

Signs of a Nation

Project Likkutei Sichos in Poetry & Art

Volume 30 | Vayeira | Sichah 1

Our sages teach that the signs are three,
That reveal a Jew's identity.
Merciful, bashful, and kind,
These are the signs in a Jew we find.

The Bavli teaches that these traits reveal,
The Jewish nature, genuine and real.
Whoever possesses these signs, we are told,
Is fit to marry within the Jewish fold.

The Bavli brings a pasuk about Avraham's way,
Who taught his household kindness each day.
"He will command his children and his household after him," we see,
For kindness was his nature, passed to his children for eternity.

But kindness must be expressed in what we do,
Not only in the feelings that we hold true.
Avraham taught his household to take an active part,
Turning compassion into action, straight from the heart.

The Yerushalmi, however, takes a different course,
Explaining that the three traits have a heavenly source.
"And Hashem your G-d will keep for you the covenant and the kindness," we're told,
These traits are gifts from Above, more precious than gold.



In the days of Dovid Hamelech, a famine arose,
Because of an injustice to the Givonim, Hashem disclosed.
Dovid sought to appease them and put things right,
But their demand revealed a troubling sight.

Seven descendants of Shaul they demanded be slain,
Refusing other ways to address their pain.
Dovid saw their cruelty, their refusal to forgive,
And questioned whether among the Jewish nation they should live.

The Bavli (Yevamos 79a) states:
"Whoever possesses these three signs is fit to attach himself to this nation."

The Yerushalmi (Kiddushin 4:1) states:
"And these [the Givonim] did not possess even one of them;
immediately [Dovid] arose and distanced them."

The Bavli says those possessing all three,
Are fit to marry within the Jewish community.
But if even one trait a person doesn't show,
Would their lineage be questioned? We want to know.

But the Yerushalmi makes it clear,
Not even one of these traits did appear.
And the Rambam's ruling supports this view,
All three must be lacking for suspicion to ensue.

Perhaps the two Gemaras agree,
That the Givonim lacked all three.
But why does only the Yerushalmi make this clear?
What deeper explanation will soon appear?



The Yerushalmi calls them three gifts from Above,
 Each a precious blessing of Hashem's love.
 A person might be kind, yet lack mercy inside,
 Or feel another's pain, yet no help provide.

Imagine three lights, each with its own switch,
 Each shines independently, without a hitch.
 One may be shining while two remain dark,
 For each has its own independent spark.

So the Yerushalmi must explicitly say,
 The Givonim lacked all three in every way.
 For missing one would not necessarily mean,
 That the other two could not be seen.

But the Bavli calls them signs, and here's the key,
 They point to one inner identity.
 Not three unrelated traits that appear,
 But signs of one essence, becoming clear.



Like three lights connected to one source of light,
 One switch turns them on, all shining bright.
 When the switch is off, all three cease to glow,
 For they share one source, as the Rebbe does show.

The Bavli need not state each missing sign,
 For all three arise from one design.
 When the common source is missing, we know,
 None of the three signs will show.

But what is the source of these signs we find?
 What single quality keeps them combined?
 The Rebbe explains that bittul is the key,
 The humble essence of a Jew, you see.

With bittul, there's no arrogance or pride,
 A tender bashfulness grows inside.
 That tenderness allows mercy to grow,
 And compassion for others to naturally flow.

And mercy moves us to kindness in deed,
 To reach out and help another in need.
 From soul to heart to action they flow,
 Three signs from one source, as the Rebbe does show.



A person may give with a generous hand,
Yet seek recognition throughout the land.
Their kindness may come from a desire for fame,
To earn admiration and praise for their name.

One may feel pity for another's plight,
Yet see oneself in a superior light.
Though compassion may move one to help someone in need,
Ego may still be mixed with that generous deed.

Bashfulness doesn't mean a lack of self-confidence,
It means a lack of self-importance.
We can be strong and do Hashem's will,
While remaining humble and selfless still.

But true Jewish kindness comes from within,
From bittul, where genuine goodness does begin.
As Avraham declared, with humility so deep,
"I am but dust and ashes," with no honor to seek.

The Rambam puts bashfulness first in the chain,
For humility allows mercy to reign.
And mercy then leads to kindness in deed,
Reaching out to help another in need.



But the Gemara lists mercy first, we see,
Before bashfulness, how can that be?
If bashfulness causes mercy to grow,
Why does the Gemara reverse their order so?

The Givonim's cruelty was their greatest wrong,
Their lack of mercy stood out strong.
But the Rebbe reveals a lesson more,
A deeper meaning for us to explore.

Even when mercy is genuine and true,
A feeling of pride may arise in us too.
So after showing compassion and care,
We must awaken humility, it's clear.

The Midrash teaches that those who are blessed,
Should give tzedakah to those in distress.
The poor person's need gives the wealthy a chance,
To fulfill a mitzvah and spiritually advance.

But when I consider another's pain,
Through which I have a mitzvah to gain,
A feeling of shame should awaken in me,
For another must suffer to benefit me.



The Friediker Rebbe was sailing by sea,
Returning from Eretz Yisrael, where he'd been recently.
When he learned of the tragedy in Chevron that day,
His anguish was so great that he fell ill on the way.

A G-d-fearing doctor was there by his side,
With medicine and care that he faithfully supplied.
He did all he could, his health to restore,
Yet a troubling thought he could not ignore.

He approached the Rebbe, seeking to explain,
Why he felt responsible for the Rebbe's pain.
"Had I not been aboard to provide medical care,
No natural means of healing would be there."

"The Jewish people need you healthy and strong,
To guide and inspire them all along.
Had I not been here, you'd have been spared the pain,
So I seek a tikkun for what you did sustain."

The doctor's compassion led him to see,
A deeper reason for humility.
For when we help another in need,
Our mercy should bring us to bittul indeed.

