

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

One of the most striking features about Judaism in comparison with, say, Christianity or Islam, is that it is impossible to answer the question: Who is the central character of the drama of faith? In both of the other Abrahamic monotheisms the answer is obvious. In Judaism, it is anything but. Is it Abraham, the founder of the covenantal family? Is it Jacob, who gave his name Israel to our people and its land? Moses, the liberator and lawgiver? David, the greatest of Israel's kings? Solomon, the builder of the Temple and the author of its literature of wisdom? Isaiah, the poet laureate of hope? And among women there is a similar richness and diversity.

It is as if the birth of monotheism -- the uncompromising unity of the creative, revelatory and redemptive forces at work in the universe -- created space for the full diversity of the human condition to emerge. So Abraham, whose life draws to its close in this week's Parsha, is an individual rather than an archetype. Neither Isaac nor Jacob -- nor anyone else for that matter -- is quite like him. And what strikes us is the sheer serenity of the end of his life. In a series of vignettes, we see him, wise and forward-looking, taking care of the future, tying up the loose ends of a life of deferred promises.

First, he makes the first acquisition of a plot in the land he has been assured will one day belong to his descendants. Then, leaving nothing to chance, he arranges a wife for Isaac, the son he knows will be heir to the covenant.

Astonishingly, he remains full of vigour and takes a new wife, by whom he has six children. Then, to avoid any possible contest over succession or inheritance, he gives all six gifts and then sends them away before he dies. Finally we read of his demise, the most serene description of death in the Torah: "Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age,

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by Itzy and Ruchie Weisberg

an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people." (Gen. 25:8)

One is almost tempted to forget how much heartache he has suffered in his life: the wrenching separation from "his father's house," the conflicts and aggravations of his nephew Lot, the two occasions on which he has to leave the land because of famine, both of which cause him to fear for his life; the long drawn-out wait for a son, the conflict between Sarah and Hagar, and the double trial of having to send Ishmael away and seemingly almost to lose Isaac also.

Somehow we sense in Abraham the beauty and power of a faith that places its trust in God so totally that there is neither apprehension nor fear. Abraham is not without emotion. We sense it in his anguish at the displacement of Ishmael and his protest against the apparent injustice of the destruction of Sodom. But he places himself in God's hands. He does what is incumbent on him to do, and he trusts God to do what He says He will do. There is something sublime about his faith.

Yet the Torah -- even in this week's Parsha, after the supreme trial of the Binding of Isaac -- gives us a glimpse of the continuing challenge to his faith. Sarah has died. Abraham has nowhere to bury her. Time after time, God has promised him the land: as soon as he arrives in Canaan we read, 'The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land"' (Gen. 12:7).

Then in the next chapter after he has separated from Lot, God says "Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you" (Gen. 13:17). And again two chapters later, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it" (Gen. 15:7).

And so on, seven times in all. Yet now Abraham owns not one square inch in which to bury his wife. This sets the scene for one of the most complex encounters in Bereishit, in which Abraham negotiates for the right to buy a field and a cave.

It is impossible in a brief space to do justice to the undertones of this fascinating exchange. Here is how it opens: "Then Abraham rose up from before his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, 'I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead.' The Hittites replied to Abraham, 'Hear us, my lord. You are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs.

None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead." (Genesis 23:3-6)

Abraham signals his relative powerlessness. He may be wealthy. He has large flocks and herds. Yet he lacks the legal right to own land. He is "an alien and a stranger." The Hittites, with exquisite diplomacy, reply with apparent generosity but deflect his request. By all means, they say, bury your dead, but for that, you do not need to own land. We will allow you to bury her, but the land will remain ours. Even then they do not commit themselves. They use a double negative: "None of us will refuse..." It is the beginning of an elaborate minuet. Abraham, with a politeness to equal theirs, refuses to be sidetracked: "Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. He said to them, 'If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you.'" (Genesis 23:7-9)

He takes their vague commitment and gives it sharp definition. If you agree that I may bury my dead, then you must agree that I should be able to buy the land in which to do so. And if you say no one will refuse me, then surely you can have no objection to persuading the man who owns the field I wish to buy.

Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. "No, my lord," he said. "Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead."

Again, an elaborate show of generosity that is nothing of the kind. Three times Ephron said, "I give it to you," yet he did not mean it, and Abraham knew he did not mean it.

Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land and he said to Ephron in their hearing, "Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there." Ephron answered Abraham, "Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between me and you? Bury your dead."

Far from giving the field away, Ephron is insisting on a vastly inflated price, while seeming to dismiss it as a mere trifle: "What is that between me and you?" Abraham immediately pays the price, and the field is finally his.

What we see in this brief but beautifully nuanced passage is the sheer vulnerability of Abraham. For all that the local townsmen seem to pay him deference, he is entirely at their mercy. He has to use all his negotiating skill, and in the end he must pay a large sum for a small piece of land. It all seems an impossibly long way from the vision God has painted for him of the entire country one day becoming a home for his descendants. Yet

Abraham is content. The next chapter begins with the words: "Abraham was now old and well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed him in all things." (Genesis 24:1)

That is the faith of an Abraham. The man promised as many children as the stars of the sky has one child to continue the covenant. The man promised the land "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18) has acquired one field and a tomb. But that is enough. The journey has begun. Abraham knows "It is not for you to complete the task." He can die content.

One phrase shines through the negotiation with the Hittites. They acknowledge Abraham, the alien and stranger, as "a prince of God in our midst." The contrast with Lot could not be greater. Recall that Lot had abandoned his distinctiveness. He had made his home in Sodom. His daughters had married local men. He "sat in the gate" (Genesis 19:1) of the town implying that he had become one of the elders or judges. Yet when he resisted the people who were intent on abusing his visitors, they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge!" (Gen. 19:9).

Lot, who assimilated, was scorned. Abraham, who fought and prayed for his neighbours but maintained his distance and difference, was respected. So it was then. So it is now. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. Non-Jews disrespect Jews who disrespect Judaism.

So, at the end of his life, we see Abraham, dignified, satisfied, serene. There are many types of hero in Judaism, but few as majestic as the man who first heard the call of God and began the journey we still continue. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* ©2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust [rabbisacks.org](http://rabbisacks.org)

### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

“**M**y lord hearken to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me.” (Genesis 23:14) A significant part of this Torah portion deals with Abraham's purchase of the Hebron grave-site from the Hittites in order to bury Sarah, his beloved wife. In painstaking detail, the text describes how the patriarch requests to buy the grave, how the Hittites wish him to take it for free, and – when Efron the Hittite finally agrees to make it a sale – he charges Abraham the inflated and outlandish sum of four hundred silver shekels. The Midrash seems perplexed: why expend so much ink and parchment – the entire chapter 23 of the book of Genesis – over a Middle-Eastern souk sale? Moreover, what is the significance in the fact that the very first parcel of land in Israel acquired by a Jew happens to be a grave-site? And finally, how can we explain the irony of the present

day Israeli-Palestinian struggle over grave-sites – the Ma'arat HaMakhpela in Hebron where our matriarchs and patriarchs are buried and Joseph's grave-site in Shekhem – which were specifically paid for in the Bible by our patriarchs?

In order to understand our biblical portion, it is important to remember that throughout the ancient world – with the single exception of Athens – the only privilege accorded a citizen of any specific country was the 'right' of burial, as every individual wanted his body to ultimately merge with the soil of his familial birthplace. Abraham insists that he is a stranger as well as a resident (*ger toshav*) of Het; he lives among, but is not one of, the Hittites. Abraham is a proud Hebrew; he refuses the 'right' of burial and demands to pay – even if the price is exorbitant – for the establishment of a separate Hebrew cemetery. Sarah's separate grave-site symbolizes her separate and unique identity. Abraham wants to ensure that she dies as a Hebrew and not a Hittite.

Interestingly, the Torah uses the same verb (*kikha*) to describe Abraham's purchase of a grave-site and to derive that a legal engagement takes place when the groom gives the bride a ring (or a minimum amount of money).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps our tradition is suggesting that marriage requires a husband to take ultimate responsibility for his wife – especially in terms of securing her separate and unique identity – even beyond her life and into her grave.

