

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The conversation and negotiations between Avraham and Efron, which comprises the first part of this week's parsha, has always been a puzzling to me. Why does the Torah, which in so many other places is so very chary of words, feel it necessary to record all of the elaborate talk that was involved in Avraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpela? The Torah could have simply stated that Avraham purchased that gravesite from Efron for four hundred shekel and left it at that. I still don't have any brilliant answer to this question but living in the Land of Israel has given me a different perspective on the issue. In Jewish society, words, spoken words, count for a great deal. The Torah warns us not to cheapen our words, not to be hypocritical, not to slander and tell falsehoods and not to renege on our spoken commitments. The Talmud is replete with stories of great men who kept their spoken word, and even in some instances their unspoken mental commitment to a price or transaction, often to their own personal and financial detriment. Avraham is such a person of integrity and steadfastness.

But as the Torah continually points out here at the beginning of the parsha, he dwells among the Hittites. The Hittites show him great outward respect, even affection. "You are the prince of God who dwells in our midst," they declare to him. But Avraham is not fooled by their compliments and blandishments or extravagant protestations that he can choose any gravesite he wishes and that it will be deeded to him free of charge. Living with the Hittites has taught him how cheap talk is in that society and that the words of his neighbors and erstwhile admirers are not to be relied upon. By recording the entire series of conversations and negotiations that mark Avraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpela, the Torah warns his descendants that good words are often not to be taken at face value. Better criticism from a friend than

compliments from an enemy.

In our time, Jews have proven especially gullible to sweet words of conciliation and hope. What we felt to be a legitimate effort to achieve peace, our enemies turned into a brutal and bloody struggle for our national existence. In a world where the spoken word no longer carries much weight, it would be highly foolish of us not to recognize the true intent of our adversaries. King David said in Psalms: "I speak of peace, but they are determined to wage war upon me." Efron's fawning compliments to Avraham are the prelude to his demanding and receiving an exorbitant price for the Cave of Machpela. The Torah, by recording the incident in its fullness, transforms Efron's immediate and temporary gain into a badge of eternal shame. We have a right to be skeptical of good words alone. Only good deeds and positive actions have the ring of truth and conviction to them. © 2004 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

“Rabbi Acha said: More pleasant is the conversation of the servants of the Patriarchs before the Omnipresent than the Torah of the children, because the subject of Eliezer is doubled in the Torah and many basic Torah laws are only given with brief hints.” (Rashi)

It's quite remarkable to observe that Eliezer is granted so much "air time" by the Torah. He is probably the most quoted and visible personality that is not a direct relative or an antagonist of the family of Avraham. Who is this fellow? Strangely he is a descendent of "cursed Canaan" (Breishis 9:25) and for that reason his very own daughter disqualified as a match for Yitzchok. As Avraham told him, "My son is blessed and you are cursed and cursed does not cleave to blessed". (Rashi—Breishis 24:39) He would probably have been voted "least likely to make it into the Torah", in his senior class. Yet there he is. How did it happen?

I know a young man, "a driver" who would often speak with a strong sense of nostalgia that he was the personal driver for a well known Jewish philanthropist whose name appears on many buildings of charitable causes throughout Jerusalem and the world. I could tell

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that he felt accomplished for that period of his life even though he was not the one who was writing the big checks. He was more than glad to have played a positive part in improving the life of so many, even if it was only as a driver.

How thrilling it would be to just hold a test tube in a lab that discovers the cure for some terrible disease. We would all be happy to have even a small role toward that noble end. We can easily appreciate how this fellow felt just getting the car close to the curb, opening the door, and waiting there patiently for the return trip.

Conversely, how tragic to be in the shadow of greatness and to miss out on the opportunity to act with awareness, imagining all the while life is an exercise in failed mediocrity. What a shame to have lost the opportunity of being a conscious part of something big by living so small.

It's an odd but not insignificant fact that the name of the person whose words and actions take up so much space and use so much ink does not appear once in this week's portion. Why not? Defined by his own words he says, "A servant of Avraham I am!" He saw himself as a window to let the light of Avraham shine in. Not more! Dutifully he resisted the undercurrent of his own personal agenda and was able to act purely as an extension of his master's will. He is therefore rightly credited with having assisted not just the great man he served, but the entirety of his noble mission as well. Eliezer, though, is more than the paradigm of the loyal servant.

