? One commentary explains, “Having been told before the twins were born that the younger would be the superior one Rebecca knew that the blessings had to go to Jacob - but she had not been commanded to convey this knowledge to Isaac. Her only alternative was to deceive Isaac into giving the blessings to Jacob. For Jacob, this was the ultimate test, his personal *Akedah* - a test of awesome proportions - because, as the Sages derive from Scripture, Jacob personified truth and he was to receive the blessings that would be ratified by God Whose very seal is ‘Truth.’ But his mother was commanding him to secure those blessings by perpetuating a falsehood against his father. For Jacob to behave in such a way was totally foreign to his nature. Thus, both brothers were to engage in difficult tasks to earn the blessings. Esau was at the hunt risking his life, and Jacob was at home risking his soul, his spiritual essence” (Stone Chumash, 135).

In a similar manner, Morinis explains, “On only a moment’s reflection, it becomes clear that most lies are told to protect oneself or hurt someone else. These sorts of manipulative or malicious motives for deceit can never be excused. Twisting truth in a self-serving or harmful way has negative consequences for the whole

goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, as he loves. Then bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before his death.”

But Jacob replied to Rebekah, his mother, “But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall appear to him as a mockery; I will thus bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.” But his mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only heed my voice and go fetch them for me.”

Chapter 27:18-19

And he came to his father and said, “My father,” and he said, “Here I am. Who are you, my son?” Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau, your firstborn.”⁶⁴ I have done as you told me; sit up please and eat of my game that your soul may bless me.”

world, since lying erodes truth, which is one of the pillars of the world, as Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel teaches. Lying like this undermines the only standard that enables us to trust one another.

There are also spiritual consequences to lying. Deceit undermines the soul of the person who is not dedicated to truth. When we habitually lie, flatter, boast, cheat, and otherwise deny truth, the impact registers at our deepest internal level. In *the Path of the Just*, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto tells us that lying is a spiritual illness. Ultimately, contact with the soul is lost completely. It is taught in the Talmud that a habitual liar is unable to perceive the *Shechinah* (the Divine presence). The simple (though devastating) conclusion is that lying can damage worlds, both outer and inner” (Everyday Holiness, 168).

While Jacob may have gotten away with the lies he told to his father, in the process, he destroys the relationship he has with his brother, and is left with a moral scar that plagues his soul. While he will mend later these wounds later on in Genesis with both the help of God and his family, Jacob is still forced to confront the reality of his lies.

⁶⁴ ***I am Esau, your firstborn*** What can we learn about the delicate notion of Truth from this interaction? What do Jacob’s lies teach us about the subjectivity of truth as it relates to our own lies and our integrity? “The Midrash states that Jacob came to Isaac with head bowed and in tears, so unhappy was he that he had to use deception, even though it was to gain what was truly his. It is noteworthy that even when he was forced to deceive Isaac, Jacob stayed as close to the truth as possible...he tried to use ambiguous language so that he could mislead Isaac without lying directly. Falsehood was so repulsive to Jacob that even when he had to lie, he tried to stay as close to the truth” (Stone Chumash, 137).

Morinis explains, “The Jewish tradition condemns lying and celebrates truth telling, much as we would expect. As we explore this soul-trait, however, we will find that neither life nor the Mussar teachings invite us to take a simplistic approach. Truth is delicate. Its fabric is so easily stretched and torn. Truth is versatile - look at how many causes will readily sacrifice truth to some other goal. Truth can be simple, but more often it is deceptively complex, and not always singular. And as the Alter of Novardok teaches, we are easily confused about truth, because truth can appear before us in the guise of falsehood, just as falsehood can show up in the trappings of truth

Because we want to understand and develop the quality of truth as an optimally calibrated feature of our inner life, we don’t focus on truth as if it were something hard, objective, and external. Rather, the truth we’ll investigate is subjective. The test we apply in our search for truth is therefore not strictly empirical. You’ll see that the Jewish tradition understands that truth is situational, and we ourselves are part of the situation. (Everyday Holiness, 166)

Chapter 27:26-45

Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come close, if you please, and kiss me my son.” So he drew close and kissed him; he smelled the fragrance of his garments and blessed him and said, “See, the smell of my son is like the fragrance of the field that Adonai has blessed:

And May God give you the dew of heaven
 And of the fatness of the earth,
 And abundant grain and wine
 Peoples will serve you,
 And nations will prostrate themselves to you
 Be a lord to your kinsman
 And your mother’s sons will prostrate themselves to you⁶⁵
 Cursed be those that curse you,
 And blessed be those who bless you”

And it was, when Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother returned from his hunting. He also prepared delicious food and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, “Let my father sit up and eat of his son’s game, so that your soul will bless me.”

