



Partners In Torah
San Diego Study Guide

תשפ"ג Chayei Sarah

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Partners In Torah San Diego

Mission Statement:

Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Welcome.

Thank you for coming.

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.

Yitzchak was 40 years old, and it was time for him to get married and continue the legacy that Avraham had begun. Avraham then lived in Canaan; an area inhabited by the descendants of Noach's grandson Canaan. Because Noach had cursed Canaan, none of its women were eligible to marry the son of Avraham, the person whom Hashem said would be the source of blessing. Avraham thus needed to turn to his family to find a wife for his son.

Although Avraham's family comprised a number of scoundrels (specifically, his nephew Betuel and Betuel's son Lavan,), the females in Avraham's family were a totally different story. Rivka (Betuel's daughter) and Leah and Rachel (Lavan's daughters), were all perfectly righteous in spite of their evil fathers.

A certain holy spark lodged in the hearts of these women from birth, which gave them the fortitude and ability to defy everything that their fathers stood for. Where did this spark come from? They inherited it from Avraham's brother Haran, who was Sarah's father, Rivka's grandfather, and Leah and Rachel's great grandfather.

But how did *he* get it?

In relating the incident of Haran's demise, the Torah tells us (Genesis 11:28):

(כח) וַיָּמָת הָרָן עַל פְּנֵי תֵרַח אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדֹתוֹ בְּאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים

28) Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terach in the land of his birth Ur Kasdim.

Rashi quotes the Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 28:13) that explains why the Torah mentions that Haran died *during Terach's lifetime*.

(כח) על פני תרח אביו - בחיי אביו (ב"ר) ומ"א י"א שע"י אביו מת שקבל תרח על אברם בנו לפני נמרוד על שכתת את צלמיו והשליכו לכבשן האש והרן יושב ואומר בלבו אם אברם נוצח אני משלו ואם נמרוד נוצח אני משלו וכשניצל אברם אמרו לו להרן משל מי אתה אמר להם הרן משל אברם אני השליכוהו לכבשן האש ונשרף וזהו אור כשדים

28) *During his father's lifetime.* The Midrash reveals a deeper meaning; that it was actually **because** of his father Terach that Haran died. This is the story. Terach left Avraham in charge of his idol store one day, and came home to find all but the largest idol smashed to pieces. This large idol had a hammer and bowl of fine flour in its lap. Upon inquiry, Avraham told his father, "A woman brought a bowl of flour as a present to the idols. This sparked an argument between them, as each claimed, "I should get the present!" The largest idol took a hammer, smashed the other idols to pieces, and took the present for himself, as you can see."

Terach responded, "Avraham, you know that the idols can't speak! You know that they can't move! You did it yourself!" Avraham responded, "Dad, did you hear what you just said? They can't speak, they can't move? So why do you worship them?"

Terach became so incensed, that he turned his son over to Nimrod to have him killed. Nimrod worshipped fire, and gave Avraham the choice to either bow down to fire, or to be thrown into a burning furnace. This was Avraham's first test, and he chose to be thrown into the fire rather than to bow down to it.

Haran was undecided. He said to himself, "If Avraham survives the furnace, I am with him, and if he doesn't, I will be loyal to Nimrod." When Avraham was unaffected by the flames and could be seen walking around like nothing unusual was going on, Haran realized that Hashem was true and said, "I am with Avraham." With this, they threw him into the fire, but, he perished, since his belief in Hashem was not perfect like Avraham's. So,

*Terach, by turning Avraham over to Nimrod, caused Haran to die. Nevertheless, this is the secret to Haran's greatness, and why he merited to be the source of all four Matriarchs; **he gave up his life because of his belief in Hashem.***

After the *Akeida* – the Binding of Yitzchak – Hashem told Avraham that Rivka, Betual's daughter and Yitzchak's mate, was born. Avraham waited a few years until she became eligible for marriage, and now sought to bring the two together.

Avraham feared that if he went himself or sent Yitzchak to get her, Rivka's evil family would reject them out of hand because of their holiness. Rivka's family was everything but holy, and they would surely have been reviled by the holiness of Avraham or Yitzchak. Avraham therefore decided to send his loyal servant Eliezer, a Canaanite, to carry out the task.