This parsha reminds me of two poignant stories. First, when I was a very young rabbi, one of the first "emergency" questions I received was from an older woman leaning on a young Roman Catholic priest for support. She tearfully explained that her husband – who had died just a few hours earlier – was in need of a Jewish burial place. He had converted to Catholicism prior to having married her, and agreed that their children would be raised as Catholics. The Roman Catholic priest was, in fact, their son and she had never met any member of her husband's Jewish family. Even though they lived as Catholics during thirty- five years of their married life, his final deathbed wish had been to be buried in a Jewish cemetery....

Second, when my good and beloved friend Zalman Bernstein z'l was still living in America and beginning his return to Judaism, he asked me to find him a grave-site in the Mount of Olives cemetery. With the help of the Chevra Kadisha (Sacred Fellowship) of Jerusalem, we set aside a plot. When he inspected it, however, he was most disappointed: "You cannot see the Temple Mount," he shouted, in his typical fashion. I attempted to explain calmly that after 120 years, he either wouldn't be able to see anything anyway, or he would be able to see everything no matter where his body lay. "You don't understand," he countered. "I made a mess of my life so far and did not communicate to my

children the glories of Judaism. The grave is my future and my eternity. Perhaps, when my children come to visit me there, if they would be able to see the holiest place in the world, the Temple Mount, they will be inspired by the Temple and come to appreciate what I could not adequately communicate to them while I was alive..."

For each individual, their personal grave-site represents the past and the future. Where and how individuals choose to be buried speaks volumes about how they lived their past lives and the values they aspired to. Similarly, for a nation, the grave-sites of its founders and leaders represent the past and reveal the signposts of the highs and lows in the course of the nation's history. The way a nation regards its grave-sites and respects its history will determine the quality of its future.

Indeed, the nation that chooses to forget its past has abdicated its future, because it has erased the tradition of continuity which it ought have transmitted to the future; the nation that does not properly respect the grave-sites of its founding patriarchs will not have the privilege of hosting the lives of their children and grandchildren. Perhaps this is why the Hebrew word, *kever*, literally a grave, is likewise used in rabbinical literature for womb. And the Hebrew name *Rvkh* (Rebecca), the wife of Isaac who took Sarah's place as the guiding matriarch, is comprised of the same letters as *hkvr*, the grave and/or the womb, the future which emerges from the past. Is it then any wonder that the first parcel of land in Israel purchased by the first Hebrew was a grave-site, and that the fiercest battles over ownership of the land of Israel surround the graves of our founding fathers and mothers? And perhaps this is why our Sages deduce the proper means for engagement from Abraham's purchase of a grave-site for Sarah – Jewish familial future must be built upon the life style and values of our departed matriarchs and patriarchs. The grave is also the womb; the past is mother to the future. ©2024 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**J**ewish tradition has always viewed the family as being an important component in choosing a proper mate. Though family certainly cannot be the only criterion, it certainly is an important one. The rabbis taught us that the speech and language of a child is always a reflection of the speech and language of the father and mother of that child. People who are raised in serene and loving home environments, homes of tradition and Jewish values usually grow up to be serene, self-confident and proud Jews.

Children who are raised in dysfunctional family environments have great hurdles to overcome to achieve self-worth and a productive life. Both the Canaanites and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kiddushin 2a-b

Avraham's family in Aram were pagans. But Avraham's family had the stability and a minimum code of morality, traits that were lacking in the more permissive and licentious Canaanite society. This was the curse of the Canaanite society and Avraham felt that this factor would be impossible to ever truly overcome.

Eliezer, the loyal servant of Avraham, adds another requirement to the search for the mate of Yitzchak. Innate kindness and goodness and the willingness to sacrifice one's own comforts for the sake of others is part of the makeup of Yitzchak. He was raised in a house where concern for the welfare of others was the everyday norm. A husband and wife have to be on the same page when it comes to this issue.

I recall that in my years as a rabbi there were husbands and wives that would bring to me money to distribute to the needy of the community and caution me not to allow their respective spouse to become aware that they had done so. Sometimes there were halachic or overriding family issues present that even forced me not to accept the donation. But I was always saddened by such situations. Eliezer's testing of Rivkah was correctly done in order to spare the couple possibly ruinous disputes in their future life together. And since in the house of Avraham and Sarah kindness of spirit and generosity of action and behavior were the fundamental norms of their family life, only a spouse that also espoused those ideals could bring to Yitzchak happiness and serenity.

