

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Why does the Torah devote an entire chapter - no less than 20 verses - to the burial of Sarah in this week's portion? Why does the sacred Biblical text discuss with such detail Abraham's procurement of a proper burial place?

After all, until this point no one's death has evoked this much concern. Biblical characters are born, they live and they die. Even Noah receives no special eulogy; it's flat and perfunctory: "All of Noah's days were 950 years and he died" (Gen. 9:29). That's it.

So all the devotion, bargaining and patience that Abraham expresses in making sure that Sarah rests properly in eternal peace seem all the more worthy of our scrutiny. A clue to the answer can be found in the oxymoron of a phrase Abraham uses to describe himself to the children of Heth: Ger v'toshavav, alien and resident (23:4), two opposite descriptions!

Why does Abraham describe himself in such ambivalent, almost paradoxical terms? From one perspective, the phrase exquisitely captures Abraham in exile, with one foot here and one foot elsewhere, on the one hand, tax paying citizens mastering the legal system, cul-ture and language down to its subtlest nuances, but at the same time ready to leave on a moment's notice when the host country decides that we Jews are aliens after all. As Tevye wryly remarks when he and his co-religionists are forced to leave Anatevka "that's why we Jews always wear a hat; we must be ready to get out at a moment's notice." And remember that when Abraham was negotiating with the Hittites, they were in control of Canaan!

But even more profoundly, the phrase alien-resident expresses the realization that every human being's connection to the world is temporary, his existence tempered by the experiences that remind him of mortality. Every one of us lives in this transient world as a resident-alien. As we shall see in the Book of Leviticus, we read G-d's command that once every 50 years - the Jubilee year- all purchased lands must return to the original owners. The Bible explains, "And the land shall not be sold into in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; you are strangers and settlers with Me" (Lev 25:23). Nothing in this world really belongs to us, is really permanent, not even "real estate."

Perhaps it is because Abraham is aware of the resident stranger condition of humanity, that he seeks a permanent burial site for Sarah and is ultimately willing to pay so much money for it. Indeed, the chapter ends with the declaration that the cave became the "uncontested property" of Abraham. This may very well be the source for the principle expressed in the Ethics of the Fathers: "This world may be compared to a foyer before the world to come; prepare yourself in the foyer so that you may properly enter the living room" (4:21).

Abraham understands death differently than anyone who ever lived before him, and therefore sees the grave-site as an "eternal" monument, which stands for an existence beyond the body's expiration. After all, the corollary to the fact that every person is created "in the Divine image," infused with 'a portion of the Divine from Above; is that we are endowed with a piece of eternity a soul, which lives beyond our physical existence. Hence, the Jewish customs of death, the significance of kever yisrael - a Jewish burial -is derived from this week's portion.

Why do we light a yahrtzeit candle? Why is cremation a major sin in Judaism? Why yizkor and kaddish? Why do we gather together when the burial monument (matzeva) is unveiled? All of these customs are based on the idea that there is an eternity, a reality based on the beyond of this reality, a life of the spirit which, if properly nurtured in this world - the temporary world for the eternal world -is much more significant than the day a soul leaves its eternity for its temporary sojourn down below.

To be sure, the kind of life a person lives in this world determines his portion in the eternal world, and the bettering of the world here and now is a most legitimate Jewish goal. Nevertheless, once a person accepts the limitations of this world and the limitless nature of the next one, everything he does takes on a different cast.

Maimonides, the arch-rationalist, usually stresses that Judaism's purpose for life is to improve this world. Nevertheless, the major thrust in his Laws of Repentance deals with the world to come and the eternity of the soul. Indeed, for Maimonides, the most significant human endeavor in this world is in establishing an abiding relationship with one's spirit, with one's G-d, with one's eternity; that is what brings eternal life.

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Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (1707-1747), in his work "Paths of the Righteous," asks: "Why were we put in this world in the first place?" He answers that "we are put in this world to enjoy it." Yet but what brings true enjoyment? Only spiritual achievement. What is physical will, after all, eventually disappear or dissolve... that is why, he argues, too much of anything physical will make you retch. Only the spiritual and eternal ultimately provides real pleasure.