The Rambam writes, "Anyone who accepts upon themselves the Seven Commandments of the Children of Noah and is scrupulous to do them is considered to be from the righteous of the nations of the world and has for himself a portion in the future world..." (Laws of Kings 8:11)

Although the Torah focuses almost exclusively on Avraham and his children we understand that it is so only because they had accepted the yoke of responsibility for carrying out The Almighty's grand plan for human history. Anyone, then, who would lend assistance and play a supportive role anywhere along the way is to be honored as part of the ultimate solution and not a part of the problem, as was promised, "Those who bless you will be blessed and those who curse you will be cursed".(Breishis 12:2)

All the attention aimed at Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, is a lasting testimony and also an invitation. Any decent person who realizes that encouraging the Jewish People and furthering their purpose is tantamount to not less than joining that grand unfolding plan of The Almighty. "A wise man", the Talmud tells us "recognizes his place". Eliezer, by knowing his place earned it, and as a result, is forever blessed! © 2004 Rabbi L. Lam & www.torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

When Sarah died in Chevron, Avraham was not there. "And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Chevron, in the Land of Canaan. And Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and weep for her." [Bereishit 23:2]. Where was Avraham? Rashi explains that he came from Be'er Sheva. This seems to be true, corresponding to what is written after the binding of Yitzchak, "Avraham returned to his servants, and they went together to Be'er Sheva. And Avraham stayed in Be'er Sheva." [22:19]. But if Avraham was in Be'er Sheva, why was Sarah in Chevron? The Ramban replies, "This does not mean that he remained there, as is written, 'Avraham stayed in Be'er Sheva,' for in that case why was Sarah in Chevron? Rather, he went there for a day to do something, and he heard there about Sarah's death and came to eulogize her and weep for her." This implies that after Avraham first went to Be'er Sheva he moved to Chevron, where he lived with Sarah, until she died. On that day, he had gone to Be'er Sheva on an errand, and it was there that he was told that she had died.

However, the simple meaning of the passage does not indicate that Avraham had gone to Chevron after the binding of Yitzchak. Rather, it implies that Avraham remained in Be'er Sheva, as Rashi writes, and it was there that he heard about Sarah's death. But this leaves us with no answer for the Ramban's question: "Why was Sarah in Chevron?" Many possible answers can be suggested for Sarah's presence in Chevron, but the Torah does not tell us the real reason. One central point is that the Torah does not mention any meeting between Avraham, Yitzchak, and Sarah after the binding. The simple interpretation of the description in the Torah is that Avraham and Yitzchak were in Be'er

Sheva while Sarah was in Chevron, and therefore they did not tell her about the experience of the binding. Why is this so?

The words of Rashi, based on the Midrash, are well known: "Sarah's death is described close to the binding of Yitzchak, because her soul left her as a result of hearing about the binding, that her son was almost slaughtered but in the end was not killed." [Rashi, Bereishit 23:2]. According to this approach, when Sarah heard about the binding (from Satan, as is written in Avot D'Rebbe Natan, chapter 31), she could not contain her feelings and her soul left her. It is true that the passage in the Torah does not explicitly note that Sarah knew about the binding, but the Midrash can help us answer our questions. It may be that Avraham and Yitzchak hesitated to tell Sarah about the binding out of fear that it would upset her. They therefore stayed for a while in Be'er Sheva, while Sarah remained in Chevron, until she died.

If this approach is correct, it adds another dimension to the difficulty that Avraham experienced in the binding of Yitzchak. Not only was it related to his beloved son, it also had possible repercussions on his relationship with his wife Sarah.

Let us pray that the Almighty will remember the binding of Yitzchak with respect to the descendents of Yaacov, with passion and mercy.

The Machpelah Cave in the Torah and in the Words of the Sages

by Noam Arnon

The Torah portion of Chayei Sarah and additional passages in Bereishit serve to emphasize the great importance that the Torah attaches to the Machpelah Cave. This can be seen in the many varied and detailed descriptions of the site and its history. In fact it is true not only for the Torah. A look at traditional sources shows how the characteristics and heritage of our forefathers in general are central to Jewish thought. This is particularly true of prayer in the Machpelah Cave. The concept of "merits of the fathers" appears hundreds of times in the Midrash—it serves as the spiritual basis of such items as the creation of the world, the existence of the nation of Yisrael, the giving of the Torah, prayer, atonement, and redemption.

