

CHESED – LOVING-KINDNESS

HOW CAN I LIVE WITH LOVING-KINDNESS?

CHECK-IN

Share your name and what brings you to this Omer Group.

OUR BRIT (COVENANT)

- ❖ Everybody's story is sacred: we commit to respectful communication.
- ❖ Listening is important for understanding: we commit to active and thoughtful listening.
- ❖ Our hearts are open when we feel safe: we commit to confidentiality.
- ❖ We will not try to fix, explain, or judge one another.
- ❖ We will allow for silences within the discussion so that everyone has the space to speak.
- ❖ As our Omer Groups are under the umbrella of Isaiah Together and the broader umbrella of Temple Isaiah, we will keep the values of each front and center.

COUNTING OF THE OMER

Hineini – I am ready to fulfill the mitzvah of counting the Omer.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוֵּנוּ
עַל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר.

Baruch atah, Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al sfirat haOmer.

Praised be You, Adonai our God, who rules the universe, instilling within us the holiness of mitzvot by commanding us to count the Omer.

Today is the _____ day, which is _____ weeks and _____ days of the Omer.

May this be my prayer: May my life be guided by *chesed*, by acts of love and kindness.

WHAT IS CHESSED?

Chesed is a difficult word to translate from the Hebrew. It has been alternatively translated as love, kindness, mercy, and compassion. It is often used as the term to communicate God's love towards humanity and through our covenant with God, love towards the Jewish people. In turn, it is a term used for the actions that we can take towards one another. In Kabbalistic tradition, *chesed* is one of the *sephirot* or mystical emanations of God. For Jews who observe the Counting of the Omer, we focus on the *sefirah* of *chesed* during the first week of counting, asking ourselves: how do we show love in the world and how do we open ourselves to receiving love in return?

Shimon the Righteous used to say, "On three things the world stands: On Torah, on worship and on acts of loving-kindness (*chesed*)." – Mishnah Pirkei Avot 1:2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Describes acts of *chesed*/loving-kindness that you see in the world around you. What makes an act of *chesed* qualitatively different from other actions that we might take?
- (b) In what ways does the world stand on *chesed*? What happens to the world when *chesed* is absent? What happens to your world when *chesed* is absent?

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF:

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. – Exodus 23:9

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle. – Philo, Jewish philosopher

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) In what ways have you been a stranger/an outsider/ oppressed? What did it feel like when you were shown *chesed* (or not shown *chesed*) in those situations?
- (b) Could getting in touch with the ways in which we have felt like outsiders affect how we might treat others around us? How could encountering the stranger within lead us to sharing *chesed*?
- (c) How easy or difficult is it to bring Philo's teaching to life?

FROM OUR TRADITION:

Olam Chesed Yibaneh – The world was built with *chesed*... - Psalm 89:3

How do we practice a *chesed* that balances giving with boundaries so that it actually builds the world? Rav Wolpe points us to one of the Torah's most powerful passages about giving:

If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. (Deuteronomy 15:7-8)

The Torah calls on us to really see what the other needs as a first step before acting on the impulse to give. Often we only see our own needs projected onto the other when we want to give. A well-known example of this from international aid circles is the case of a well-meaning young man from Florida who wanted to help poor African children. He started a non-profit organization to collect and donate t-shirts to a certain country in Africa. His message was that everyone in the U.S. has extra t-shirts and people in Africa do not have enough clothes, so let's donate our t-shirts. After a huge number of t-shirts were collected and sent to Africa, the international aid community prevailed on him to stop because people did not need the shirts in the place he sent them and his free t-shirts endangered the fragile local economy by undermining demand for locally produced clothing. This type of unbounded, harmful *chesed* can be prevented by practicing *savlanut*/forbearance and making the effort to truly see and hear what the other needs. Truly seeing the other in his or her humanness evokes deep compassion and we can target our *chesed* where it is really needed.¹

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How does the text from Deuteronomy above teach us about intention when it comes to giving?
- (b) What are the limitations on *chesed*? Do the limitations change when we translate *chesed* as love or kindness or compassion?

¹ <https://tikkunmiddotproject.wikispaces.com/file/view/Chesed+for+Participants.pdf>

MODERN VOICES:

At the 2016 Tony Awards (that occurred shortly after the massacre at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida), Lin-Manuel Miranda dedicated a win to his wife, Vanessa with this sonnet:

My wife's the reason anything gets done
She nudges me towards promise by degrees.
She is a perfect symphony of one
Our son is her most beautiful reprise.
We chase the melodies that seem to find us
Until they're finished songs and start to play
When senseless acts of tragedy remind us
That nothing here is promised, not one day.
This show is proof that history remembers
We lived through times when hate and fear seemed stronger;
We rise and fall and light from dying embers, remembrances that hope and love last longer
And love is love cannot be killed or swept aside.
I sing Vanessa's symphony, Eliza tells her story
Now fill the world with music, love and pride.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) This sonnet was shared following a national tragedy. While there are many valid and powerful responses to trauma, how might love be a particularly powerful response to pain?
- (b) How will **you** 'fill the world with music, love, and pride'? What is the *chesed* that you can personally bring into the world this week of the Omer?

A FINAL WORD:

Read this poem/prayer by Alden Solovy. Perhaps read it once on your own and once aloud. Perhaps have each member of your Omer group share a line aloud that is particularly resonant for them.

Let Love

Let love wash over your face,
Caress your eyes,
Brush your lips.
Let love pulse through your heart,
Warm your lungs,
Fill your chest.
Let love strengthen your bones,
Ignite your nerves,
Awaken your flesh.
For love is in the air and in the wind,
The current and the waters,
The flow of gifts from G-d's creation,
Divine bounty and grace,
Calling out to you dear sisters and brothers:
'Awake you slumberers!
Awake you who walk warily into the day and dejected into the night.
Have you forgotten My gifts and treasures?
Have you forsaken the beauty around you?
Have you surrendered your joy and passion?'
This, then, is G-d's command:
Let love wash over you,
Pulse through you,
Pour strength into you.
Let love carry you into luminous days
And radiant nights.
Sing and dance,
Laugh and play,
Lifting your life with passion and hope.
Let love be your messenger and your message.
Blessed are You, G-d of love.