



**Beyond Flipping Out:  
Experiences of Year-in-Israel Programs**  
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**Chesed – Meaningful for Students**

*Despite their immersion in academic pursuits and specifically mitzvat Talmud Torah, the most recurring theme in the interviews was the centrality of chesed and sensitivity to relationships bein adam l'chaveiro.*

**A. An Attractive Mitzvah**

One of the first questions asked at each of the interviews was about the Jewish activities that the students find most meaningful. Naturally, from the year-in-Israel student population, whose daily schedule is loaded with intensive Torah learning and davening, we had anticipated hearing almost exclusively those activities from students we interviewed. We were admittedly stunned by the responses. The most frequently mentioned activities (8 students) were those of chesed. Not only were they mentioned, but it seemed that they were prominently at the top of students' minds. Four students mentioned chesed first, before any other mitzvah. An additional three students mentioned it second.

**What about chesed makes it such a meaningful or attractive mitzvah?**

Student #10 pointed to how performing chesed makes him feel:

"Different parts of chesed are very meaningful... You feel it is the right thing to do; and, you feel good when you do it; and, when you help people, you just feel like you are doing something right."

The above student seemed to be focusing on an internally generated feeling or realization. The following student pointed to external feedback that she received as the provider of that meaningfulness.

Student #14, when asked "What makes chesed so meaningful?" responded as follows:

"You see the outcome right away. You see how much gets done. You see the smile on their faces, and it makes everything so much easier to do."

When asked, if it is that there is an instant response, she replied,

"Yeah. You see what you are doing, and how it has its meaning."

Perhaps this attitude toward the attractiveness of chesed activities can help us understand why so many students find it meaningful relative to the other mitzvot that lack the instant gratification. **In total, a significant four of the students cited the fact that they can see the difference that their actions make as a reason for their attraction to chesed.** Again, it might be noteworthy that even in their current yeshiva environments, students were citing neither shiurim nor mussar schmoozes as their basis for prioritizing mitzvot or activities. The emphasis on chesed also seemed to include without distinction both those who are enjoying their year of study more fully, as well as those less enamored with the experience.

**Did mandatory chesed hours in high school play a role in the students' involvement in chesed?** High school educators and administrators involved in high school chesed projects, clubs, and mandating weekly chesed hours will be encouraged by some of what we heard. When asked which mitzvot are meaningful, student #14 replied immediately, "I really like chesed projects." She went on to describe how at

home she had to do chesed hours. At first she had thought it would be annoying, but by the time she had finished her hours, she had learned to love it and do it more.

It is significant for schools to hear that students feel that the habits formed by and the exposure to the experience of chesed outlast the mandatory activity and become a cherished part of the student. This is a heartwarming success of chesed hours, beyond the obvious mitzvah shelo lishmah and the benefit to the recipients. **Though not hinted at in any question, chesed hours as an influence toward future voluntary chesed was cited by three of the students.**

**Are students referring to the large-scale chesed projects or to the day-to-day variety?** Though most of the students interviewed focused on larger-scale chesed projects, the next student (#11) was one of two who instead focused on the smaller, day-to-day type of chasadim:

"Chesed is something that comes up all the time; and, you know, it is kind of hard to be too specific about it. But, in little ways here and there, you can do something kind for someone. It is not always like the going out and preparing, for poor people or something, like preparing food. It is not always something that big."

**Other sources for being drawn to do chesed:**

The following student (#12) pointed to her own talents and personality as her draw toward chesed:

"...inborn feeling that this is what I'm supposed to do; I am a giving person and a helping person. Different people have different tendencies and different strengths."

Perhaps it is noteworthy that she did not feel that chesed intrinsically should be ranked higher than other mitzvot. Rather, she felt that this was a personal strength and

responsibility for herself. Later in this article, we hope to address the prioritization by some students of chesed relative to mitzvot bein adam lamakom.

## B. Room for Improvement

A surprisingly high proportion, (8 of 14) students, cited chesed-type mitzvot as examples of those they are **in**consistent about.