The approach of the sages is that the forefathers are "sleeping in Chevron," and when necessary they wake up in order to pray for their descendents. According to the Talmud, the prophet Eliyahu is the one who wakes the forefathers so that they will pray (Bava Metzia 85). This idea also appears in the Zohar (Teruma 151) and in the Tikunei Zohar in the passage "The Entrance of Eliyahu," which is recited at the beginning of prayers. The sages emphasized the link between the forefathers and prayer, and they revealed that the fathers are the ones who established the three daily prayers (Bereishit Rabba 60). The importance of the Machpelah Cave to prayer can be

seen in the well known Midrash about Kalev Ben Yefuneh, whose visit to the Cave helped him avoid joining the evil approach of the scouts (Sottah 34). The prayers of both Moshe and Eliyahu were not answered until they based their approach on the merits of the forefathers (Shemot Rabba 44). The sages have taught us that the concept of the merits of the fathers will continue to exist forever (Vayikra Rabba 36). Based on this merit, Yisrael was redeemed from Egypt, and it will also be the basis of the future redemption. The one who brings the announcement of the redemption will first appear at the Machpelah Cave (Tanchuma Bamidbar 14).

The Talmud rules that a special intention of prayer is needed in the first blessing of the Shemona Esrei (Berachot 34), which opens with the phrase "the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak, and the G-d of Yaacov." The key first verse of "Shema Yisrael" has been interpreted by our sages with an innovative insight: "Listen, Yisrael, our father who lies in the Machpelah Cave, we continue to observe the custom that you commanded us—G-d, who is our Lord, is One" [Bereishit Rabba 98].

The Zohar teaches us that the Machpelah Cave is the entrance to the Garden of Eden. This is the place where souls enter the world and through which prayers pass, a place where a unique spiritual light shines, and where there is a wind that comes from the Garden of Eden. In particular, "If mankind would know the great honor due to our father Yaacov, people would lick the earth for a distance of three Parsaot around the grave" [Zohar Shemot 1].

We have been privileged in our generation to be able to return and pray at the Machpelah Cave. Let us hope and pray that because of the merits of the forefathers we will be rescued from harsh and difficult decrees, and that He who remembers the charity and good deeds of the forefathers will soon bring about the redemption of their descendents.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd Abraham was old, he came into his days; and the Lord blessed Abraham with everything" (Genesis 24:1).

The progress of medical science has thankfully challenged every community with providing proper care for its aged. I remember very well the weeping and the cries during the High Holy Day services when congregants would recite the ancient prayer, "Do not cast us aside O' G-d at the time of our old age" My maternal grandmother would always interpret the words to mean, "do not throw me into old age", do not make me suddenly sick and dependent, get me used to the aging process slowly, gracefully and graciously. And although we all pray of old age, we also fear those twilight years and the discomfort that they often bring.

What can we glean from this week's Torah reading about the Biblical view of old age?

The Ramban (Nahmanidies) explains that Abraham goes on to administer an oath to a servant Eliezer that he go to Abraham's birthplace to bring back a suitable wife for Isaac. It is necessary for him to send a messenger—agent for this most sensitive task because the Patriarch himself was frightened that he might die before completing the task if he were to have gone himself. This is how the Ramban explains the phrase "he came into his days"; Abraham was already marking time in terms of days, sensing that the end of his life was approaching. Between the lines of this commentary lies a picture of an old age devoid of strength, devoid of anticipation and devoid of the excitement of future plans. Indeed, old age has all the poignancy of a setting sun, of the closing curtain on the last act of a play.