Ernest Becker, in his masterful work Denial of Death, queries why a physical act as pleasurable and wondrous as the sexual union has linguistically become the source for words of destruction and curses, "dirty" jokes, locker room humor. He theorizes that anything that is physical cannot give a person consummate joy because it only reminds him that one day he, too, will disappear. Indeed, the British poets use the word "death" to describe the sexual orgasm.

Hence, the human response to the sexual act is ambivalent. It's pleasure has a bitter undertaste since it reminds the individual of his eventual mortality. Becker likewise concludes that the most crucial human enterprise is the search for immortality, the connection with that aspect of our essence which lives beyond death.

Abraham establishes a "Jewish" burial plot, for which he pays an enormous amount of money, in order to teach that there is a life of the spirit that defies and transcends death.

Perhaps this is why the portion is called Chayei Sarah - the life of Sarah - because even after her death, Sarah lives. The righteous, according to the Talmud (Brakhot 18a), are alive even after their deaths, while the wicked are dead even when they're alive. Only connection with the eternal spirit brings eternal life.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Two of my grandsons have become engaged to be married, all of this occurring over the last ten days.

Naturally, this is an occasion of joy and satisfaction to me. It occurs during the period of time that we read this week's parsha which deals with the betrothal and marriage of Yitzchak and Rivka. In the bible and in

traditional Jewish life generally, parents have input into the choice of a mate for their children.

Avraham strictly instructs Eliezer not to deign making any marriage arrangement with the daughters of the Canaanites for Yitzchak. Avraham chooses family - his own general family - over all other considerations. There is no doubt that family is a very important consideration in choosing a mate. People who come from stable and loving home environments have a pattern and model to follow in their own later domestic relationships.

Avraham searches for a family that, although it has other defects - paganism and a selfish attitude towards wealth and stretching the truth - at least shares his value of hospitality towards strangers and a sense of compassion towards other human beings. Nevertheless, Rivka represents the exception in her family. She is not a pagan and her sense of hospitality towards others surpasses ordinary standards. She is a product of her family and home but she has gathered within her all of the positive attributes that the family of Avraham possessed while rejecting all of the negative traits and beliefs that the environment of her society impressed upon the rest of the family.

Eliezer is searching for a diamond in the rough. These are very rare. We are told of the "tests" and complications that Eliezer demands and encounters in his search for the proper mate for Yitzchak. He is looking for the benefits that stem from Avraham's family without having the liabilities that usually accompany them. He searches for extraordinary kindness and concern, modesty of behavior and loyalty to family even when that family's beliefs are no longer hers.

It is this remarkable combination of characteristics that mark Rivka as being the special matriarch of Israel that she becomes. When she will look for the proper mate for Yaakov she will also send him back to her family in Aram, in spite of her knowledge of the trickery of her brother Lavan. There too she hopes that he will find diamonds in the rough - women who will build the house of Israel and mother the Jewish people for all eternity.

Yaakov will also have to find the mates that possess all of the positive attributes of the family of Avraham and do not carry with them the burden of the negative traits of the society of Aram. This effort will cost Yaakov many years of his life, physical privation and mental anguish, but eventually the goal of creating a nation from a few individuals is achieved because of his wives and their characteristics.

Eliezer's search for Rivka becomes the paradigm and model for creating the proper Jewish family and necessary home environment. The search for diamonds is much easier today in the Jewish world than it was for Eliezer. My grandsons may have given their prospective mates diamonds as an engagement gift but I am certain that the women themselves who

are involved are the true diamonds in the matter. © 2007 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As he buys a burial plot for his wife Sarah, Avraham (Abraham) identifies himself as a ger toshav. (Genesis 23:4) The term is enigmatic. Ger means alien while toshav means resident. How could Avraham be both when those terms seem to be the opposite of one another?

On a simple level, Avraham tells the children of Heth that he initially came to their community as a stranger, but now he has finally settled in. Alternatively, the Midrash interprets Avraham declaring: "I am prepared to conduct myself as a stranger and pay for the burial plot. If, however, you rebuff me I will take it as a citizen who already owns the land that G-d had promised to His children."

