

When the Raven Teaches Kindness

Parshas Bereishis 5787 • Shalosh Seudos

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The unexpected teacher

I want to begin with a very unusual Midrash.

Kayin has killed Hevel. Adam and Chavah are sitting beside their son, crying. They do not know what to do. They have never buried anyone before. Who is going to teach them?

A raven comes along. One raven has died, and another raven digs in the ground and buries it. Adam sees what the raven has done, and learns how to bury Hevel.

Think about that picture. The parents of humanity are mourning their child, and a bird teaches them how to care for him.

But why a raven?

When we think of a creature's natural compassion, we usually think of its care for its young. A helpless little creature cannot provide for itself. Its survival depends on its parents. That is where we would expect compassion to be strongest.

Yet Chazal describe a stage at which the raven withholds that care from its own young. Its newly hatched young have not yet developed their black colouring. While they are still pale, the raven does not feed them. Chazal distinguish this early stage from the later stage, when the young become black and receive care.

The little ones cry out for food. In Tehillim we praise Hashem as the One Who provides food for the young ravens that call out. They are dependent on His provision even when their own parent does not feed them.

That is why the raven is such a striking image of cruelty in the language of Chazal. The lack of compassion reaches into the relationship where we would most expect tenderness: a parent and its helpless young.

And this is the creature Hashem sends to teach Adam and Chavah kindness.

Surely that choice has a meaning. What does the raven teach us about repairing the evil that has entered the world?

What changed after the Eitz HaDaas

To understand the answer, we have to go back to the beginning of the parsha.

Hashem places Adam in Gan Eden. He may eat from the trees of the garden, but he is commanded not to eat from the Eitz HaDaas Tov VaRa, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Hashem warns him that eating from it will bring death.

The nachash approaches Chavah and presents a very different picture. Eating from the tree, he claims, will open their eyes. They will become knowing of good and evil. Chavah sees that the fruit is desirable, eats from it, and gives some to Adam.

What has changed?

On a deeper level, the change is that evil has now become mixed into the human being. Before the sin, man had the choice whether to obey Hashem; the temptation could confront him from outside. After the sin, the struggle penetrates within. **Good and evil are intertwined in his own desires and motives.**

The expression knowing good and evil means more here than having information about two subjects. Daas can express connection. Adam and Chavah have become connected to a mixture of good and evil.

We experience that mixture in ordinary life. I can want to perform a mitzvah and also want the honour that comes with it. I can want to correct a wrong and also enjoy showing that the other person is mistaken. The good intention may be sincere, while something selfish becomes tangled up with it.

That is part of our avodah: to recognize the mixture and work to purify our intentions.

Now we can understand something about the Eitz HaChayim, the Tree of Life. After the sin, the Torah describes the concern that Adam might eat from it and live forever. Why would that be a problem? Surely life is a blessing.

But in his present condition, everlasting life would also give the evil mixed into him an everlasting foothold. The damaged condition would continue without an end.

Mortality limits that condition. The physical life in which evil has become embedded does not endure forever. Death remains a painful consequence of the sin, but within that consequence is also the prevention of evil becoming permanent.

Adam and Chavah now understand that human life has changed. And then comes another terrible discovery.

Kayin kills Hevel.

Here is a human being deliberately taking his brother's life. The evil within man has become powerful enough to destroy another person.

Adam and Chavah are sitting before the consequences. What can be done when the destructive side has become so strong?

The counterweight

There is a deeper way to understand Kayin and Hevel. Alongside their actual lives and actions, they can represent the struggle within a human being. Kayin represents the destructive force, and Hevel represents the good. Kayin's killing of Hevel gives us an image of evil overpowering goodness.

We can recognize that struggle without comparing our ordinary failings to murder. We know moments when anger overpowers patience, or jealousy prevents us from rejoicing in someone else's success. Afterward we wonder why we let that middah take control.

At precisely this point, the raven comes and teaches kindness.

The creature associated with cruelty performs an act of chesed. It shows the direction of the repair. We have to place weight on the opposite side.

That is the idea of teshuvah hamishkal: **repentance through a corresponding counterweight**. Mishkal means weight. Think of a scale. If

we have placed a heavy weight on one side, a tiny weight on the other side will not restore the balance. We need a counterweight to the wrongdoing.

In this explanation, the counterweight to cruelty is a deliberate increase in kindness. Where the evil has become particularly deep, the goodness must be strengthened with corresponding force.

Let us apply that to ourselves. If I have developed a habit of speaking harshly, I have to ask forgiveness from those I have hurt and repair what I can. I also have to invest in the opposite middah. I need to practice speaking gently, listening patiently, and taking another person's feelings seriously.