The Sacred Zohar gives another spin to the words "came into his days" as a description of old age. After a human being's sojourn on earth, his soul ascends to heaven along with each of the days he has spent on this world. Those days comprise the garment in which his soul is clad. The days that he sinned cannot serve as a covering for the soul; "Woe unto that individual's soul whose garment has gaping holes, or— even worse— has no garment whatsoever with which to be covered." In Abraham's case, the Bible testifies that "he came into his days (in the other world)" since G-d blessed him with every day of righteousness and with a fully completed garment awaiting him in the world to come. (Zohar Vayechi 124)

This interpretation urges each of us to live our lives in such a way so as not to be embarrassed when we arrive at the true and eternal world of souls. The Talmud records an incident in which a number of captive women were freed from their captivity and a place had to be found for them until a ship would come to bring them home. The community placed them in the attic of the home of Rabbi Natan, a great Sage who lived alone but was known for his piety and scholarship. In the middle of the night, the rabbi awoke with a start and excitedly began to climb the ladder to the attic. Suddenly he began to scream, "fire, fire". All of his neighbors and students came to the rescue, thoroughly confused when they found not even a hint of smoke "Aren't you ashamed to have gotten us up for no reason in the middle of the night", the fire chief asked. "The fire was within me", responded the rabbi. "It is far better for me to be ashamed before you in this world than in the world to come."

I would like to suggest a third interpretation, one which emphasizes the positive and even glorious aspect of old age. The Midrash Tanchuma comments on the Biblical verse we have cited that Abraham actually prayed for old age. A young individual does not live a life of days; he thinks ahead in terms of a career and a sizable bank account, utilizing days as a means

to an end which is almost palpable and within reach, but actually lives in that future time when his dreams will be realized. An elderly individual has the luxury of truly living in the present, of trying to enjoy each day not as a means to an end but rather as an end in itself. He can allow himself to benefit from the present, to look upon what has been positively accomplished, to enjoy the present day relationships from which he can still benefit. He can even correct past transgressions and heal hurt feelings. Indeed he has an opportunity to repair that which has been broken. Often when we only look ahead we have neither the time nor the energy to look behind and pickup what has fallen by the wayside; during the twilight years, when one lives day by day it becomes possible to pick up many fallen pieces. "Fortunate is the old age which makes repair upon the sins of our youth." (B.T. Sukkah 53a)

May the Almighty grant us the wherewithal and the wisdom to make the most out of every stage of life, and rather than count the days that have left us, make the most of each day which we have left. © 2004 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The two portions preceding this week's reading have two distinct characteristics. The portion of Lekh Lekha is nationalistic and Vayera is universal. A cursory glimpse of the narratives in each of these portions supports this thesis.

In Lekh Lekha, God chooses Avraham (Abraham) (Chapter 12) and Sarah (Chapter 17) to be the father and mother of the Jewish covenantal community. The specifics of the brit (covenant) are spelled out in detail in the covenant of the pieces. (Chapter 15) The other chapters in Lekh Lekha are similarly particularistic. They describe how Avraham separates from those members of his family who have no role in the covenant. He parts with both his nephew Lot (Chapter 13) and his maidservant, Hagar, mother of his child, Yishmael, (Chapter 16). The portion also describes how Avraham refuses to take any of the spoils from the King of Sodom. (Chapter 14) Throughout the portion, Avraham insulates himself from the rest of the world, and identifies himself solely as a Jew.

Vayera is quite different. The narrative is universal. Avraham tries to save the non-Jewish city of Sodom. (Chapters 18, 19) He establishes peace with the King of Philistea, Avimelekh. (Chapters 20, 21) He also shows emotion for his child Yishmael, who is not part of the Jewish covenant. (Chapter 21)

It can be suggested that in Vayera, Avraham becomes so involved in the universal that he forgets his nationalistic roots. This is understandable for so often it is the case that in caring about the larger world, we forget our own community.

In order to show Avraham the need to recapture his priorities, a corrective was needed. At the end of Vayera, we read the section of the binding of Isaac. The fundamental message of the episode is the message that if Yitzhak (Isaac) is killed, there is no future for the Jewish people. In other words, if you care about everyone, but, in the process, forget who you are—all is lost.

This trend of the corrective for Avraham reaches its crescendo in this week's portion, Hayei Sarah. Hayei Sarah is the narrative that translates the covenantal promises of land and children, into reality. Avraham buys land to bury his wife, Sarah. (Chapter 23) He insures continuity by having a wife chosen for Yitzhak. (Chapter 24) Avraham moves inward, reinforcing his relationship with Sarah and Yitzhak thus guaranteeing the future of Am Yisrael.

