



## Words of Wisdom

**By**

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### Vayechi: Righteous Kindness

At the close of *Sefer Bereishis*, Yooqov prepares for the inevitable, his ultimate passing. He summons his son Yosef and has him swear to fulfill his last wish, to be buried with his forefathers in the land of Canaan, the land of Israel. When Yooqov makes this request, he refers to this act of kindness as "Chessed VeEmes", "[an act of] kindness and truth". We can understand that an act can be one of kindness but how does an act embody truth? To clarify, Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that the verse should not be understood as meaning "an act of kindness and truth" rather "Chessed VeEmes" refers to an act of kindness that is true.

How can an act of Chessed be true? Rav Hirsch offers a novel interpretation of this idea. Oftentimes when kindness is unchecked by that which is right and true, that said kindness can actually be misguided and wrong. Rabbi Isaac Levy, a grandson of Rav Hirsch and translator for Rav Hirsch's work on Chomosh, amplifies this thought using an old British axiom, "he allows his heart to run away with his head." This idea is emphasized by the *Sefer Orchos Tzadikim* in chapter 7, *The Gate of Rachmim/Mercy*. He explains, that sometimes, compassionate behavior is in fact worse than cruelty. For instance, when one has mercy on the wicked or when a judge allows his compassion for a pauper to distort a proper judgement. In those cases, excessive compassion can lead to harm. Passion and compassion are essential Jewish traits, but they must always be held in check by that which is true and right.

When we attempt to apply this principle taught by R' Hirsch, we must keep in mind the specific order of the expression "Chessed VeEmes", in which chessed notably precedes emes. In an article published in the *Jewish Observer* in October, 1986, a few months after the petira of R' Moshe Feinstein, R' Nossen Scherman references the eulogy given by R' Nisson Alpert at the funeral of his teacher R' Moshe. In his words:

"In Rabbi Alpert's eulogy of Reb Moshe, he provided a delicate insight into Reb Moshe's method of dealing with halachic queries from troubled people. He combined chessed and emes, kindness and truth-but first came the kindness. He would feel compassion for the questioner and that chessed would be the background upon which he would etch the halachic truth."

R' Moshe understood that in the balance of chessed and emes, chessed comes first. We must begin with chessed before we approach emes. I heard quoted in the name of R' Moshe that if one justifies his actions based on the pursuit of truth and only decides to perform chessed when truth demands it, he would never succeed in actually performing chessed!

As a Jew we must always have the fortitude to combine chessed and emes; but as taught and lived by R' Moshe, we must always remember that the bedrock of our values is chessed. On the other hand, we cannot allow our heart to run away with our head. As R' Hirsch notes, we must check on that chessed to ensure that our chessed is emes.