If I have become selfish, I need to practice generosity. Giving when it is convenient may not do much to challenge the selfishness. I have to become willing to give some of the time or comfort I would rather keep for myself.

The middah that caused the damage tells me where I must put the counterweight.

This is why the raven is the teacher. Its act is unusual precisely because it moves in the opposite direction from the cruelty associated with it. It teaches that there is an answer to the destructive force: strengthen the kindness that can counterbalance it.

Kindness that remains pure

But there is still a question. Why is the lesson taught through burial?

We call caring for the dead chesed shel emes. **The person who has passed away cannot repay us.** He cannot return the favour or help us when we need something. We are doing the kindness for his sake.

That gives us a standard with which to examine our own chesed.

Sometimes I do not want money or a favour in return. But I do want appreciation. I want the person to notice what I did. If he does not thank me, I become upset.

We have all heard the complaint: After everything I did for him, this is how he treats me?

The feeling is understandable. Yet it can also show us that part of our kindness depended on receiving something afterward. We can work toward a

more unselfish chesed, one in which the other person's benefit matters even when the appreciation does not come.

There is a further depth to the word emes.

The Midrash describes a debate before the creation of man. Chesed argues that man should be created because he will perform kindness. Emes objects because man is full of falsehood.

How can both descriptions apply to the same person? A human being can do kindness and still have mixed motives. He may be helping, but also calculating what he stands to gain. That brings us back to the mixture of good and evil within us.

Chesed shel emes points toward kindness that can withstand the examination of emes. Even when a person's shortcomings are visible, there can still be a reason to help him. I do not have to pretend that he is perfect in order to recognize his need.

This kind of chesed can apply to the living as well. A person may be unable to repay me. He may not appreciate what I do. He may even have behaved in a way that makes it difficult for me to help him. And I can still choose to do the good that is needed.

Sometimes the recipient cannot thank us because he does not even know what we have done.

There is a story about a husband and wife that brings this very close to home.

The gift and the loss

Let us begin with a young couple, just starting their life together.

The chosson's grandmother, Bubby Chava, had a custom of giving jewellery to each new bride in the family. Two weeks before the wedding, she gave this kallah a diamond ring worth five thousand dollars.

Imagine what a gift like that means to a new kallah. It is precious because of the diamond, certainly. But it also carries a message: You belong to our family now. We are happy to welcome you.

There was one problem. The ring was loose. The kallah kept checking that it was still on her finger.

Then came their sheva brachos Shabbos in Netanya. Both families were there. After lunch, they walked along the seafront. Later, after Havdalah, her mother-in-law noticed that the ring was missing.

Her husband searched their room. Relatives searched their belongings. The ring could not be found. Perhaps it had fallen off near the beach.

Five thousand dollars. Gone.

For a young wife, that is already distressing. But there is another fear beneath it. What will his family think of me? Will they remember the happiness of the wedding, or will this become the thing they remember?

The loss became a recurring subject of criticism. Even her husband's attempt at humour hurt her. A remark about an expensive vase brought the embarrassment back again. She stopped wanting to visit. For a short time, the couple broke contact with his family. Bubby Chava helped bring them back together, but the hurt remained.

Think about the difference between losing an object and losing your ease with the people around you. An object has a price. How do you put a price on feeling welcome?

The ring in the pocket

Before Rosh Hashanah, the husband put on his frock. He reached into a pocket.

And there was the ring.

The ring everyone had been searching for. The ring that had caused so much unhappiness. In his coat pocket.

He accepted responsibility. The mistake, he made it appear, had been his all along.

His wife cried with relief. He telephoned his mother. The family gathered and apologized to the young wife. Now the blame belonged to him.

You can understand her relief. The expensive gift was back. The embarrassment had lifted. At last, she could breathe again.

But the story did not disappear. It changed its address.

Now he was the one who had misplaced the ring. Now he was the careless one. His wife teased him about it. When something needed to be kept safe, the old incident could be brought up again.

He accepted it.

There is something especially painful about a mistake that becomes a permanent description. A person may forget an object once, and suddenly he is the person who cannot be trusted to remember anything. We stop seeing the whole person. We see the label.

In this home, the label remained. Their seven children heard the story too. Fifteen years passed.

Fifteen years is a long time to live inside someone else's version of an event.

The discovery

Eventually, his wife decided that she might exchange the ring for different jewellery. Her mother-in-law sent her to Bubby Chava's jeweller, Yankel Cohen.

He examined it. It was worth more than six thousand dollars now. But he had never sold this ring.

That puzzled her. She went home and looked for the receipt. She found one from a different jeweller. Then she looked at the date.

Fourteen Elul.

Their wedding had been on the ninth of Sivan.