This is the sweep of the Avraham story. When becoming too universal, Avraham is at risk of forfeiting his nationalistic base. Hayei Sarah comes to remind Avraham that, to be a strong universalist, one must first be a strong nationalist.

It is often the case that people view nationalistic and universalistic agendas as contradictory. The truth is—a strong sense of who we are is a prerequisite for forming a commitment to the whole world.

I've always been wary of those who say they love everyone. When you love everyone, you don't have to love anyone. The movement of the Avraham narrative teaches that the pathway to caring about everyone is to address and insure family, and in this case, national and religious continuity. The path to loving everyone is to love someone. © 2004 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

When Eliezer told Rivka's family that he wanted to return (with Rivka) back to his master (Avraham), her brother and mother asked that she be able to stay with them for a while longer (Beraishis 24:54-55). This seems rather puzzling, as the day before they had told him that he can "take her and go" (24:51), implying that he can (or should) leave with her immediately. What happened in such a short time that changed their mind?

The Chizkuni (who asks this question) says that when they told Eliezer that he can go back right away, they had assumed that he was not authorized to enact the engagement on behalf of Yitzchok, so wanted him to bring Rivka to Yitzchok to do so ASAP. The silver and gold items that he then gave Rivka (24:53) were for that engagement, though, and once they realized that, they changed their mind and asked that she be allowed to stay home to prepare for her wedding.

However, most commentators explain that they had said she could go because they understood that

they really had no choice in the matter. After all, it was plainly obvious (from how quickly and accurately Eliezer's prayer was answered) that G-d was behind this; resistance was futile. If Rivka was able to leave whether they wanted her to or not, her being officially engaged wouldn't change that. Additionally, why would they first ask her if she wanted to go now- after she was already engaged- but not initially? Besides, the wording of "take her and go" implies that they knew- even requested- that the "taking" (i.e. the engagement, see Kiddushin 2a) occur before she left (ostensibly to ensure that it would occur). Which brings us back to our original question: What happened between the time that Eliezer told the story of how he "found" Rivka for Yitzchok- when her family knew that she should go immediately and didn't even ask her permission- and the next morning- when they asked that she be able to stay home for a while, and insisted that she be consulted before she left?

Another aspect that seems puzzling is the actual marriage ceremony of Rivka and Yitzchok. There was no wedding party, no celebration, no public acknowledgment of G-d's divine providence in helping arrange the shidduch. Wouldn't we have expected that Avraham- who took every opportunity to help others realize that there is a Creator running the world, including the "big party" he made when Yitzchok was weaned (21:8)- would make a big wedding, publicizing the divine involvement? Rivka's family knew of Avraham's stature (see 24:31), and surely would have wanted to celebrate marrying into his family. Yet, Eliezer brings Rivka straight to Yitzchok, who consummates the wedding without any fanfare (24:67). Why was such a special, obviously divinely-arranged marriage kept so low-key?

The Midrash (Beraishis Rabbah 60:12) tells us why Rivka's family asked that she be able to stay in Aram (modern-day Syria) for a while before going to Canaan/Israel to marry Yitzchok: The "days" that they asked for (24:55) were seven days of Shiva- to allow her to mourn for her father, who had just died (see Rashi). The day before, they were willing to (or had no choice but to) let her leave right away. Now, however, they felt that she should wait (at least) until the mourning period ended. The family couldn't properly celebrate a wedding at this point either, and needed to get things settled with her father's estate before being able to travel to Yitzchok's area for the ceremony.

When Eliezer insisted that they return immediately anyway, they replied that they had to ask Rivka first- to see if she wanted to get married now despite her loss, and was willing to do so without her family being there. She did, and when Eliezer relayed all of this to Yitzchok, Yitzchok realized that there couldn't be a large party with only his family (and friends), as it would highlight the absence of Rivka's family. He also realized what she had given up to build a home and

family in a G-d fearing atmosphere, so didn't wait to plan for a fancy wedding before starting it.

