



Committing to Kindness

Topic

Gemilut Hasadim

Grade Level(s)

- 4th-8th
- Can also be done with parents as a family activity
- Note: This lesson can be made Shabbat-friendly for communities that offer school on Shabbat and observe traditional Shabbat practices.

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will be able to:

- Identify the relationship between *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim*
- Distinguish between *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim*
- Make a commitment to three concrete acts of *gemilut hasadim*

Materials needed

- “Two Stories of Kindness” (download)
- Copies of “*Al Shlosha Devarim*,” one per student (download)
- Double-sided copies of ““*Gemilut Hasadim v. Tzedakah*,” one per student
- Copies of “*My Gemilut Hasadim Commitments*,” one per student, preferably on cardstock for durability. (download)
- Small dot stickers, three per student (if on Shabbat in a Shabbat observant community)
- Pens, one per student (if not on Shabbat)



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Background for Teachers

<i>Hesed</i>	Lovingkindness	חֶסֶד
<i>Gemilut Hasadim</i>	Acts of lovingkindness	גְּמִלוּת חֶסֶדִים
<i>Ligmol</i>	To recompense	לְגַמּוֹל
<i>Tzedakah</i>	Giving charity, Justice	צְדָקָה
<i>Tikkun Olam</i>	Repairing the world	תִּקּוּן עוֹלָם
<i>Bikkur Holim</i>	Visiting the sick	בְּקוּר חוֹלִים
<i>Mitzvot</i>	Commandments often translated as “good deeds”	מִצְוֹת

In *Pirkei Avot*, the rabbis teach that the world stands on three things: on Torah, worship, and acts of lovingkindness, *gemilut hasadim*. Many students are familiar with Torah and worship, and perhaps also with the concept of *tzedakah* or *tikkun olam*; but *gemilut hasadim* — critically important to the rabbis — may be less well known.

While there are many *mitzvot* that obligate the giving of *tzedakah*, visiting the sick, clothing the naked and feeding the poor, *gemilut hasadim* describes the way in which people approach each other: by performing acts of kindness that show our awareness of our shared humanity. *Gemilut hasadim* invokes acts of kindness between people that require resources, time, energy, and compassion. They are easy to do, by kids as well as grownups, and if our world were filled with more acts of *gemilut hasadim*, it would indeed be a happier place.

The phrase *gemilut hasadim* consists of two words — *gemilut* and *hasadim* (*hesed*). *Hesed* can be understood in relation to the idea of *mitzvah*. The word *mitzvah* is usually translated as “commandment,” something we are obligated to do. For example, one might be obligated in *bikkur holim* (visiting the sick). However, one can choose to visit the sick with *hesed*. For example, one can make a simple visit or one could bring a magazine or a special treat and make sure the patient is comfortable. The latter scenario demonstrates acting with *hesed*. A further example, one can visit a house of mourning out of obligation but one can also act with *hesed* by bringing a meal for the mourners and/or help organize a *minyán* so they can say *kaddish*. Acting with *hesed* means giving one’s time, resources, skills, and self.



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Description of Activities

1. Read aloud to the students “Two Stories of Kindness.”
2. Ask students:
 - a. What did you feel when you heard those stories? (warm and fuzzy, good, maybe even a little sad, curious why we don’t do these things more naturally/often)
 - b. While the details of these stories are different, what is similar about them? (people going out of their way for someone else; anonymity, yet also done with other people in community; not doing it because they wanted recognition, even though they ultimately received it)
 - c. Both of these stories were in the news. What makes them newsworthy? Are they stories of heroes or just common people doing good? Why or why not?
 - d. Are there aspects of this story that resonate with you as possible to do yourself? What would you have done, for example, if someone asked you to attend the funeral?
 - e. What term would you use to describe these types of actions? (kindness, community building, paying attention, generosity, above and beyond, altruistic)
3. Explain the difference between *mitzvah* and *hesed*.
4. Define *Gemilut*
 - a. Explain that, in Hebrew, the root ג-מ-ל (gimel-mem-lamed) means “reciprocal acts” or “to recompense”
 - b. Instruct students: turn to the person next to you. First person, scratch the second’s back. Now the second scratches the first.
 - i. That back scratching was reciprocal.
 - ii. It means that you can do for me and I can do for you. And it can feel good for both of us.
 - c. Judaism does not believe that we should treat others in a way that is “quid pro quo” – meaning, I ONLY do for you IF you do for me. Rather, the Talmud teaches that, if you do service and good deeds in this world, you will have a reward in *this world* (Shabbat 127a).
 - d. Jewish tradition is in favor of doing things for others that might lead to reward as well.
 - e. Ask: Will that reward necessarily be monetary? Or are there other kinds of rewards?
 - i. We may feel good about ourselves – and that is ok!
 - ii. We may get a reputation as being a kind person – and that is ok!
 - iii. Other people may treat us more kindly – and that is ok!