The ring had been purchased after their wedding.

Here was a small piece of paper overturning fifteen years of certainty. Until that moment, she knew exactly what had happened. Her husband had misplaced the ring. He had found it in his coat. That was the story.

But a ring given before the wedding could not have been bought after the wedding.

When her husband returned from kollel, she mentioned the appraisal and the unfamiliar shop. At first, he spoke lightly about the increase in value.

But she had understood.

She really had lost the original ring. He had borrowed five thousand dollars and bought an identical replacement. Then he had placed it in his coat and made its discovery look like the discovery of her missing ring.

He had rescued her from the blame by taking it upon himself.

Now think back to all those reminders. Every time she had treated him as the man who lost her ring, she was speaking to the man who had quietly replaced it.

Every time she had laughed at his carelessness, she was looking at his care.

She wept. The receipt had revealed a kindness she had never known to thank him for.

Repaying the money had taken years. He explained that his family were good people with weaknesses, and that accepting the blame had restored her happiness.

The money was one part of his gift. The misunderstanding was another. He had carried both.

And for fifteen years, the person he had helped had believed that he was the person who needed forgiving.

The kindness she could not see

Let us stop for a moment and think about what she discovered.

There is an ordinary kindness that most of us would understand. Someone loses something valuable, and we help replace it. That already asks generosity of us.

But this kindness went further. It protected her from being regarded as careless. To do that, he accepted that description himself. And then he allowed the kindness to remain hidden.

We can imagine how difficult that would be. Most of us want to explain ourselves when we are misunderstood. Even if we can tolerate an unkind remark once, we may have a very hard time when the subject returns again.

We want to say: You do not understand what happened. You have no idea what I did for you.

Here, an explanation would have taken away some of the benefit he wanted to give. His wife could not thank him for his sacrifice because she believed the opposite about him. He was willing to allow that misunderstanding to remain while she enjoyed the relief his act had brought her.

That gives us a picture of chesed without a demand for recognition. **The person receiving the kindness does not know to be grateful. The person giving it still chooses her good.**

And think about the counterweight. The hurt in that home came through criticism, through making someone feel small over a mistake. The answer was an act of extraordinary care for her dignity. He gave of himself so that she could hold her head up again.

That is how we can connect the story to the raven. Cruelty diminishes another person. Chesed takes that person's pain seriously and asks what can be done to relieve it. The deeper the wound, the more substantial the care may need to be.

There is a lesson here for those of us who receive kindness too. We should be cautious about the weaknesses we think we see in another person. Sometimes we turn one incident into his permanent description. We repeat it to others, and eventually everyone knows him that way.

Do we really know the whole story?

Even when someone truly made a mistake, remembering it does not require us to keep reminding him. A husband or wife deserves room to grow. So does a child. So does a friend.

We can stop a remark before it leaves our mouth. We can allow an old embarrassment to fade. That, too, is a kindness.

Taking the lesson home

We began with a raven, a creature associated in Chazal with withholding care from its helpless young. And yet it became the teacher of chesed.

Its lesson comes at a moment when cruelty has caused terrible destruction. Adam and Chavah cannot bring Hevel back, but there is still a kindness for them to perform. Evil has brought damage into the world; they can begin adding the goodness that counterbalances it.

As Shabbos comes to an end, let us each identify one place where that counterweight is needed in our own lives. If we have been harsh, let us put real effort into gentleness. If we have been absorbed in ourselves, let us make time for someone else's need.

And let us look for an act of chesed that can remain between us and Hashem.

Something good we can do without waiting to receive the credit.

That wife went to the jeweller to find out what her ring was worth. She came home and discovered something about the man who had given it to her.

For fifteen years, she thought the ring reminded her of her husband's greatest weakness. Then she discovered it revealed his greatest strength.

May Hashem help us to recognize the good in one another, and to perform the kind of chesed that He sees, even when nobody else does.

Sources and acknowledgments

Torah exposition adapted from Eliyahu Wolf, Me'at Min Ha'Or, Parshas Bereishis, Teshuvos HaMishkal, based on Reshimos, booklet 25.

Bereishis 2:16-17; 3:1-6, 22-24; 4:8. Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishis, remez 38. Kesubos 49b; Eruvin 22a; Tehillim 147:9. Rashi to Bereishis 47:29; Bereishis Rabbah 8:5.

Ring story: an original spoken adaptation of the account published as A Golden Heart, Chaim Walder, Dei'ah veDibur, July 17, 2003, with reference to the later retelling Renewing One's Vows with Hashem, Yitzchok Friedman, September 8, 2022. The published account does not name the husband and wife.

Published story: Dei'ah veDibur | Later retelling: Yitzchok Friedman