Eliezer, who rebelled against his father Nimrod, was Nimrod's gift to Avraham after Avraham miraculously survived the fires of the furnace. Eliezer, seeing the truth of Avraham's G-d and the goodness of His ways, served Avraham faithfully for over 90 years, following his every command. He also absorbed all of Avraham's sterling character traits and became Avraham's foremost disciple, teaching Avraham's Torah to all who sought it. Eliezer was also in charge of all of Avraham's wealth, and Avraham trusted him implicitly. Eliezer's sole flaw was, that he was a descendant of Canaan, who received a curse from Noach.

Avraham made Eliezer swear that he would not take a wife for Yitzchak from the women of Canaan, but that instead, he must travel to Avraham's homeland, birthplace, and family. Despite Avraham's trust in Eliezer, he still made him swear to follow his instructions exactly because when one is bound by an oath, he has no choice but to fulfill his promise. Avraham did not want Eliezer to feel that he had any latitude in his mission. And, there was a good reason for this.

The Midrash informs us that Eliezer had a daughter whom he thought would make a suitable mate for Yitzchak. She was beautiful, and, most of all, she grew up in the house of Avraham Avinu. She absorbed all the lessons of Torah and kindness from her pious father and his outstanding teacher and mentor, Avraham. No other woman in the world had such credentials! “Why should I,” Eliezer thought, “have to travel to a faraway place to *possibly* come back with a suitable wife for Yitzchak, when there was perhaps an even better match for him right here?”

When Eliezer suggested the *shidduch* to Avraham, Avraham told him as gently but as firmly as possible that it was impossible. Because Eliezer’s daughter was a descendant of Canaan, a cursed nation, she is perforce, incompatible with Avraham’s child who is blessed. Because Avraham wanted Eliezer to be as objective as possible in finding the right wife for Yitzchak, he made Eliezer swear and told him that his (Eliezer’s) own daughter was not a candidate.

At this point, Eliezer asked Avraham (Genesis 24:5),

ה) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הָעֶבֶד אֲוִלִי לֹא תִאָּבֶה הָאִשָּׁה לְלָכֶת אַחֲרַי אֶל הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת הַהִשָּׁב
אָשִׁיב אֶת בְּנִךְ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יָצֵאתָ מִשָּׁם

“Perhaps the woman will not wish to follow me back here; shall I take your son back to the land from which you departed?”

Our Sages explain that in spite of Avraham having told Eliezer that his daughter was not a candidate, this question still emanated from Eliezer’s deep desire to have his daughter marry Yitzchak. He was secretly hoping that if the girl would not agree to leave her family and follow him home, his daughter would be better than nothing. Perhaps then she could marry Yitzchak.

Avraham responded, *“Be careful not to take my son there. Hashem will send his angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son Yitzchak from there. If the woman doesn’t want to follow you here, you are exempt from my oath, but, under no circumstances should you take my son there.”*

With this, Eliezer took ten camels and, the Midrash tells us, a document stating that Avraham had given all of his wealth to his son Yitzchak, making him very wealthy, and set out to Avraham’s birthplace, Aram Naharaim. Eliezer made record time, and, with Hashem’s help, miraculously made the three-day journey in a single day. He settled down that evening next to the town’s well outside the city and waited for the girls to come out to the well to draw water.

Eliezer knew that Yitzchak’s wife would have to be beautiful, smart, and have exemplary character. Additionally, to join Avraham Avinu’s household (the paradigm of חסד - *loving-kindness*), she would also have to excel in the quality of kindness. But how would he determine which girl was had the necessary qualities?

Eliezer left the decision up to Hashem, Whom he asked to show him the right girl by having her respond correctly to a sign that he would devise.

This was his prayer (24:12-14):

(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר יְדֹדְדִי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִרְהָם הַקָּרֵן נָא לְפָנַי הַיּוֹם וַעֲשֵׂה חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנָי

אַבְרָהָם:

(יג) הֲיֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹצֵב עַל עֵין הַמַּיִם וּבָנוֹת אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר יֵצְאוּ לְשָׂאֵב מַיִם

(יד) וְהָיָה הַנֶּעֱרָר אֲשֶׁר אֹמֵר אֵלֶיהָ הִטִּי נָא כַדָּד וְאֲשַׁתָּה וְאִמְרָה שְׂתֵה וְגַם גִּמְלִיד

אַשְׁקָה אֹתָהּ הַכֹּחֶת לְעִבְדִּי לְיִצְחָק וְבָה אִדַּע כִּי עָשִׂיתָ חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנָי

“Hashem, God of my master Abraham, may You so arrange it for me today that You do kindness with my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing at the spring of water and the local daughters come out to draw water. Let it be, that the maiden to whom I shall say, ‘Please tip your jug so I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will even water your camels,’ she

You will have designated for Your servant for Yitzchak, and may I know through her that You have done kindness with my master.”

