Hessed in Deed; Hessed in Thought: Thoughts on Parashat Lekh Lekha, October 16, 2010

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The Midrash teaches that Abraham and Sarah won many converts to their religious views. How did they succeed?

The Midrash offers a suggestion. Abraham and Sarah were models of "hessed"--kindness and compassion. They invited guests into their home, fed them, created a warm and loving environment. People were drawn to Abraham and Sarah as models of humanity at its best; and then, they went on to learn about the theology of Abraham and Sarah. The "strategy" of the Founding Couple of our tradition was: to set a proper example of religious behavior, and to convince--not coerce--others of the truths of ethical monotheism.

Many people have first been attracted to Orthodox Judaism because they have had positive experiences with Orthodox Jews. They have been helped in times of difficulty; they have been offered hospitality; they have been warmly received in the synagogue; they have been treated with impeccable honesty and decency. Acts of "hessed" have the power of drawing people closer to oneself--and also to one's values and ideals. Once people feel comfortable with Orthodox Jews, they might then be curious to study the teachings of Orthodox Judaism.

"Hessed" doesn't only manifest itself in friendly, honest and kind behavior. It also is reflected in our attitudes toward others. If we are imbued with "hessed", we demonstrate respect for the feelings and thoughts of others. We enter respectful discussion with them. Our goal is to be helpful to them in their exploration of Jewish teachings, and to provide meaningful guidance in a gentle, thoughtful way. Discussion--not coercion--is the hallmark of "hessed".

We sometimes (too often!) hear comments from Orthodox leaders and laymen that do not reflect "hessed". These statements convey the notion that the speaker alone has the Truth, and that others must listen and obey. The strategy of such people is closer to coercion than to open discussion. They say: do it our way or you are a sinner; obey our policies, or you will be disciplined. They claim to be the sole spokespeople of God's Truth, and to have the right--and responsibility--to control the thoughts and actions of others. They prefer coercion to discussion. They aren't interested in other opinions, since they believe they

alone have the Truth.

In his book, "Bein Yisrael le-Amim" (published in 1954), Rabbi Haim David Halevy discussed the role of religion in the State of Israel. He obviously wanted the Jewish State to operate according to the teachings of Torah and Halakha. Although he recognized the importance of involvement in the political process, he did not think that the religious nature of Israel could be guaranteed by political maneuvering or legislative coercion. "We will not achieve our goal by these means [of political power]. All of our efforts to increase the presence of religious Jewry in the Knesset elected by the nation, can only be--in the best of circumstances--only a means to achieve the goal....We will never be able to force our ideas and beliefs on the entire nation by means of legislation." Rabbi Halevy stressed the need for the religious community to impact the larger society by setting proper moral examples, by teaching and convincing, by working with others in a spirit of "hessed". Even if people can be forced to comply with religious legislation, this will ultimately backfire. People will resent the misuse of political power, and will ultimately cast off religion along with the coercive religious leadership. The truth of Rabbi Halevy's observations is easily substantiated by the many polls in Israel which show a growing antagonism toward the "religious establishment" within Israeli society. Coercive power is abusive power: people will not put up with it indefinitely. The day of reckoning will come.

Abraham and Sarah set important models for us on how to reach out to others who do not share our views or beliefs. First, be a good person. Behave in such a way that people are naturally drawn to your goodness, kindness and honesty. Then, be a respectful person who believes in discussion and exploration of ideas. Recognize that coercion not only reflects a bad attitude, but is actually a bad strategic choice. It drives people away, rather than bringing them closer. To create a religious community and society, we need to win hearts and minds. We need to think and discuss together, not to coerce or threaten each other. We need to demonstrate hessed in deed, and hessed in thought.

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