The Canaanite society that tolerated and even exalted the societies of Sodom and Amorah could not produce a suitable mate for Yitzchak. The Torah tells us that Yitzchak loved Rivkah. Love is based on character traits and shared values and not only on physical beauty and attraction. That is what makes its achievement so elusive for so many. ©2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**D**escriptions of Sarah's length of years and Rebecca's lineage teach vital life lessons.

Live life fully. The first is drawn from the summation of Sarah's years: "Sarah's lifetime – the span of Sarah's life – came to one hundred years and twenty years and seven years" (Genesis 23:1).

One wonders, why the repetition of years? Why not simply say that Sarah lived to 127 years? Classical commentaries suggest that at one hundred, Sarah was as beautiful as at twenty. At twenty, she was as innocent as at seven (Bereishit Rabbah 58:1).

But perhaps the reverse can also be suggested. The years are mentioned sequentially to teach that Sarah lived every stage of her life to the fullest. At one

hundred, she lived fully as a one hundred-year-old. At twenty as a twenty-year-old. At seven, as a seven-year-old. The message of this phrasing is that while the former interpretation paints a picture of seeking to be in a different phase of life, the latter challenges us to be content and find fulfillment in whatever stage of life we are living.

Beware of jealousy. We learn a second life lesson from the lineage of Rebecca: "She [Rebecca] replied: 'I am the daughter of Betuel, the son of Milcah, who she bore to Nachor'" (Genesis 24:24).

Here, Rebecca was responding to the query of Abraham's emissary about her lineage. In fact, Rebecca's pedigree was elaborated upon – almost anti-climatically – after the Binding of Isaac narrative (22:20–24).

The listing there seems to contrast Abraham and Nachor's life. Abraham, the pathfinder of a new faith, the absolute believer in God, struggled to have a child with Sarah. And even after the long-anticipated birth, the miracle child, Isaac, almost dies in the Akeidah story. Nachor, on the other hand, appears to have a much easier time, as reflected in the quick, simple mention of his eight children with Milcah.

In a word, Nachor is easy to envy. Children are presented as being born easily to him, living in harmony, without struggles.

And yet, as the story in our narrative unfolds, we learn that Nachor's family was complex. Most notably, from Nachor came Laban, Rebecca's brother, with all of his trickery and terrible behavior (29:23; 31:7). In fact, the Passover Haggadah suggests that Laban was more dangerous than Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

From this contrast we learn that while it is easy to be jealous of someone else, beware. A closer look at that person's whole story inevitably reveals complications. As my dear friend and mentor, the late Stanley Langer, said, "When you're jealous of someone, you can't buy into just a part of their story; you have to take into account their whole story."

Live life fully, beware of jealousy: important matriarchal teachings. ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

#### **ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT**

## **Onen**

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**W**hen a person loses a close relative (for whom he is required to mourn) and the relative has not yet been buried, the mourner is called an *onen*. An *onen* is exempt from performing positive commandments (*mitzvot aseh*) such as praying, putting on *tefillin*, and reciting *Keriat Shema*. However, he may not transgress any negative commandments (*mitzvot lo ta'aseh*).

*Acharonim* disagree as to his status when it comes to commandments that have both a positive and a negative component. For example, is an *onen* exempt from destroying his *chametz* before Pesach? On the one hand, this is a mitzva which requires taking positive action. On the other hand, destroying the *chametz* is also done to make sure that one will not transgress the negative prohibition of owning *chametz* (commonly referred to as *bal yera'eh u-bal yimatzei*).

An additional question pertains to an *onen* as well. May an *onen* choose to be stringent and fulfill the positive commandments from which he is exempt?

The answers to these questions depend upon the reason an *onen* is exempt from performing these. If the exemption is meant to give honor to the deceased and show that nothing else is important to the mourner at this point, then even if he wishes to perform these *mitzvot* he would not be permitted to do so. However, if the reason for the exemption is to enable the mourner to take care of the burial, then if he is able to arrange for someone else to take care of it (such as the local *chevra kadisha*), he would be permitted to perform these *mitzvot*. Alternatively, if the exemption is based on the principle that one who is already involved in performing one mitzva is exempt from performing another one (*ha-osek be-mitzva patur min ha-mitzva*), then if the mourner feels able to perform both *mitzvot*, he would be allowed to do so.

