

A Few of the Rabbi Reb Nuchem Asz's Witticisms

A) *Acts of kindness¹ are greater than charity* [Talmud Bavli, *Sukkah* 49b]

In 1902, there was a pogrom in Częstochowa, during which many Jews suffered, including important people. Money was then collected, in town and in other cities as well, to aid the victims and ensure their further existence. But it was decided to distribute the funds in the form of loans and to take a receipt from each one for the sum he was allotted, so as not to shame the beneficiaries.

One of the victims failed to understand the true intention behind this and asked the Rabbi z"l, who was chairman of the committee, why money that had been collected to distribute as charity was now being given out as loans? The Rabbi z"l answered him jokingly, "The money was really given not to be returned, but being as *"acts of kindness are greater than charity"*, meaning that a larger reward is to be gained from an act of kindness than simply giving money, we have decided to call [this aid] a *"Gmilus Chessed"*, and what have you to lose if, for this, we receive a larger reward in the afterlife? You may be entirely at ease - the money is yours to keep!"

B. *Man has already been created* [Midrash Rabbah, Genesis, ch.8, 5

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Decades ago, the question of appointing a rabbinical judge was being addressed in our city. The Rabbi z"l then called a meeting of representatives - public activists and *Chassidim* - to take counsel with them regarding a suitable candidate for this position. At the meeting, quarrels flared up amongst the different *Chassidim* and they were unable to achieve any results. The Rabbi adjourned the meeting and, as closing words, said, "Actually, I already have a judge and all your tearing about is completely unnecessary." When one of those present asked, "If the Rabbi has already appointed the candidate without us, then what was the need for this meeting?". The Rabbi replied, "We see that when God came to create Adam, he called together the ministering angels in charge of Kindness, Truth, Righteousness and Peace and asked them whether he should create Adam or not. Kindness said, *"Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of kindness"*. Truth said, *"Let him not be created, because he is full of lies"*. Righteousness said, *"Let him be created, because he will perform righteous deeds"*. Peace said, *"Let him not be created, because he is full of strife."* Then God said, "[What can you avail?] *Man has already been made!*". "The same question", continued the Rabbi, "presents itself - If the Sovereign of the Universe had already created Man by himself, why had he called the meeting?"

But the explanation seems to be this - God wished to hear the opinions of the most important pillars on which the universe stands and it turned out that each one had only his own unilateral interest in mind. Kindness wanted him created, because he is his follower - *"he will dispense acts of kindness"*. Truth did not want him created, because he is his opponent - *"he is full of lies"*, and the fact that Man is full of kindness and righteousness did not interest Truth in the least. Then comes Righteousness and says, *"Let him be created, because he will perform righteous deeds"* - also his follower, and he cares not that he is "full of lies". And lastly comes Peace, who wishes him not to be created since *"he is full of strife"* - he is his antagonist, as he doesn't side with Peace, but is

¹ [TN: "Acts of kindness" are called "Gmilus Chessed" in Heb., which is also the name given to a fund for loans without interest. The subsequent pun is based on this term's double meaning.]

quarrelsome. Then God says, “While you are all arguing among yourselves” - as I see that you have no interest in the virtues of Man, and only care whether he is one of your company - “*Man has already been made*” – I shall somehow manage without you.”

C. [And he was king in Yeshurun,] When the heads of the people and the tribes of Israel were gathered together. [Let Reuben live, and not die; and let not his men be few. (Deuteronomy 33:5-6)]

Some years ago, a *Kehilla* budget-meeting was held, during which the *Kehilla* Council voted against the Administration, which brought about losses to the *Kehilla's* income. At an meeting of the leaders of the *Kehilla*, together with the Councilmen, the Rabbi said:

“When Moses our Teacher came to bid the Jews farewell [before dying] and instruct them how to carry themselves in the future, he made it clear to them that, when would there be “*king in Yeshurun*”? When would the Jews be able to live in peace? “*When the heads of the people and the tribes of Israel were gathered together*”, when the leaders of the community become united in one mind with the representatives of the people, the councilmen. Only then, would “*Reuben live, and not die; and let not his men be few*”, the Jews would prosper and multiply.

D. Longevity

The Rabbi z”l once went to collect money for the *cheder* and, when visiting an elderly wealthy non-religious Jew, asked him for a larger donation, promising him longevity for it. To this, the latter remarked, “I do want longevity, but I am not required to give more than what this-and-that orthodox rich man gave”, naming a local prosperous *chassid*, a miser. To this, the Rabbi replied, “There are two remedies by which to achieve longevity - the first is supporting Torah students, as is written, “*But ye that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day*” [Deuteronomy 4:4], and the Sages explained, “*Cleave unto Torah scholars*”, and thus attain a long life. The second remedy is to go morning and evening to the synagogue and pray – “*That your days may be multiplied [and the days of your children,] in the land*” [Deuteronomy 11:21] – [which refers to those who] “*go early and go late to the synagogue*” [Talmud Bavli, *Brachot*, 8a]. I had nothing to “sell” to that orthodox rich man, because he goes morning and evening to the synagogue to pray and has already found longevity without me. You, on the other hand, need to pay handsomely for it, and must therefore give a large donation to the *cheder*.

E. One who goes but does nothing²

An emissary, travelling for a *yeshivah*, came once to Częstochowa to gather funds, and agreed with a local Jew to accompany him and show him where the wealthy lived. The latter carried his task out to perfection, going around with the collector from morning till late at night. But some of the rich people were not at home, while others simply refused to give money to that *yeshivah*, making the venture unprofitable. The envoy, therefore, did not wish to pay him the wages they had agreed upon, saying that his efforts had not brought any benefit. They both came before the Rabbinical Court for a Torah judgement. After hearing both sides, the Rabbi ruled that the man should be paid his wages, because “*one who goes*”, even if he “*does nothing*”, “*has gained the rewards of going*”, i.e., must be paid for the fact that he went.

² [TN: *Ethics of the Fathers*, chapter 5, mishna 14: “There are four types among those who attend the study hall. One who goes but does nothing—has gained the rewards of going. One who does (study) but does not go to the study hall—has gained the rewards of doing. One who goes and does, is a *chassid*. One who neither goes nor does, is wicked.”]

F. [*For length of days, and long life,*] *And peace, shall they add to thee* [Proverbs 3:2]

A burgher came to the Rabbi with a question. His son was terribly ill and, usually, the custom in such cases is to give the sufferer the additional name “Chaim” [Life]. But, seeing that his son’s name was already Chaim, what name should be added? The Rabbi said to add the name “Szulim” [*Shalom*; Peace] and based this on a verse: “*For length of days, and long **Life*** [Chaim]”, i.e., in order that Chaim should enjoy a long life – “*and **Peace*** [Szulim], *shall they add to thee*”, the name Szulim is to be added. The sufferer indeed recovered and Chaim-Szulim lived to an old age.