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik sees it differently. For him, Avraham is defining the status of the Jew throughout history living amongst foreigners. No matter how comfortable a Jew may feel among others, in the end, the Jew is a stranger and is viewed as an other by his neighbors.

Another thought comes to mind. Avraham was a very successful man. He introduced the revolutionary idea of monotheism-and, indeed is chosen to be the father of the Jewish nation. Still, as he buries his wife, he emotionally cries out that as accomplished as he may be, in the end he is vulnerable, with glaring weaknesses and frailties-just like everyone else. Hence, ger toshav resonates one's outlook on life. As much as one may feel like a toshav, like a resident who is in control of life, one, in the same breath is a ger, a stranger-here one day and gone the next.

Commenting on the verse recited every Friday night which speaks of the rivers dancing and the trees clapping hands, Rav Shlomo Carlebach said:

"You know beautiful friends, the way we are living. One day I feel so good, the next day I'm in the lowest dumps. One day I'm so happy, the next day I want to commit suicide. I want you to know nature is very real. When a person says I'm happy, the tree says, 'hey, wait till I see you tomorrow.' One day I say I'm so holy, then the rivers will say wait till tomorrow. You know one day there will be a great Shabbos, a never-ending Shabbos. One day the whole world will be good forever. One day there'll be joy forever. So every Friday night when we receive Shabbos, I'm crying, I'm begging, Master of the world, let it be forever, let it be for real. You know my beautiful friends, so many

houses are broken, so many hearts are broken so many windows are broken because nothing lasts forever, nothing lasts forever. But this Shabbos, let it be, let it be, let it be forever let the rivers dance, let the trees clap hands...So we are begging, we are crying before the One, let it be, let this Shabbos be forever, let us hear the great trumpet, ba-hatzotzros be-kol shofar. Let us hear the great trumpet, let us hear the greatest message, from now on everything good and holy will be forever."

But until that time, nothing lasts forever. All joy, says the Talmud, must be tempered with trembling. We are all, in the words of Avraham a ger toshav, permanent, yet temporary. Such is the way of the world. © 2007 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.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

When Eliezer is sent by Avraham to go to his hometown (Aram) to find a wife for Yitzchok, he asks G-d to help him (Beraishis 24:12-4). However, rather than just asking for help, he sets the conditions by which he would know which is the right girl, saying that she will come out to the well and give him and his camels water. Why did Eliezer feel the need to set up such a test rather than trying to find her on his own?

This is especially problematic since Avraham seems to have specifically asked Eliezer to go to his family to find a wife for Yitzchok. After all, when Eliezer asked Rivka's family whether they will allow her to marry Yitzchok, he indicates that if they refuse, he'll go to either Yishmael's family or Lot's family (see Rashi on 24:49). If Avraham had only asked that Eliezer find a girl from his hometown (i.e. not a Canaanite), he could have looked for other girls in Aram, not just the daughter of Besuel, and wouldn't be limited to either Avraham's other son's family or to his nephew's family! Additionally, the commentators make a big deal out of Eliezer giving Rivka the jewelry before asking which family she's from (24:22-23); if being from Avraham's family wasn't a precondition, why would he have to first find out if she was from Avraham's family? She had already passed the "kindness" test, so will fit right in with the family! However, if Avraham asked Eliezer to go to his family, we can understand why he is taken to task for not verifying which family she's from before giving her the gifts. Besides, when retelling the story to Rivka's family, Eliezer tells them that Avraham sent him to his family (24:38 and 41). Yet, rather than going straight to Avraham's family, Eliezer stops by the well and asks G-d to send him a "sign" indicating which is the right girl for Yitzchok. Shouldn't the faithful servant, whose name is not mentioned in the entire story to indicate that he was totally obedient to Avraham, have

headed straight for Besuel's house, as Avraham asked him to do? Why did he come up with this plan to figure out who was appropriate for Yitzchok instead of following orders and going right to Avraham's family?