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- f. Service does not need to be selfless; we can honor both our want to help and our want to feel good.
 - g. Consider presenting one of the following quotes about *gemilut hasadim*.
 - i. When we put together “Ligmol” and “Hesed” – it is acts that cause love – certainly they cause love in others, and even more importantly, they awaken love in us (Rabbi Ed Feld, quoted in *God Was in This Place & I Did Not Know* by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner)
 - ii. Note: it may be easy to do *gemilut hasadim* with those people we like, but it is also important to “act with kindness both with he who deserves it and also he who does not deserve it” (Shlomo ibn Gabirol, *Mivhar Hapeninim*, quoted in *Raising a Mensch* by Shelley Kapnek Rosenberg)
5. *Gemilut Hasadim* is NOT the same as *Tzedakah*
- a. Explain: *Tzedakah* is the requirement to give money.
 - b. Ask: Which would you think the rabbis would think is more important: *Gemilut Hasadim* or *Tzedakah*?
 - c. Ask for a volunteer to offer an argument for each side (you don’t have to agree necessarily with your side)
 - d. The rabbis struggled with this too – but came down clearly on which they thought was better.
 - e. Break into groups of three.
 - f. Give each student a copy of the sheet “*Gemilut Hasadim v Tzedakah.*” Allow them to read it together for 5-10 minutes.
6. *Gemilut Hasadim* or *Tzedakah*? A Game
- a. Have all participants stand up.
 - b. Designate one side of the room “*Gemilut Hasadim*” and the other side “*Tzedakah.*”
 - c. Read the following bullet points aloud and have students go to the side they think best describes the scenario. Ask students why they went to their chosen locations.

Gemilut Hasadim or *Tzedakah*? Scenarios

- ❖ Giving money at Hanukkah because you have to because it’s your family’s designated night of giving
- ❖ Giving money when you see someone at the store is fumbling for \$3
- ❖ Giving a granola bar to a homeless person that is in your backpack when you walk by



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- ❖ Looking a person in the eye and saying hello when you walk by
- ❖ Donating a toy for Toys for Tots
- ❖ Attending a funeral
- ❖ Letting someone go ahead of you in line at the bus stop
- ❖ Helping an elderly person with the door
- ❖ Bringing cookies to a friend who is feeling sad
- ❖ Bringing a meal to a family who had a new baby and has no other family in town

7. My *Gemilut Hasadim* Commitments

- a. Return to *Al Shlosha Devarim*: The rabbis teach that the world exists because of three things: Torah, *avodah* (worship), and *gemilut hasadim*.” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:2). Knowing what you know now about *gemilut hasadim*, why do you think the rabbis thought it was so important that the whole world relied on its existence?
- b. Ask: What does it look like in a world where people practice *gemilut hasadim* regularly? What does it feel like?
- c. Explain: In order to help create a world like that, we are going to make some personal *gemilut hasadim* commitments.
- d. Give each student a copy of “My *Gemilut Hasadim* Commitments”
 - i. If Shabbat, give students stickers so they can identify three commitments they will make.
 - ii. If not Shabbat, students can use pens or markers to identify their commitments.
- e. After selecting their three commitments, students share with a partner or with the group.
- f. Encourage students to post these commitments in a prominent place and check in with them occasionally.
- g. Challenge students to do an act of *hesed* before going to sleep at night and see how it feels.