This would explain why Rivka's response was "I will go by myself" (see Rashi on 24:58), rather than just answering "yes" (that she wanted to go right away). We can also understand why her family first asked for the delay the next morning, and why a marriage obviously "made in heaven" was celebrated so inconspicuously.

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DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi?

The parsha relates two main stories. The first: Sarah's death and burial. The second: Abraham's searching for, and finding, a wife for his son, Isaac. When his servant, Eliezer arrives at Rebecca's home, Laban, her brother, greets him and welcomes him inside. We find the following:

"And the man came into the house and he unfastened the camels, he gave straw and fodder to the camels and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him." (Genesis 24:32)

"And he unfastened"—RASHI: "He loosened their muzzles, for he had sealed their mouths, so they (the camels) should not graze in other people's fields."

Can you see why Rashi needed to interpret the verse this way? What was bothering him?

An Answer: If Eliezer had to unfasten the camels, apparently they were muzzled.

But why were they muzzled? These muzzles shouldn't have been necessary. This unfastening was what was bothering Rashi. How does his comment deal with this?

An Answer: Rashi tells us that these muzzles were Abraham's idea. Abraham was particularly careful not to have his camels feed freely, since some of the fields might belong to a private owner, and this would then constitute theft.

The Ramban asks a question on this interpretation. Rashi's source was the Midrash. And the Midrash itself, (which the Ramban cites) questions the interpretation that Abraham muzzled his camels so that they would not graze in private property.

It cites the famous case of the Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. He had animals that "instinctively" would not eat grains that had not been tithed. He did not need to muzzle his animals. So they ask, certainly Abraham's animals were no less righteous than Pinchas ben Yair's animals! Why did Abraham have to muzzle his animals?

Can you think of an answer?

By the way, the Midrash gives no answer, implying that, in fact, Abraham did not muzzle his animals. Also, according to the Ramban, the animals were not muzzled. He interprets the "unfastening" in our verse as unfastening their saddles or the ropes with

which one camel was tied to another, which was customary to do on long journeys.

But can you think of an answer for Rashi?

Hint: Can you see any difference between Pinchas ben Yair's case and Abraham's?

An Answer: One simple difference between Pinchas ben Yair's case and Abraham's is that Pinchas ben Yair was concerned about his animals' eating untithed grains. This was a problem for his own righteousness. He was concerned about this transgression but at the same time he also trusted his animals, because they had, so-to-speak, absorbed the holy influence of his household. If he was satisfied that this was sufficient "protection" that his animals should not transgress the sin of eating untithed food, that's fine.

But Abraham had to be more cautious since the problem here was theft from another's property. In such a case it wasn't just Abraham's righteousness that was at stake; it was another person's possessions. Abraham couldn't rely on the "instinctive righteousness" of his camels. He had to muzzle them. So Rashi's comment is quite reasonable. © 2004 aish.org & Dr. A. Bonchek

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

“**A**nd [the servant] said: Hashem, God of my master Avraham... The girl to whom I say, 'Please pour some water for me to drink,' and who responds, 'Drink, and I will also fetch water for your camels'—she is the one whom You have proven [to be the correct mate] for your servant Yitzchak." (Bereishit 24:12-14)

In its discussion of the definition of nichush (soothsaying), the Gemara (Chullin 95b) cites Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, as the archetype of a soothsayer, since he chose a wife for Yitzchak based on an omen. Tosafot respond vigorously, asking: How it is possible that Eliezer, who was prohibited from engaging in nichush, would do so? Obviously, they respond, Eliezer did not sin. Rather, one can see that Eliezer based his final choice of a wife on other considerations, since he did not give Rivka the bracelets until after she had explained her genealogy to him. Thus, he did not really rely upon a vacuous sign, but was convinced more by her parentage.

The Rambam (Hilkhos Avodat Kokhavim 11:4) disagrees with Tosafot and writes that Eliezer did indeed sin. The Ra'avad (ad loc.) takes an entirely different approach, saying that the gemara was not at all discussing the parameters of what is defined as forbidden nichush, but rather was just debating what kind of signs are more effective. Thus, according to the Ra'avad, the gemara was simply saying that although Eliezer's actions did not fall under the category of

forbidden forms of nichush, nevertheless it is not wise to rely on such a sign.