Before suggesting a possible answer, let's take a slight detour through the history of Avraham's family. Terach, his father, had three sons, Avraham, Nachor and Haran (11:27). The Talmud (Sanhedrin 69b), when trying to prove that in biblical times a father was able to conceive a child at age eight, says that Haran must have been eight when his daughter Sara was conceived. This is based on certain givens, without which there would be no proof. First of all, Sara is "Yiska," Haran's daughter (11:29), which is generally accepted to be true. Secondly, Avraham was 10 years older than his wife, Sara. We know this is so because we are told explicitly that Avraham was 100 and Sara was 90 when Yitzchok was born (17:17). Third, since the Torah mentioned Avraham first, Nachor second and Haran third, that must be their birth order. Finally, the Talmud assumes that all three had the same mother, figuring that between each birth there must be about a year for the recovery and the next pregnancy. Based on these "facts," the Talmud says that Haran, who is two years younger than Avraham, had to have had Sara by the time he was eight years old. The Talmud subsequently dismisses this proof, as it realizes that Avraham may have been mentioned first not because he was the oldest, but because he was the wisest (or most righteous), just as Noach's son Shem was mentioned first even though his brother Yefes was older. A proof is then brought from elsewhere that one could become a father at eight years of age.

But do we still maintain that Avraham was the oldest? Or, once the attempted proof from Haran is dismissed, do we no longer have any indication of who was the oldest? The Yefeh Aynayim brings other Talmudic era sources that quote this "proof" that Haran was only eight, without dismissing it. The Malbim (11:28), on the other hand, says that once the attempted proof is no longer valid, there is no reason to be forced into saying that Haran was so young when Sara was born, and the simple understanding is that Haran was older than Avraham.

Another indication that the Talmud's original assertion is not necessarily the generally accepted one is an earlier discussion in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 58b), where it is stated that Haran and Avraham had different mothers (see also Rashi on 20:12). As the Rashash (on 69b) points out, there is no reason to put a two-year time frame between Avraham and Haran if they didn't come from the same womb. It would seem then, that Talmud's original formulation of Avraham being a year older than Nachor and two years older than Haran need not be accepted as fact.

The Meam Loez (11:31) relates the story of Avraham's birth and his having to be hidden from

Nimrod, who wanted Terach's infant son dead. A similar version is related by Rabbeinu Bachya (15:7), and the Sefer Hayashar (at the end of Parashas Noach). In short, Nimrod was the king of the entire world, and Terach was his second-in-command. When Avra[ha]m was born, Terach threw a big party. Leaving the party, several of Nimrod's officers saw a vision in the sky that indicated to them that the baby that was just born to Terach would challenge Nimrod and inherit the entire world. The next morning, they tell Nimrod what they saw, what they think it means, and advise him to offer Terach an enormous amount of money to buy the infant and kill him before he can cause trouble. Nimrod does, but Terach tries to talk him out of it, explaining that without having anyone to inherit him (if his son is killed), the money being offered is worthless. Nimrod becomes furious with Terach, who backs off and says he will sell his baby to Nimrod to kill. He then gives Nimrod a different baby, one born to one of his maidservants, pretending it is Avra[ha]m.

If Terach was concerned that he would have no one to inherit him, it would seem obvious that this baby must be the oldest (as otherwise an older brother, who would still be alive, would inherit him). However, the Sefer Hayashar adds one more line to the story. When Terach saw how upset Nimrod was when he tried to talk him out of killing his son, he tells him that not only will he give the king his newborn, but, if the king wants, he'll give him the baby's two older brothers [to kill] as well. Huh? Two older brothers? How could the son who would be the only one to inherit Terach have older brothers? Well, sons born from a concubine (or a maidservant) are not considered legal sons, but servants (see Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 36; see also Beraishis 21:10). If these "older brothers" were only half brothers, and their mother was not Terach's legal wife, they would not inherit Terach; only the newborn baby, born from Terach's full-fledged wife, would! And, as we have already seen, the Talmud (and Rashi) have already told us that Haran and Avraham had different mothers! Could these two "older brothers" who would not inherit Terach be Nachor and Haran, or were they different "brothers?" Well, the Sefer Hayashar tells us explicitly that Haran was 32 when Avraham was born. It also tells us (in Parashas Chayay Sara) that Nachor was 172 years old when he died, which was when Yitzchok was 40. Since Avraham was 100 years older than Yitzchok, he was 140 when Nachor died, meaning that Nachor was also 32 when Avraham was born. We now know that these were the two "older brothers" who would not inherit Terach.