In Parshat Chayei Sarah, Avraham was an *onen* before Sarah was buried. Yet not only did he acquire a grave for her, he also purchased the field where the cave was situated, thus fulfilling the mitzva of *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (Settling the Land of Israel). Perhaps we may conclude that just as Avraham involved himself in additional *mitzvot* even while he was an *onen*, so too any *onen* who wishes may choose to perform the positive commandments from which he is exempt. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

### RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

## RavFrand

*Transcribed by David Twersky*

*Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman*

It says in the beginning of Parshas Chayei Sarah, "Sarah died in Kiryat-Arba which is Hebron in the land of Canaan; and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her." (Bereshis 23:2). The sefer Me'orei Ohr makes an interesting observation. In the entire Torah, there are only two hespedim (eulogies): One for Sora Imeinu and one for Yaakov Avinu. When Miriam died, a hesped is not mentioned. Likewise, when Aharon Hakohen died, the Torah says that "the entire House of Israel cried" but there is no mention of a hesped. Similarly, the Torah does not mention hespedim for Avraham or Yitzchak when they died. And again, although it says that the "House of Israel cried" for Moshe, there is no mention of a hesped.

Apparently, it was not such a common practice in Biblical times that hespedim were made when a person passed away. What then was so special about Sora that Avraham formally eulogized her?

A famous Gemara in Sanhedrin discusses whether hespedim are primarily for the honor of the living or for the honor of those who have departed. Clearly, in a hesped we speak of the fine attributes of the deceased -- but why do we do that? Is it to honor the dead or perhaps it is because when people hear the hespedim, they become inspired to live more meritorious lives themselves? As Shlomo says, "It is preferable to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting." (Koheles 7:2).

At funerals, we hear things about people that we don't necessarily know about them. Invariably, when I walk out of a funeral after hearing the hespedim, I think to myself "You know, I never knew that about this person." The purpose of hesped is to inform the audience who this deceased person was. Chazal say that the hesped that Avraham said for Sora was the chapter "A woman of valor who can find?" (Mishlei 31:10-31). That was the hesped, because if there was one defining attribute of Sora, it was that "Behold, she is in the tent." (Bereshis 18:26). She was extremely tzanua (private). Therefore, we can assume that people really did not know much about Sora. It was not until her hesped that Avraham Avinu let the world know who she was.

The author of Me'orei Ohr cites an incident involving Rav Yeruchem Levovitz. He was once in a shtetel and he heard that an old woman who lived by herself passed away. He was told that there probably would not be a minyan at her levaya. Even though Rav Yeruchem didn't know the woman, he figured that this was somewhat akin to a mes mitzvah (because no one would be at her funeral). Therefore, even though he didn't know her, the great Mirer Mashgiach went to this lady's levaya. To everyone's surprise, there was a large gathering of people there. It turned out to be a tremendous levaya and even people from other cities came.

Initially, people could not figure out why so many people came. It eventually emerged that unbeknownst to almost anyone, this woman did acts of chessed for dozens and dozens of people. Everyone, however, thought that "I am the only one for whom she does this." So everyone said "She was so good to us, she would take care of us, she would give us money and give us food... so I need to go to her levaya." Rav Yeruchem Levovitz -- the great Mashgiach -- did not want to let this event pass without sharing the mussar message within it to his yeshiva talmidim (students) in the Mir.

He returned to the yeshiva and told them: It is the way of people to not hide things from the public that are not valuable. A person's everyday silverware and dishes are never hidden away in a closet under lock and

key. However, the fine china is stored behind the breakfront. The crystal gets hidden away even further and the gold is kept in the vault. We don't want anyone to see that.

We hide the things that are most dear and precious to us. The most precious things to this woman were the things she did for other people. As a result of that, she hid them, like people hide gold and silver. This is what Rav Yeruchem learned from that story of the old woman in the shtetel.

That is why Avraham Avinu felt the necessity to eulogize Sora. Everybody knew Avraham. "You are a prince of Elokim in our midst..." (Bereshis 23:6). Yitzchak was also well known. When Yosef died "he was the ruler throughout the Land of Egypt." Aharon and Moshe's greatness were known throughout the "entire House of Israel." Who needed to, and in fact, who would be able to say hespedim, on such great and well-known individuals?

