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5786 Parshat Chayei Sarah

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תשפ"ו Chayei Sarah

Yitzchak was 40 years old, and it was time for him to get married and continue the legacy that Avraham began. Avraham lived in Canaan, inhabited by the descendants of Noach's grandson Canaan. Because Noach cursed Canaan, all of the Canaanite women were cursed and hence were unsuitable to marry Yitzchak, the source of blessing. Therefore, Avraham needed to go to his family to find a wife for Yitzchak.

Although the men in Avraham's family, his nephew Betuel and his grand-nephew, Lavan, Betuel's son, were both scoundrels, the women 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.

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

How did he get it?

The Torah makes a point of telling us about Haran's death. It says, (Genesis 11:28):

כַּחַ (כח) וַיָּמָת הָרָן עַל פְּנֵי תֵרַח אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדוֹתוֹ בְּאֹר כַּשְׂדִּים

28) And 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) which explains why the Torah mentions that Haran died *in Terach's lifetime*.

כַּחַ (כח) עַל פְּנֵי תֵרַח אָבִיו - בַּחַי אָבִיו (ב"ר) וּמ"א י"א שַׁע"י אָבִיו מֵת שִׁקְבַל תֵּרַח
עַל אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ לִפְנֵי נִמְרוֹד עַל שִׁכְתָּת אֶת צַלְמִיו וְהַשְׁלִיכוֹ לִכְבָּשָׁן הָאֵשׁ וְהָרָן יוֹשֵׁב

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 **because** of his father Terach that Haran died. This is the story. Terach left Avraham in charge of his idol store 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 the 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, "Faher, did you hear what you just said? They can't speak and 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 Haran saw Avraham walking around in the furnace like nothing unusual was going on, he 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 the daughter of Betuel, 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. Therefore, Avraham decided to send his loyal servant Eliezer to carry out the task.

Eliezer, who rebelled against his father Nimrod, was given to Avraham by Nimrod as a present 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, and followed 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 oversaw all of Avraham's wealth, and Avraham trusted him implicitly. Eliezer had but one flaw, and that 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 instead, he must travel to Avraham's homeland, birthplace and family. Despite Avraham's trust in Eliezer, he still made him swear because one who is bound by an oath has no choice but to fulfill his promise. Avraham did not want Eliezer to feel that he had any latitude in his mission. There was a good reason for this.

Eliezer had a daughter that he thought was a suitable mate for Yitzchak. She was beautiful, and most of all, 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 those credentials. Why should he 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* (match) to Avraham, Avraham told him as gently and as firmly as possible that it wasn't a *shidduch*. Because his daughter was a descendant of Canaan, a cursed nation, she is incompatible with Avraham's child who is blessed. Avraham wanted Eliezer to be as objective as possible in finding the right wife for Yitzchak, so he made him swear, and told him that his own daughter was not a candidate.

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

הַיְאֹמֵר אֵלָיו הָעֶבֶד אֲוִלִי לֹא תֵאבְּהָ הָאִשָּׁה לְלֶכֶת אַחֲרַי אֶל הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת
הַהִשָּׁב אֲשִׁיב אֶת בְּנִי אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יֵצְאֶת 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 although Avraham 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 not 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 a document stating that Avraham had given all 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 *רחמים* - *loving-kindness*), the girl would also have to excel in the quality of kindness. How would he determine which girl was had the necessary qualities?

Eliezer decided to ask Hashem's help in the matter. He asked Hashem 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 יְדוֹד אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם הַקָּרֵן נָא לְפָנַי הַיּוֹם וַעֲשֵׂה חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנָי
אַבְרָהָם:
(יג) הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי נֹצֵב עַל עֵין הַמַּיִם וּבָנוֹת אַנְשֵׁי הָעִיר יֹצְאוֹת לְשָׂאֵב מַיִם:
(יד) וְהָיָה הַנַּעֲרָה אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיהָ הִטִּי נָא כַדָּף וְאַשְׁתֵּה וְאָמְרָה שְׂתֵה וְגַם גִּמְלִיךָ:
אַשְׁקֶה אֹתָהּ הַכַּחֲתָ לְעַבְדְּךָ לְיִצְחָק וּבָה אֲדַע כִּי עָשִׂיתָ חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנָי

"Hashem, God of my master Abraham, may You so arrange it for me this day that You do kindness with my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by 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 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, 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 over 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 girl." The sign that Eliezer contrived was not without thought. His primary goal was to determine if the girl had the quality of טוֹחַ lovingkindness worthy of the house of Avraham the greatest source of all kindness to mankind in the world. In designing a test where she had to offer to give his camels to drink also, he was testing her character and her desire to help others.

The Sages find the way that Eliezer enlisted Hashem's help improper. 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 ושאלו בן
קיש ויפתח הגלעדי אליעזר עבד אברהם דכתיב והיה הנערה אשר אמר אליה הטי
נא כדך וגו' 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 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 give Hashem an ultimatum and expect Him to respond with the desired

outcome. It is like trying to force Hashem to do a miracle for him. He must do all that he can, and then he can ask Hashem to help his efforts to succeed.

Even before Eliezer finished his prayer, Rivka appeared with her jug on her shoulder. 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 started praying to get there. in time for the end of his prayer. This match was made in heaven.

Eliezer immediately focused on her. Rashi quoting the Midrash explains why.

וירץ העבד לקראתה - לפי שראה שעלו המים לקראתה. (ב"ר)

Because Eliezer saw that the water came to the top of the well to greet her.

She was so righteous that she didn't even have to drop the bucket into the well to draw up the water, it came to her.

Harav Shach wonders. Once Eliezer saw that Rivka was so righteous, why did he continue with his test? Didn't Eliezer already have his answer? Rav Shach answers, "No!" Even though Hashem did a miracle for her, it is insufficient and her character must still be tested to see if she excels in kindness.

He derives from here that the most difficult challenge to a person in this world is the perfection of his character. The Vilna Gaon puts it this way.

עיקר חיות האדם להתחזק תמיד בשבירת המדות ואם לאו **למה לו חיים?**

*The most important endeavor for a person is, to constantly strengthen himself in breaking down his evil traits, and if he doesn't do that, **what is life worth?***

This is what Eliezer was trying to determine. Does Rivka have stellar character traits? She passed with flying colors.

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, but she also offered to water his camels as well.

As soon as Rivka completed her task, Eliezer ran over to her and gave her a golden 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.

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

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 that 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. Our sages are surprised by this, and Rabbi Acha answered with the following.

א"ר אחא יפה שיחתן של עבדי בתי אבות מתורתן של בנים פרשתו של אליעזר שנים וג' 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 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 teaching us 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 are a few 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 is that he is 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.

There is a second, but more subtle lesson 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 **אוּלַי** and the original question to Avraham, it is spelled correctly. However, in his narrative, when Eliezer repeats this question to Betuel, the Torah omits a letter, spelling it **אלי** - which means *to me*.

The reason it was misspelled is to reveal that when Eliezer told 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 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, as the granddaughter of Canaan, she is not a candidate. But Eliezer was not able to rise above his personal desires and remained tainted by his bias.

This teaches us 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 tend to believe what they want to believe, despite clear facts indicating the opposite. Very often they will hold tenaciously on 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, the loyal and steadfast servant of Avraham, 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.*

What are our options when confronted with a matter in which we may have a bias? For one, we can speak the matter over with an objective wise person who may pick up where the bias is playing a role, and help us come to the correct decision. Secondly, 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.