[Another indication that Haran was older is that, according to the Sefer Hayashar and the Meam Loez, Haran was thrown into the furnace when Terach lied to Nimrod and said it was Haran's idea to give the king a different baby than the one he wanted to kill. Obviously, Haran had to have been born at least a few years

earlier to be blamed for telling Terach to save baby Avraham.]

Before getting back to Eliezer's trip to Charan, there's one more piece to the puzzle. The Sefer Hayashar and the Meam Loez tell us that when Avraham was saved from the furnace, Nimrod gave him many gifts, including two of his best slaves. One of those slaves was Eliezer.

So Eliezer, who knew Avraham's family history, was sent to Nachor's city to find a wife for Yitzchok (24:10). Why was it Nachor's city? Well, Terach had moved there from Ur Kasdim, and his son would have inherited his land and possessions. Or would he? Only Avraham should inherit Terach, not Nachor. But, luckily for Nachor, Avraham had chosen to move to Canaan, so he was able to live there and call it his home. Now here comes Eliezer, representing Avraham. How would Nachor's family receive him? Eliezer knew that they might think he was sent to Charan to reclaim the property that really belonged to Avraham. This may be why he suspected that they would try to kill him (see Baal Haturim on 24:33), and why he thought that by telling them that he wasn't Avraham but his servant (24:34) they might not attempt to.

In any case, Eliezer felt that despite Avraham's instructions to go to his family, he couldn't just knock on their door and announce who he was (most likely it didn't dawn on Avraham, who had no intention of taking Nachor's land, that they would suspect such a thing). If he did go right to them, they wouldn't let him in, and very likely would try to kill him. Therefore, instead of going straight to Avraham's family, he thought of another option. He asked G-d to have the girl come out to where Eliezer was, so that he could speak with her directly, and have her bring him home and introduce him to her family. Seeing G-d answer his prayer so quickly and vividly, Eliezer had no doubt that she was the right girl. Once he was in the door, he was able to tell them that his only purpose was to find a wife for Yitzchok;

Avraham already had plenty of money, and wasn't interested in reclaiming his father's inheritance.

Now that we've delved into this aspect of Avraham's family, keep it in mind when penniless Yaakov knocks on Lavan's door. Might there have been an undercurrent of tension and suspicion by Lavan and his children? Was Avraham's grandson really coming to escape from his brother and to find a wife? Or was he (also) planning to reclaim his great-grandfather's inheritance? We may know, but did Lavan? © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI DANIEL TRAVIS

Integrity

“I will be in his eyes k'metate'ah (like an impostor).” (Bereshith 27:12) As explained previously, lying is such a serious transgression that it is

compared to idol worship. Truth, on the other hand, is such a fundamental value in Jewish thought that clinging to truth can lead one to a life of Torah observance, as described in the following story.

An inveterate thief once approached a rav with the announcement that he had decided to abandon his life of crime. He begged the rav to tell him what he could do to make amends for his many acts of theft. He fully expected the rav to instruct him to undergo a rigorous process of repentance.

The rav, however, realized that any such stringent regimen would prove too difficult for the penitent thief, and he would not be able to maintain it for long. He therefore told the thief that the only change he would need to accept upon himself was an absolute dedication to truth under all circumstances; he should never allow himself to utter even the smallest lie. The thief gave his word that he would do as the rav had instructed him, and with that he left the rav's home, delighted that so little was being demanded of him.