However, Sora Imeinu's greatness, because of her incredible tznius and privacy, was not as well known. Therefore, Avraham Avinu had to let the world know who she really was.

As far as the fact that Yaakov Avinu was also eulogized, the Me'orei Ohr explains that this was because Yaakov Avinu led a troubled life. He had to run away from his brother who wanted to kill him. He had to put up with a cheating father-in-law for twenty-plus years. He had the aggravation of the apparent loss of his beloved son, Yosef. Everyone looked at Yaakov Avinu and thought "Nebach, a troubled life." That is why, this author suggests, there was also a necessity to eulogize Yaakov.

I think that perhaps there may be another reason why they said a hesped for Yaakov. The pasuk says "They came to Goren Ha'atad..." (Bereshis 50:10) The Gemara says that all the kings of Canaan took their crowns and put them on the coffin of Yaakov Avinu. Who was the hesped for? In that case, the hesped was for the benefit of the nations of the world. The "Jews" there were just Yaakov's family, who already knew who he was. The purpose was so that everyone else should know who he was. In either event, there was a special necessity for saying a hesped in Yaakov's case.

But the bottom line is that hespedim are needed when there is a special reason to let the world at large know who this person was. With Avraham, Yitzchak, Moshe, Aharon, and Dovid, there was not such a need. It was the same with the other Matriarchs. But the world needed to know about Sora: "A woman of valor who can find?" because of her exceptional attribute of tzniyus / privacy. ©2024 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org

**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## One or Two Commands?

**O**ur parasha introduced us to Lavan, Rivka's brother. Throughout the parasha, we see that

Lavan was greedy and sought to enrich himself while marrying off his sister. His entire conversation with Eliezer was centered on prolonging Rivka's time with her family at the expense of Eliezer who had been sent to find a wife for Yitzchak. We saw in Eliezer's carefully worded account of his encounter with Rivka at the Well, that it was necessary for Eliezer to change aspects of his report in order to limit the miracle in Lavan's eyes while at the same time acknowledging that Rivka's marriage to Yitzchak was pre-ordained by Hashem.

The Torah states, "Her brother and mother said, 'Let the maiden remain with us a year or ten (months); then she will go.' He said to them, 'Do not delay me now that Hashem has made my journey successful. Send me, and I will go to my master.' And they said, 'Let us call the maiden and ask her decision.' They called Rivka and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' And she said, 'I will go.' So they escorted Rivka, their sister, and her nurse, as well as Avraham's servant and his men. They blessed Rivka and said to her, 'Our sister, may you come to be thousands of myriads, and may your offspring inherit the gate of its foes.'"

The words, "a year or ten months," is written literally as, "days or ten." The translation that was used is found in Rashi and many other mephorshim, based on Gemara Ketuvot (57b). According to the Gemara, her brother and mother requested this time to provide a dowry before her marriage. Rashi translated the word "days" as we have seen in other contexts in the Torah as "a year." Rashi does not leave the understanding as "days," as this would mean that her family was asking for "days," and if that was unacceptable then a larger amount, "ten months." This must be understood to mean that Rivka's family was asking for a full year or at least ten months, which would delay Eliezer indefinitely or cause him to return a second time to bring Rivka with him. If Eliezer had needed to return, he would not have been able to return without bringing additional gifts.

Eliezer countered their request by reminding them of Hashem's part in this arrangement. Previously, after Eliezer had related his story, even with the changes to minimize the miraculous events of his meeting Rivka at the Well, it was clear to Rivka's brother and father that Eliezer's mission had been made successful by Hashem. Lavan and Betuel stated, "The matter stems from Hashem. We can say to you neither bad nor good. Here, Rivka is before you, take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son as Hashem has spoken." One could ask why Lavan and his mother appear to have second thoughts after acceptance had already been given. Perhaps the explanation of HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin can provide us with a satisfactory answer.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Avraham was well-known in the entire world as a rich man who had a special relationship with Hashem. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that there is a difference of opinion among the Rabbis as to the statement made by Lavan

and Betuel that, “The matter stems from Hashem.” Chazal asks “from where do we see that the matter stems – from Har HaMoriah.” The Rabanan say that the matter stems from “here and now”. Lavan and Betuel believed in the story that Eliezer told and the miracles that he presented that had come from Hashem. Even though they were pagans, they believed not only in their own gods but also in Hashem, only not as the only Supreme Being. When they agreed to let Rivka marry Avraham’s son, they did so because it was the Word of Hashem.