Does this contradict our above findings that the students were extremely conscious of and involved in chesed activities? Our intuition tells us that this is not the case. As a matter of fact, there seemed to be a high degree of correlation between those students who were most actively involved in chesed activities and those who felt their performance of bein adam l'chaveiro mitzvot needed work. For example, student #12, most recently cited above as being drawn to chesed by her very nature, cited bein adam l'chaveiro mitzvot as her primary example of inconsistent observance. It is also interesting that one student who is particularly involved with chesed, even relative to the other students in our sample, claimed that she is most inconsistent about "veahavta l'reacha". We believe that when students recognize themselves as being inconsistent with an area of mitzvot, it is not necessarily an indication of relative deficiency at all. Rather, often the student has raised an area of observance as a developmental concern because the student is sincerely concerned with developing this into more of a strength. The student has already developed a heightened sensitivity for the mitzvah and is therefore on a level to catch him/herself slipping at times. At least two students who mentioned "shmirat halashon" or "lashon hara" as an inconsistently observed commandment also noted that they had been learning Sefer Chofetz Chaim or had been participating in a special program to be more careful with their speech. Clearly, they care deeply about these mitzvot. It might be that mitzvot in which they are more genuinely inconsistent or totally deficient are merely falling beneath their threshold of conscious awareness. Perhaps the most obvious support for our hypothesis is a student who worked in the US as a volunteer EMT. Remarkably, he was self-critical about his inconsistency in fulfilling bikur cholim. Our feeling is that if he were really bad at bikur cholim, he would not care enough about it to even mention it. Rather, his self-analysis is reminiscent of the above-mentioned sensitive speakers. This student, as an EMT, is

around the sick a lot. He naturally feels he could do more than the tremendous amount he already does.

**Dorm Life as a Factor:** There might be another reason for the prominence of chesed and bein adam l'chaveiro on both the list of "meaningful activities" and on that of "inconsistently observed mitzvot". The students interviewed are all residing in dormitories, far from their families. For many of the students, it is their first encounter with such a social dynamic. In addition to their new mode of residence, they are also attending classes and small-group study sessions with the same population of peers for an unprecedented number of hours weekly. Dorm life lends itself to a heightened degree of socialization. In addition, the students all find themselves suddenly lacking a parental support system, especially for physical assistance. In addition to breeding personal independence, this newfound social structure also provides fertile ground for chesed opportunities with one's peers. On the other hand, this heightened degree of socialization, especially in a stressfully unfamiliar setting and sometimes in close quarters, can also lead to a strain on one's usual degree of patience and self-control. A number of the students mentioned that dorm life leads to more interpersonal friction than in the past and that they crave some private space. The interpersonal challenges of the new dorming away-from-home experience might contribute to the emphasis on chesed and on the need for people to treat each other more sensitively, a topic we will expand upon below.

## C. Most Bothered about:

### **Lack of Bein Adam I'Chaveiro Sensitivity**

**Contrary to our own anticipations, 8 students focused on the lack of bein adam I'chaveiro as a sore point in our religion.** The context in which most of these comments were made was in response to the question "Are there things in Judaism that bother you?" We had expected the teenage respondents to say that they were bothered by areas of belief or practice that differ with those prevalent in Western culture. We had thought they would respond with issues like women's role in Judaism or with a list of restrictive laws that they do not appreciate. Instead, the most common response that we received was that the student was bothered by divisive "sin'at chinam" or by a lack of sensitivity within our religious community to bein adam I'chaveiro mitzvot and concerns. The fact that these comments are so far from the simple interpretation of the question "what bothers you in Judaism?" might make them even more significant.

**Pervasive Primacy of Bein Adam I'Chaveiro:** Students complained about divisiveness between communities and about insensitivity on a personal level. A few of them also noted a lack of parity between the seriousness with which ritual law is treated, in contrast to the lack of care for other people. Consistent with these concerns, students also noted that their primary reason for being impressed by or drawn to a given teacher was neither the teacher's charisma nor his thought-provoking shiurim. Rather, the students' adoption of the teacher as a role model was a function of what the student observed and experienced first-hand as the teacher's own openness and midot.