It was not long before the thief's excitement over the notion of repenting wore off, and he was seized by the urge to rob someone's house. As he was on his way to carry out his intention, someone inquired of him where he was headed. Remembering the one promise he had made to the rav, he would not lie, but neither could he bring himself to tell the truth that he was going to commit a theft. He therefore changed his mind about his anticipated action, and returned home. This scene repeated itself in various forms again and again, until finally he realized that his career as a thief was over; never again would he attempt to steal. He was then able to put his past behind him completely and make a fresh start. (Sefer Chasidim 647)

How did the rav know that merely telling the thief not to lie would influence his behavior so dramatically? Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai taught that the embarrassment caused by fear of what others will think is the strongest motivation to stop one from transgressing (Brachoth 28b). Since people are in constant interaction with one another, it would be nearly impossible for the penitent thief to remain faithful to his promise to always speak the truth while maintaining a life of crime. A steadfast dedication to the truth was therefore the most appropriate way of keeping him from faltering while correcting his ways. © 2007 Rabbi D. Travis & torah.org

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

As we read the Book of Genesis, we are spellbound by a rapid succession of sharp and vivid images that leave deep and lasting impressions. The Creation, the Flood, Abraham's departure from home, the angels bearing tidings of the birth of Isaac, the destruction of Sodom, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the conflict between

Jacob and Esau, the rivalry between Joseph and his brothers and many others pass before us, each sketched in bold strokes in a small number of verses and laden with endless moral and spiritual significance.

In this week's parshah, however, we find a relatively extensive account of Abraham's negotiations for the purchase of the Cave of the Machpelah in Hebron as a burial ground following the death of Sarah. Why did Abraham go to such great lengths to acquire this particular piece of land? And what is so significant about the acquisition of the Cave of the Machpelah that the Torah focuses upon it in such great detail?

Furthermore, the Midrash tells us that Abraham eulogized Sarah by using each verse of the Woman of Valor (Proverbs 31) to describe another of her virtues. How did the phrase "she planned the purchase of a field and acquired it" apply to Sarah? The Midrash explains that this referred to her acquiring a permanent resting place in the Cave of the Machpelah. But how can this be? The Cave was acquired by Abraham, not by Sarah-and only after her death.

The Zohar writes that the Cave is "the very entranceway to the Garden of Eden." The Hebrew word machpelah means twofold. The Cave is considered "twofold," because it bridges the material and spiritual worlds, linking them by serving as an entrance from one to the other. The name of the city in which the Cave is situated, Hebron, also bears the etymological roots of "connection."

The Cave, as the point of fusion between Heaven and earth, was the proper resting place for the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, whose lives were the perfect bridges between the two worlds-involvement in the mundane affairs of this world without ever losing sight of the spiritual goals and aspirations that infused their lives with meaning and direction. This was how Sarah had "acquired" the Cave. She had lived her life as the paragon of an intelligent and thoroughly spiritual woman of the world, never compromising her purity, modesty or righteousness. Such a woman deserved to find her final resting place at the Gateway to Eden.

We are all "twofold" creatures. We have our spiritual sides and our material sides, and we have to forge a beneficial union between the two. We must give the full deserved attention to those daily activities that put bread on our tables and roofs over our heads. We must take our children to the doctor, and we must fix the transmission on the car. But we must also be intensely spiritual, treating our fellow men with love, kindness and compassion and seeking closer ties with the Creator. How do we reconcile these two worlds? How do we open a gateway from one to the other?

The truth is, we don't need to. The gateway already exists. It is called the Torah. If we establish the Torah squarely in the center of our lives, right between the two conflicting worlds we represent, we will find a

perfect harmony such as we never thought possible.
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RABBI ADAM LIEBERMAN

A Life Lesson

Abraham wanted his servant, Eliezer, to go find a wife for his son, Isaac. He told Eliezer the criteria the woman would need to fulfill to be worthy of marrying his son. Eliezer should go by a spring of water and see if he could find a woman who would not only give water to him to drink, but would also instinctively give water to his camels without ever being asked to do so.