Obviously, it is illogical to direct one's actions according to phenomena which are not at all connected to the issue at hand—for example, a fox straying across one's path and other such omens which are listed by the Rambam. However, what Eliezer did was inherently logical and far-sighted, and quite relevant to the matter at hand. He set for himself a test which would gauge Rivka's personality; one might say that it reflected the essence of her soul.

Chazal state that Eliezer was seeking the kind of personality he had encountered in Avraham's home: a "ba'alat chesed," a person who embodied the kind of chesed (loving kindness) which was Avraham Avinu's central characteristic. (See Rashi on Bereishit 24:14.) Let us ask ourselves what exactly Eliezer sought.

We can discern two directions in answering this question if we examine the dispute concerning Rivka's age. Rashi (Bereishit 25:20) states that Rivka was three years old at the time of this event; the Da'at Zekeinim Mi-Ba'alei Ha-Tosafot (following the Seder Olam Rabba) maintain that she was fourteen years old. As is true regarding the opinions about the age at which Avraham discovered God, this dispute too is not merely academic; rather, these ages symbolize stages in a person's spiritual development, and color our entire understanding of his personality.

Rashi's vision of what Eliezer sought is intriguing: children at such a young age tend to display an overwhelming egocentricity—they do not give, but are accustomed to taking and depending upon others. They do not yet possess the faculties to understand that the world does not revolve about themselves. Thus, a child who possesses the quality of chesed at such a young age has it almost inherently, instinctively, as part of her basic spiritual constitution. Usually, at the age of three one can speak only of very general directions in personal development; in the case of Rivka, however, she was so conspicuously different in this area that one would have had reason to believe that the trait of chesed was highly dominant in her makeup.

Secondly, if Eliezer was searching for a young child, this indicates that he sought a relatively unmolded person, one who would be unresisting to having the contours of her personality shaped by Yitzchak Avinu. This is Rashi's Rivka—the Pure and Passive Rivka, a personality to be molded.

Tosafot's view, however, differs on both accounts. A fourteen-year-old girl is a ba'alat chesed because she has decided to be one and has acted upon that decision; it is not an instinctive, supernatural spiritual boon.

Moreover, according to Tosafot, Eliezer was not looking for a timid child who follows her husband's lead; rather, he was looking for someone to lead Am Yisrael together with Yitzchak Avinu. Rivka's figure is a

dominant, powerful one. This is Tosafot's Rivka—the Nation Builder.

If we set aside the dispute for a moment, we have presented here two facets of the test which Eliezer set for Yitzchak's potential bride: (a) the strength of her commitment to the specific quality of chesed; (b) her ability to take the initiative—this with regard to all of her qualities.

Firstly, the test gauged the extent of her commitment to chesed. Was she merely a person who did not resist the idea of chesed, perhaps she even admired it; or, was she a person who was "rodef chesed," one who charges after the opportunity to perform a kindness? According to both Rashi and Tosafot—regardless of whether her kindness was instinctive or decided-upon—the test was designed to measure its strength.

Secondly, Eliezer was trying to distinguish the level of her leadership initiative—he was searching for someone who was not just a cheftza but a gavra, not a passive object but an active subject.

Generally speaking, the ability to take initiative is a very positive quality. But when speaking of a potential mate for Yitzchak, it becomes crucial. Generally, Yitzchak is portrayed as a relatively passive character. When he decides to leave Eretz Yisrael in a time of famine (Bereishit 26:3), God tells him not to move, but to stay where he is. In the akeida, he is the archetype of sacrifice: Avraham is tested, but Yitzchak never reacts; he is sacrificed, quietly and willingly. Later, when Yitzchak digs wells, he gives them the same names his father gave them (Bereishit 26:18).

In short, Avraham is a spiritual revolutionary, while Yitzchak is far more passive, willing to walk in his father's footsteps and never feeling the need to step out of his father's shadow. Most indicative of his passivity is the fact that towards the end of his life, he becomes blind—to the extent that Rivka controls the entire issue of succession and the dispute over the birthright, working around him when necessary! Ya'akov, too, was transformed from the child who does as his mother bids him into a resourceful planner and executor of a broad strategy—as is evident in his conflicts with both Lavan and Esav.