In other words, “I will approach a girl, say the magic words, ‘Please tip your jug so I may drink,’ and if she responds, ‘Drink, and I will even water your camels,’ that will indicate to me that this is the right one.”

Yet the Sages find Eliezer’s methodology inappropriate. The Talmud (Taanit 4a) states:

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן : שלשה שאלו שלא כהוגן לשנים
השיבוהו כהוגן לאחד השיבוהו שלא כהוגן . ואלו הן : אליעזר עבד אברהם ושואל בן
קיש ויפתח הגלעדי אליעזר עבד אברהם דכתיב והיה הנערה אשר אמר אליה הטי נא
כדך וגוי יכול אפילו חיגרת אפילו סומא השיבו כהוגן ונזדמנה לו רבקה

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmeini said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Three asked inappropriately. Two of them Hashem answered appropriately, and to one Hashem did not. Who were they? Eliezer, Avraham’s servant, King Saul, and Yiftach the Giladi. Eliezer said, “Let it be that the maiden to whom I shall say, ‘Please tip over your jug so I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will even water your camels,’ she You will have designated for Your servant for Yitzchak” What if Hashem didn’t accept the charge, and the girl that responded correctly turned out to have a limp, or was blind, and Eliezer wouldn’t catch it?

Because of Avraham and Yitzchak’s merit, Hashem did respond appropriately to the charge, but the request was inappropriate. One is not allowed to shift his burden to Hashem and expect Him to respond with the desired outcome. It is like trying to force Hashem to do a miracle for him. One must do his due diligence to come up with the right answer to his problem.

Even before Eliezer finished his prayer, Rivka appeared with her jug on her shoulder. We are told that Rivka had never gone to draw water

before, but, because she needed to marry Yitzchak, today, Hashem made her go draw water for the first time. She also left the house before Eliezer had started praying to arrive in time for the end of his prayer.

She was the most beautiful of all the girls so Eliezer immediately focused on her. After she had finished filling her jug with water, Eliezer ran over to her and asked her for some water from her jug. Rivka immediately lowered her jug and gave him a drink. Not only that, she offered to water his camels as well.

Hashem had responded to Eliezer's requirement, and without question he had found the right girl. Avraham and Yitzchak's merit had carried the day.

As soon as Rivka completed her task, Eliezer ran over to her and gave her a gold nose ring and two bracelets to betroth her to Yitzchak. He then asked who her parents were, and if they had room for him to stay. Eliezer was pleasantly surprised to hear that she was from Avraham's family. Rivka's father *Nachor* was Avraham's brother, and Rivka's mother, Milka, was Avraham's niece from his brother Haran.

It was important for the Torah to describe at length the events of Eliezer's providentially finding the wife for Yitzchak. But what is highly unusual here is how, when Eliezer asks Rivka's parents' permission for her to marry Yitzchak, the Torah relates Eliezer's entire conversation with them. It describes in meticulous detail the entire story as Eliezer told it to them. The Torah never uses extra words. In the interest of brevity, the Torah could have just said, "And Eliezer told Betuel the details of how Hashem helped him find Rivka," and we would have understood what he meant. Why in this instance did the Torah spell out each detail as Eliezer repeated the story to Betuel and Rivka's family? Of the 105 verses in this week's portion, almost two thirds of them describe the details of Eliezer's efforts to find the wife for Yitzchak, the longest narrative in the entire

Torah. Our Sages are surprised by this, and Rabbi Acha answered with the following.