HaRav Sorotzkin explains that those who wish to say that the matter stemmed from Har HaMoriah explain that Yitzchak’s status changed at the Binding of Yitzchak. When Yitzchak was born, all the kings respected Avraham and all of their daughters envisioned being married to his son, Yitzchak. They knew that Avraham was blessed because he listened to Hashem and did all that was requested of him. When Lavan and Betuel said that they could not say “bad or good” about the match with Yitzchak, HaRav Sorotzkin suggests that there could be no “bad” in this marital arrangement, and then goes on to give us the “bad” which diminished the desire to marry Yitzchak. The kings of the world believed that Avraham had acted against the commandment of Hashem. They believed in the first commandment “take your son” but they did not believe in the second commandment, “do not send your hand on the lad.” Even though the people only heard about the first commandment from Avraham’s mouth, they believed that was true. And the second commandment which they also only heard from Avraham’s mouth, they did not believe. The people were disappointed in Avraham and believed that he would no longer be in Hashem’s good graces. They also believed that Yitzchak was destined to be a king in the Heavens and would, therefore, isolate himself in the mountains.

Only Avraham’s students and his close friends (Eliezer, Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre) believed in both commandments given to Avraham. They did not believe that Avraham went against Hashem, nor that Yitzchak should isolate himself on the mountains. They understood that he would live like all men and be the father of many children. They were willing to have their daughters marry Yitzchak. Even the Canaanites wished to have their daughters marry Yitzchak, not because he was a holy man, but because he was wealthy. But Avraham did not wish to have Yitzchak marry into those families. Only Avraham’s close relatives, descendants of his brother, Nachor, recognized the name of Hashem even though they worshipped idols. Yet his own family had many doubts about the holiness of Yitzchak due to his not being sacrificed. Only after they heard of the miracles that were performed for Avraham’s servant on behalf of Yitzchak, were they convinced of Yitzchak’s strong connection to Hashem. That, coupled with the wealth that Avraham still possessed, convinced them a

second time to desire a wedding to Yitzchak for Rivka.

It is much easier for us to understand Avraham’s special relationship with Hashem because we have the real story before us, and we are aware of both commands from Hashem. Our faith is not put to the test, and our knowledge of all the facts makes us aware of the mistakes of others. But faith demands that we recognize the truth even without all the facts. Had we been tested, would we have accepted Avraham’s true testimony? That is the question we all must ask. ©2024 Rabbi D. Levin

### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

“If the woman doesn’t want to come with you, you will be free of this oath of mine, but do not return my son there.” (Beraishis 24:8) Avraham entrusted his servant Eliezer with a crucial mission – finding a wife for his son Yitzchak. He instructed Eliezer to go to the place Avraham came from, and find a wife for his son from there, from his people. To ensure compliance, he asked Eliezer to swear that he would do as Avraham had requested.

Eliezer was willing, but asked Avraham what to do if the people would not send their daughter with him back to Canaan. Should he bring Yitzchak to her? Avraham replied that in such a case, Eliezer would be free of his promise to marry off Yitzchak, but under no circumstances was he to bring Yitzchak out of Canaan.

Rashi tells us that in Eliezer’s question was a veiled reference to Yitzchak marrying his own daughter. If the girl refused to return, Eliezer would be free of his oath, perhaps opening up that possibility. Avraham told him it was not possible, but if Avraham felt so strongly that this needed to happen, to the point of making Eliezer swear, why would he give Eliezer an opportunity to make the oath null and void? Why tell him how he could get out of it? Perhaps Eliezer would exploit that loophole for his own benefit!

And even if we were to suggest that Eliezer was too principled to do so, when he retold the story to Besuel and Lavan, he let them know how to end the shidduch as well! He told them that all they had to do was refuse, and Avraham’s oath on Eliezer would go away. Why give them the opportunity to ruin the match?

We’d like to suggest Avraham knew this would not cause any harm. Who makes Shidduchim? Hashem! If Eliezer, or even Lavan, tried to manipulate things to prevent Yitzchak and Rivka from getting married, but Hashem had decreed the match, it would happen regardless. They would have their chance to be part of the marriage. If they opted to try to thwart it, they would merely lose the reward, but not be able to stop it.