Thus, we see that a highly motivated, active figure was needed to balance the more quiet and introspective Yitzchak.

Indeed, after reviewing Eliezer's actions, we would seem to side with the Ra'avad and also against him. Not only did Eliezer's actions not constitute nichush, but they were, on the contrary, a carefully planned, finely tuned test, designed to find a mate who would complement Yitzchak, who would carry on the values of Avraham, and who would lead Am Yisrael at its formative stages of development. As Eliezer says, "... She is the one whom You have PROVEN [to be the correct mate] for your servant Yitzchak" (Bereishit 24:14). It was PROOF Eliezer wanted, not an omen;

and it was proof most specifically for a mate for YITZCHAK. (*This sicha was originally delivered on leil Shabbat, Parashat Chayei Sara 5757 [1996].*)

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Daf HaShavua

by Rabbi Gavin Broder, London University Chaplain

Following the well-known incident of Eliezer meeting Rebecca at the well, we are told that Laban, Rebecca's brother, ran outside to greet the man who had showered his sister with rich gifts and invited him home. After Eliezer had unmuzzled the camels, Laban gave them straw and fodder and provided water for Eliezer and his men to wash their feet. Subsequently, when everything had been organised, food was served to Eliezer. At this juncture the verse states that Eliezer said "I will not eat until I have spoken my piece."

The commentators ask: Why was Eliezer so particular about not eating until he had spoken? The question is particularly apt since Talmud Pesachim tells that a guest is obliged to do all that his host requests of him (apart from being asked to leave). In this instance, since the food had already been placed in front of Eliezer, he should first have eaten and then explained his mission.

Upon close scrutiny of the verses, a strange thing becomes apparent. Laban metamorphoses into a seemingly kind and respectful person. We find him running to meet Eliezer and explaining that he has cleaned the house for him and prepared space, straw and fodder for the camels. In addition to the above, he provided water for Eliezer and his men to wash their feet and also served them a meal. It would be surprising to hear that Laban went out of his way for a noble person, yet here, he does so for a mere servant.

Bereshit Rabbah comments on the verse 'and he (Laban) said (to Eliezer), "Come in, you are a man blessed by G-d."' that Laban thought that he was actually addressing Abraham because Eliezer's features resembled those of Abraham, and that is why he gave him so much honour. It can therefore be understood that the reason why Laban went out of his way to befriend and honour Eliezer was because he thought that it was Abraham.

Chullin 94b relates a story of how Rabbi Sufra was walking with Raba to the next town when they met Mar Zutra who was coming from the opposite direction. Mar Zutra thought that the Rabbis were coming to meet him and asked them why they had taken the trouble to come so far. Rabbi Sufra replied that they actually did not know that he was coming and therefore were not coming to meet him. Later Raba asked Rabbi Sufra, "Why did you say that to him, you have upset him?" Rabbi Sufra replied that if he had told Mar Zutra that they had come to meet him they would have been deceiving him.

Rashi explains that Rabbi Sufra felt that if Mar Zutra would be under the impression that they had come to meet him, Mar Zutra would have felt indebted to them and would give them unjust praise. Rabbi Sufra considered this to be deceitful and therefore forbidden. Rabbi Sufra was not being 'super righteous' but had a firm source for his ruling.

The Talmud in Makkot 12b says that if the inhabitants of a city of refuge want to honour someone who has fled there (after having accidentally killed someone), the murderer is obliged to tell them that he has killed someone. In this way they will not give him greater honour than what is due to him. There is therefore, a clear prohibition in accepting honour of which one is not deserving.

This then is a concept which Eliezer understood, and therefore refused to sit at the top table in Laban's house and begin eating. As soon as Eliezer saw the way in which Laban was treating him, he realised that Laban was under the impression that he was in the presence of Abraham. Eliezer did not want to deceive Laban, nor accept the honour shown him. He could not permit the facade to continue. He immediately said, "I am Abraham's servant", not Abraham—understand who I am—I do not deserve all the honour which you are bestowing upon me.

How right were our Sages when they wrote, "the mere conversation of the slaves of the Patriarch's household is more important than the laws of their descendants." © 2004 Produced by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue - London (O) Editor Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, emailed by Rafael Salasnik



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