

Week One

The Week of Chesed

What is *Chesed*?

Chesed means kindness - however where the standard definition of kindness ends the Jewish concept of *chesed* begins.

The Sages tell us that the Torah begins and ends with *chesed*.⁵ The *chesed* at the end of the Torah is that God buried Moshe. Burying the dead is the ultimate act of kindness (as one does not expect the favor to be returned). The Talmud refers to the burial of the dead as *chesed shel emes*, true kindness, befitting the Torah's finale.

The *chesed* at the beginning of the Torah is that God clothed Adam and Chava. There are so many acts of God prior to this in the first chapters of Bereishis that show kindness; creation itself or the fact that God provided the trees and food for Adam and Chava. Why, then, did the Sages consider His kindness in providing clothing to Adam and Chava the first act of *chesed*? This happened well into the creation narrative - after they ate from the forbidden tree.

The answer is precisely in that timing, namely, after the sin. Before Adam and Chava sinned, God was obliged to provide all their needs. Once He decided to create the world, He could do no less. After they sinned, after they rebelled against Him, God continued to provide their needs and gave them clothing. This was true *chesed*. *Chesed* is not going beyond the letter of the law. It is going against what justice dictates should be done.

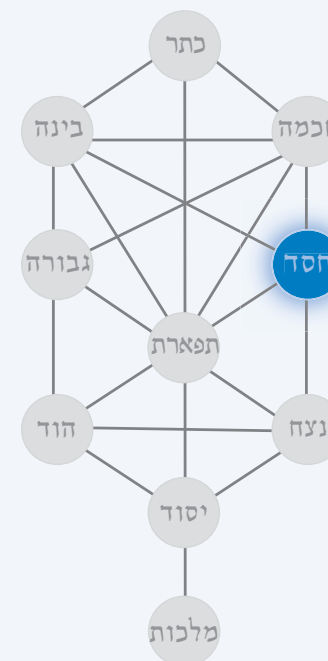
Chesed is also known as *gedulah*, 'greatness'. God is great because He is constantly doing *chesed*, even though the world may not deserve it.

Chesed in the Torah is personified by the Patriarch Avraham. His life was dedicated to caring about others. The very first prayer requesting something from God is when Avraham argues with God to save the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Let the people live", he argues, "despite the fact that they are wicked".⁶

Avraham also embodies *chesed* when he sits in the heat of the sun waiting for travelers to pass so that he can invite them into his home.⁷ Avraham invites everyone, even if their religious beliefs diametrically oppose his own. His tent is always open on all four sides.

Chesed finds the commonality and kinship between all of creation, and that commonality destroys any concept of individuality. More specifically *chesed* is the desire for life, the life-force of the universe, which is the ultimate purpose of creation. *Chesed* makes no distinction between species. *Chesed* is simply life, without differentiation.

At root, everyone is connected to everyone else through *chesed*. This is the reason that we must show kindness to each other.



The first day of creation represents *chesed*. The creation of unbounded light, which shines in all directions without limit, is the outpouring of *chesed*.

Chesed is represented by the right, or dominant, arm and hand. Acts of *chesed* should ideally be done, therefore, with the right hand. *Chesed* is also likened to water, which flows in all directions without distinction.