What would happen if the girl wouldn’t come with Eliezer? The Ramban writes, “Then Hashem will find the proper match for Yitzchak.” The Ohr HaChaim adds that the part of the oath to marry off Yitzchak would go away,

but the prohibition of returning Yitzchak to the land outside of Canaan remained, since that was in his power.

The lesson is that we are supposed to do what we can, but know that our efforts will not be able to change Hashem's plans. They will happen with or without us. We just get the chance to choose to be part of them. We are judged for our choices, not our results.

Even Lavan understood the futility of human bechira against Hashem's will, as he later told Yaakov, "I have power to harm you, but Hashem has said [not to.]" Avraham, in telling Eliezer how to "get out" of the oath, was teaching us that Hashem is in control of everything, and if He wills it to be, no man can do anything about it.

*R' Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld z"l had a dream one night. He dreamed that if he bought a specific lottery number, it would win. When he awoke, he thought about buying the ticket.*

*"I have one lira to spend," he thought. "I can either use it to buy food for today, or I can buy the lottery ticket. Hashem gives me my parnasa every day. I must only use the money for today, and tomorrow He will provide again."*

*Sure enough, the number he dreamed of won. Someone asked him if he felt bad about not buying the ticket. "Of course not," he replied. "I did what the Torah tells me I was supposed to do with my money. I am happy I did the right thing and have no regrets." © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

#### **RABBI AVI SHAFRAN**

### **Cross-Currents**

**R**abi Akiva, the Midrash (Beraishis Rabbah, 58:3) recounts, once sought to awaken some students who were nodding off by quoting the opening pasuk of the parsha: "And the life of Sarah was one hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years, the years of the life of Sarah" (Bereishis, 23:1).

"Why," he asked, "was it that Esther ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces? Because Esther, who was the descendant of Sarah, who lived one hundred and twenty-seven years, would rule over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces."

Many explanations of that strange juxtaposition have been offered. What occurs to me is that almost all that we know about Sarah is that she caused Hagar to flee from Avraham and Sarah's home and then, after the maidservant's return, banished her and her son Yishmael because of the latter's sinful actions (see Rashi ibid 21:9). Yishmael's character and tendencies, she feared, might come to influence Sarah's own child, Yitzchak.

Esther spent most of her life in a foreign environment, as queen of ancient Persia (and its 127 provinces). But she maintained her connection throughout with her cousin Mordechai and their faith. She was impervious to the influence of her surroundings.

Perhaps that was what Rabi Akiva's confounding comparison was meant to convey: that Sarah's alacrity and vigilance regarding Yitzchak provided her descendant Esther the ability to withstand the influence of her environment.

And it may be that Rabi Akiva's use of that thought as a literal "wake-up" call to the students was itself part of the lesson, namely that one has to be, as Sarah was, wide awake and fully aware of one's surroundings, lest their undesirable elements infiltrate his life, or that of those for whom he is responsible.  
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#### **RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ Z"l**

### **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**E**liezer arrives in Charan. Rivka gives him water to drink. The Torah states, "And she finished giving him to drink. And she said, 'Also for your camels I will draw water until they finish drinking'" (Genesis 24:19). Why does the Torah specify that she will "draw water" rather than writing, "I will give the camels to drink"?

The great Spanish Rabbi, the Abarbanel, tells us that Rivka was meticulously careful not to say anything that would be untrue. Therefore, she said she would draw water, as if to say, "I don't know for sure if they will drink or not, but I will draw water for them. If they want to, they can drink."

Rabbi Shmuel Walkin adds that we see here how careful we should be to keep away from saying anything untrue. He cites as an example Rabbi Refael of Bershid who was always very careful to refrain from saying anything that was untrue. One day he entered his home while it was raining outside. When asked if it was still raining, he replied, "When I was outside it was raining." He did not want to mislead in case it had stopped raining from the time he entered his home.

This may seem to be ridiculous or inconsequential. However, if a person is careful with keeping to the truth in such instances, he will definitely be careful in more important matters. On the other hand, if a person is careless with the truth, he can even be tempted to lie in major ways! *Dvar Torah Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2019 Rabbi K. Packouz z"l*