⁶⁵ *peoples will serve you...your mother’s sons will prostrate themselves to you* What does this blessing convey about the notion of responsibility and how it pertains to the soul-trait of Truth? Jacob now becomes responsible not only for his own life, but for the lives of his family. His responsibility to truth becomes much greater with the blessings he receives from his father. As a leader, one must maintain integrity for themselves, but also help guide others towards it. As Jacob grows and matures, he will become more adept in administering judgment and embodying the ethics and moral statutes that God bestowed upon Abraham and his descendants. He will become a beacon of truth for not only his immediate family, but for the entire nation of Israel.

Another soul-trait we discover in Isaac’s blessing to Jacob’s and the responsibility that has been placed upon him, is *Leading Others to Truth*. As Morinis teaches, “Truth is said to be the seal of God, and dedication to truth is a sign of wisdom and spiritual maturity. For the heart to blossom, it goes without saying that we must act and speak with allegiance to truth, but we learn here that we must also take responsibility to “set *others* to truth,” which is a literal translation of our text. When you guide people toward their ethical center and to adopt perspectives that are grounded in reality, you help them establish a solid foundation on which to build a life that is not marred by the errors of ignorance and illusion. Doing that for others is a necessary part of our own spiritual practice. What is meant by “lead others to truth” is to be sensitive, patient, humble, and caring in the way of a good and effective, teacher, not self-righteous or intimidating. Rav Shlomo Wolbe writes,

The most basic parameter of truth is consistency. This classification does not only refer to discrepancy between knowledge, awareness, and reality, but also that there not be contradictions within a person’s essential nature [Emphasis mine.]

This definition provides us with a way to appreciate what is involved in leading others to truth. When we realize that truth means following a consistent path in life with no contradictions within a person’s essential nature, then we learn that he practice of *leading others to truth* calls on us to make an effort to bring others to *their* truth, to assist them to realize *their potential* on their terms, to teach them how to live their lives in ways that have integrity and are consistent with the unique and individual image in which they are fashioned” (With Heart in Mind, 210-213).

Isaac his father said to him, “Who are you?” And he answered, “I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.” Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, “Who - where - is the one who hunted game and bought it to me, and I ate it all before you arrived, and I have blessed him? Indeed, he will be blessed.” When Esau heard his father’s words, he cried out and exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me too, Father!”

But he said, “Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing.” He said, “Is it that he was named Jacob that he has supplanted me these two times? - He took away my birthright,⁶⁶ and see, now, he has taken away my blessing!” Then he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?” Isaac answered, and said to Esau, “Behold, I have made him lord over you, and all his brothers I have given to him for servants; with grain and wine have I supported him, and for you, where - what can I do my son?” Esau said to his father, “Have you but one blessing, my father!? Bless me too, my father!” And Esau raised his voice and wept.

Then Isaac his father answered and said to him:

“Behold, from the fatness of the earth shall be your dwelling and the dew of the heavens above.

By your sword shall you live

And you shall serve your brother

Yet it will be that when you grow restless

You may cast off his yoke from upon your neck.”

Now Esau harbored hatred toward Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had bless him, and Esau said to himself, “the days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob. When Rebecca was told of the words of her older son Esau, she sent and summoned Jacob her younger son and said to him, “Behold, your brother Esau

⁶⁶ ***He took away my birthright*** Why does Esau say that Jacob “took away his birthright” when in fact Esau sold it to him under oath? One commentator remarks, “Esau had the audacity to assert to his father’s face that Jacob had ‘taken’ his birthright, when in reality Esau himself sold it under oath and flagrantly despised it, as the Torah attests [25:34]” (Stone Chumash, 140). What we learn from Esau is the underlying principle of Truth. As Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler writes, “Even after the desires of one’s heart have persuaded him to accept the false way as true, he still knows in his heart of hearts that the path is ‘truer’ than the other one...Every human being thus has the faculty of determining in his own heart where the real truth lies” Meaning, each of us will write the story of our lives according to our own viewpoint. Each person will determine for themselves their ultimate truth, and catalogue experiences in reality according to their unique perspective. While it may be true that Esau had the audacity to tell his father that Jacob had “taken” his birthright, this is still how Esau understands the situation. What we learn from Esau here is that while the facts may appear to us as straightforward, for others, they may have a different version of the same story. It’s always important to understand that for each person, determining where the truth lies is a matter of judgment and a process of discernment. As Morins says, “Truth is not a thing that depends only on the scientific verifiability of the facts. Truth is also an exercise, a judgment, and a test. The goal is to live according to the guidance of your discerning heart, for the sake of the soul you are as well as the souls of others” (Everyday Holiness, 163; 172).

is comforting himself regarding you by planning to kill you. So now, my son, heed my voice and arise; flee to my brother Laban, to Haran. And remain with him a short while, until your brother's fury subsides. Until your brother's fury against you subsides, and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereaved of both of you on the same day?"

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