א"ר אחא : יפה שיחתן של עבדי בתי אבות מתורתן של בניים פרשתו של אליעזר
שנים וגי דפים הוא אומרה ושונה ושרץ מגופי תורה ואין דמו מטמא כבשרו אלא
מריבוי המקרא

Even the mundane speech of the forefathers' servants is more precious to Hashem than essentials of the Torah. Here, the story of Eliezer finding a wife for Yitzchak takes up two to three columns in the Torah, and the laws of a what is spiritually pure and impure are only derived from an inference.

We know that the Torah is neither a story book nor a history book. It is a book of lessons and instructions from Hashem to us on how to be better people. What Rav Acha is really saying is that the Torah has elaborated on this event because there is much to be learned even from the mundane talk of Eliezer, Avraham's servant.

Here is a sampling of some of the lessons that our Sages teach us from Eliezer's mission.

One of the most noteworthy elements in Eliezer's recounting the story to Rivka's family is the reverence and respect that Eliezer had for Avraham Avinu. He begins his conversation by introducing himself. "I'm Eliezer, the servant of Avraham." His whole pride and worth was that he was Avraham's servant. It is remarkable how many times in his short dissertation that he refers to אדוני, *my master*. Even after Avraham told Eliezer that his daughter was not eligible because he descended from Canaan the cursed, he still felt that the greatest gift and honor in the world is to be the servant of Avraham, the servant of the real G-d, Hashem.

A second but more subtle lesson is revealed in Eliezer's repetition of the story.

Eliezer shared with Betuel that he had asked Avraham, “*Perhaps the girl won’t want to follow me to this land; shall I take your son back to the land from which you departed?*” (Genesis 24:5) As noted above, our Sages attribute this question to Eliezer’s interest in having his daughter marry Yitzchak.

The Hebrew word for “perhaps” is **אולי** and the original question to Avraham, it is spelled correctly. However, when, in his narrative, Eliezer repeats this question to Betuel, the Torah omits a letter, spelling it **אלי** - which means **to me**.

The reason for the misspelling is to reveal that when Eliezer related the story to Betuel, he realized then why he asked Avraham this question. He realized that the real source of his question was rooted in his personal desire to have his daughter marry Yitzchak. When Eliezer first asked Avraham the question, he felt that his motivations were purely for the sake of the mission, but once he saw so clearly that Rivka was earmarked for Yitzchak and that his daughter was never an option, he was first able to see his bias as the source of the question.

This is also why Eliezer reverted to letting Hashem show him Rivka instead of doing the due diligence himself and figuring out which girl was best suited for Yitzchak. He did not trust himself. He was afraid that subconsciously his bias would color the picture and that he would miss the cues indicating the right girl for Yitzchak. Our Sages find his behavior inappropriate because, at that point, he should not have had any designs that his daughter would be Yitzchak’s wife. Avraham told him very clearly, that, as the granddaughter of Canaan, she is not a candidate. But Eliezer was unable to rise above his personal desires, remaining tainted by his bias.

We learn from here a very important lesson about human nature. When one has a bias about a matter, subconsciously that bias will color his

vision and prevent him from seeing things clearly. When one's personal desires enter the picture, they prevent him from seeing the truth and one is unable to make the correct decisions. People believe what they want to believe. In spite of clear facts indicating the opposite, they will hold tenaciously to their erroneous beliefs and ignore the evidence. "This is what I believe; don't confuse me with the facts!" Very rare is the person who can let go of all previous biases and say, "Let me see the data, and, based on it, I will make my decision." Hashem has given us the intelligence to discern what is true and what is false, and He expects us to make our decisions based on our objective conclusions.

Even Eliezer, Avraham's loyal and steadfast servant, could not overcome his deep desire to see his daughter marry Yitzchak. This bias presented Eliezer with a personal challenge throughout his mission. He had to remain steadfast and faithful to his task of finding the right wife for Yitzchak despite his subliminal desire for the mission to fail. *Perhaps, if the girl would not come with him, his daughter may become eligible after all.* Although inappropriate, Eliezer removed himself from the process and put the matter in Hashem's hands. Because of Avraham and Yitzchak's merit, Hashem responded properly and brought about the right outcome.

What are our options when confronted with a matter in which we may have a bias? For one, we can discuss the matter with an objective wise person who may pick up where the bias is playing a role and help us come to the correct decision. Second, we can pray to Hashem to help us come to the correct decision. If our intentions are noble, Hashem will always help us to reach the right decision.