The following student (#4) literally said it all. Most poignant is the way that she explicitly expressed her awareness that she was diverging from the interviewer's question of "Are there things in Judaism that bother you?", but then proceeded to criticize our attitudes and interpersonal behavior. [**bold** here represents direct quote]

**"I don't really think it's an issue with Judaism, I think it's an issue with Jews."**

She continued to explain that in high school she was bothered by the response of some of the Judaic Studies faculty to the resignation of a colleague over a failure to comply with Torah standards. **"They were saying, 'You don't have to respect him as a person.'** When asked if she felt this was indicative of broader Jewish views, she responded, **"... indicative of more wide-scale things... Jews tend to be kind of racist."**

She complained about insensitivity on a personal level. The particular example that she cited is also laced with a sentiment that our religious leadership promotes disproportionate emphasis on *bein adam lamakom*, at the expense of *bein adam l'chaveiro*. Particularly instructive to those of us who are Judaic Studies teachers, her disappointment was magnified by the fact that these religious role models failed to live up to her expectations for *bein adam l'chaveiro* sensitivity.

**The Impact of Demeanor of Teachers:** A number of students tangentially alluded to the importance of teachers' demeanor. Student #4, above, expressed her disenchantment with insensitive or intolerant teachers. The converse was also true. Student #13 stated that the influence of teachers hinges on their approachability and on their being perceived as being sensitive to others in *bein adam l'chaveiro*. Based on the comments of those interviewed, this proved true both inside and outside of the class setting. Two students mentioned that what impressed them when visiting their teachers' homes for Shabbat was the refined way in which the teacher interacted with

his family members. This is how student #2 described what he enjoyed most about spending Shabbos with his rabbi in high school:

“His whole family is very nice too. Just seeing him and his wife, it is really nice ... the way they treat their kids.”

We find another student (#6), who cites the importance of his teacher’s midot within the classroom setting. This student repeatedly remarked that his role models in life are people who he sees as genuinely “humble”.

“I think that the tone ... in his personality and what he puts into the work – I think that has more effect than the material that’s the words coming out of his mouth.”

### **Reprioritization of Interpersonal Mitzvot ahead of Ritual:**

Student #6 claimed to have put things into proper perspective by realizing the importance of bein adam l’chaveiro:

“I just have a problem with – I think some priorities are mixed up, which is what I have come to feel this year... I felt that when I was in my high school, I felt like it was worse. I felt like there was a notion, maybe not from myself, but from others, that it’s worse for a person to miss minyan than to cheat in business. I felt like there is a certain few things that a person has to do – has to wear a suit on Shabbos, has to go to minyan three times a day, and has to go do daf yomi – but that some things that I feel play a bigger role, in Judaism and I think in the world, were just kind of like pushed off to the side. And, I guess I’m coming more to terms with this. I mean, I guess, I was an honest kid in high school, but now I feel like I am much more honest with myself and with others.”

To place the above quote, from student #6, into proper context, it bears mentioning that this student reported his own recent slackening in areas of minyan attendance and

intensity of learning. (Even if we assume a direct relationship between his statements and his behavior, it remains unclear which is the cause and which is the effect. From what he has reported, it appears that his encounters with peers and teachers that did not adequately value a balance with *bein adam l'chaveiro* soured his attitude toward the package of mitzvot and particularly toward the ritual areas that those disappointing individuals promoted. This preoccupation with *bein adam l'chaveiro* would be consistent with the prevalent attitude we have noted throughout. However, the reverse could be true. It could be that he is being unfairly critical of those who do not value sensitivity, in an attempt to deflect blame. He has, for personal reasons, decided to no longer meticulously observe certain mitzvot *bein adam lamakom*. He is taking pressure from his own conscience and from others for this. This might be the source for his newfound championing of "honesty" and "acceptance".)

The question for us to explore is whether a student fiercely committed to those practices would share his beliefs. An ideal student to look to is student #9. This student is a self-described strong learner and leader on ritual issues. He served as the *gabbai* of the vacation *minyan* in his hometown and has taken it upon himself to announce a warning to his friends in *yeshiva* each day when it is a few minutes to *mincha*. As one might have guessed, initially, all of his responses to the question of the most meaningful activities were<sup>2</sup> in the realm of *bein adam lamakom*. However, student #9 surprisingly clarified his feelings with the following:

"We say 'Derech erez kadma l'Torah.'... My personal feeling is basic respect for other people is more important than your personal *avodah* or learning. And the specific example that comes to mind is — I was davening at the *kotel*, and there is someone — I don't know anything about him at all, so I could be completely wrong — but there is someone who gets there really early, and ropes off a big area inside, in the indoor section of the *kotel*, and will not daven if anyone is standing in that rectangle, and he makes a really really big deal about it. And, my thought was, 'Well, maybe your concentration is affected by people being

close to you, but how can you not even offer an explanation for why you are kicking people out from davening at the kotel?"

Even his response to the immediate follow-up question, reflects his strong sense of being adam l'chaveiro. Recall that this is someone at whose behavior the student is incensed.

Questioner: "If you could, what would you say to him?"

Student #9: "Well, I would ask him, 'Why?' And, I'm sure he has a reason. And then, after you hear the reason, then you judge it on the merits. And it's not necessarily for any one person to judge. I mean, without knowing anything else, that was my first thought."

### **Acceptance of Others:**

The need for religious plurality in our attitude was a recurrent theme in many interviews. We see the popular refrain of 'why can't different people just accept one another for who they are?' A number of students said that they saw the existence of variant religious sects within Judaism, and particularly within Orthodoxy, and especially the strained relations between some of those groups, as reflective of a disappointing lack of unity. As one student noted, it seems that this sensitivity was aggravated more when coming to and visiting different communities in Israel. (The communities from which the students were coming in North America were probably naturally more tolerant and less judgmental than their Israeli counterparts. Also, prior to their year-in-Israel experience, the students probably tended to be exposed primarily to their own hashkafic dalet amot. This year lends them the opportunity, as uncomfortable as it sometimes might feel, to experience other community styles. However, this discussion is far beyond the scope of our study.)

Student #6 advocated increased mutual acceptance while he complained about a disproportionate stress on perfection in areas such as always going to minyan. (Obviously others have not been accepting of his lackluster minyan attendance record.)

“I think that if we can accept ourselves, then we can accept each other. And, I think, that would lead to a lot less anger in the future and a lot less different sects. And, you know, the differences between people I don’t think would seem as great, if the differences were accepted. ”

Particularly as teachers, we would take interest in the fact that this same student continued by saying that he was turned off by that very deficiency in some of his shiurim. He said that it gets to him when a teacher pushes everyone into one category or says that everyone should be doing a certain activity.

**Interpreting the findings on chesed:** We will leave the reader with a series of open questions to consider. The students we interviewed stressed the need for interpersonal sensitivity, the need for a reprioritization or at least a balancing of *bein adam l’chaveiro* relative to *bein adam lamakom*, and the need for acceptance of individuals and sects that differ from us. These concerns represent a sharp contrast to the reputation of the “brainwashed” Israel-year student. Stereotypically, such a student has an intensely narrow focus on ritual and expresses intolerance for anyone not willing to be just like him. Do our findings challenge that stereotype? Perhaps, one may argue that these students are reacting against the narrow-minded approach they are being fed in their institutions. However, it seems quite unlikely that they would not have even alluded to such feelings. Only two students, one of which we quoted above, expressed any such dissatisfaction.

Alternatively, it is possible that in response to the stereotypical imbalance in alumni’s care for interpersonal areas, yeshivot are now placing more emphasis on *bein*

adam l'chaveiro and chesed activities in their shiurim, sichot, and schedules. Even anecdotally, we have no data on such trends.

A third possibility is that indeed students graduating high school and studying in year-in-Israel programs actually care about involvement in chesed more than we had imagined. This would be an even more significant finding with respect to the males that we interviewed. Perhaps there is place for male high school and post-high school programs to reevaluate and enrich the chesed opportunities that they offer to their students. Maybe these very programs deserve the credit for apparent student focus on chesed. We must also pay close attention to the stress that the students placed on sensitivity and high standards for mizvot bein adam l'chaveiro. In particular, teachers, who are religious role models and are also interested in developing positive rapport with their students, should take additional care in their mode of speech and actions.