Eliezer did just as Abraham had instructed him and, by a spring, he saw a woman named Rebecca. Eliezer ran towards her and asked her for a drink. She quickly obliged and..."When she finished giving him drink, she said, 'I will draw water even for your camels until they have finished drinking.'...And it was, when the camels had finished drinking, the man took a golden nose ring, its weight was a beka, and two bracelets on her arms..." (Genesis 24:19-32)

There is a barely noticeable but very significant distinction in the way Rebecca gave water to Eliezer and how she gave water to his camels. This difference teaches a powerful concept regarding doing acts of kindness.

When Rebecca gave water to Eliezer, it was she who decided when to stop giving him water. When she felt that he had enough water, she then "finished giving him drink." However, when Rebecca gave water to his camels, she only stopped giving them water "when the camels had finished drinking."

When we proactively do an act of kindness for someone, we're usually the ones who choose just how much time to spend doing this good deed. This is because if someone initiates a kind gesture, he or she usually controls how much time to devote to it.

However, if you allow the recipient of the act of kindness tell you when you've done enough, then that's an entirely different experience all together.

For example, let's assume you have a friend or family member that's emotionally very needy and sometimes requires a lot of attention. Listening to this person talk endlessly might be absolutely the right thing to do. But since he's usually never the one to end the conversation, you'll usually engage him until you've "finished giving him drink" and then gently end the encounter. This is how Rebecca was toward Eliezer and it's definitely a beautiful act of kindness.

However, if once in a while you listened to and spent time with this person until he ended the conversation and "had finished drinking," it would be a monumentally greater act equal to what Rebecca did for the camels.

When doing an act of kindness we often feel a subconscious sense of entitlement that tells us that we

can end our flow of generosity when we decide to do so. It goes against our nature to give until the recipient says to stop. But sometimes this is exactly what G-d wants us to shoot for. © 2007 Rabbi A. Lieberman & aish.com

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL SHLIT" A

Summarized by Shaul Barth

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“Sara's life was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years, the years of Sara's life" (Bereishit 23:1). The Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 58:1) quotes a verse in connection with this: "The Lord knows the days of the wholehearted (temimim), and their inheritance shall be forever" (Tehillim 37:18). The Midrash comments, "This refers to Sara, who was whole (temima) in her actions; R. Yochanan said: She was as innocent (temima) as a calf." What can this mean?

In recounting the episode of the expulsion of Hagar, G-d tells Avraham, "Whatever Sara tells you listen to her" (Bereishit 21:12), and the Sages deduce that she was greater than Avraham in prophecy (Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot 1). However, if we look at the preceding parashot we find that, in contrast to the many occasions on which G-d spoke with Avraham, there is no record of Him speaking with Sara. The one occasion when it seems that G-d is talking to her is the subject of debate among the commentators. After Sara hears that a son will be born to her and Avraham, she laughs, at which point "G-d said to Avraham: 'Why then does Sara laugh, saying: Shall I then truly give birth, although I am old?' ... And Sara said to Avraham: 'I did not laugh'-for she was afraid, but he said to her: 'No, for you laughed'" (Bereishit 18:13-15). The literal text would seem to suggest that it was Avraham who chided Sara, saying, "No, for you laughed," but some of the commentators maintain that these words are spoken by G-d. Nevertheless, even assuming that G-d speaks to Sara in this instance, it is difficult to understand on what basis she is regarded as being a greater prophet than Avraham. Are these three words, which she hears from G-d, more important than the great promises that G-d conveys to Avraham?

I believe that the Sages have a completely different message in mind. They are telling us that Sara was closer to G-d specifically by virtue of her simple innocence, her pure human senses. When she sees what influence Yishmael is having on Yitzchak, she identifies him as a negative element and tells Avraham that Hagar and her son must be sent away. G-d tells Avraham to listen to Sara-not because she was a great prophetess, but rather because she- with her simple maternal instincts-was better attuned to the situation at

home than was Avraham, the great prophet. The Torah is telling us that in order to be close to G-d, one does not have to be a prophet or even a great sage. A simple, guileless person can also achieve closeness to G-d.

When I was a child, there was a saying in Poland that used to be attached to innocent, wholehearted people: "That person is simpler than Avraham Avinu." It angered the rabbis; they regarded it as proof of the ignorance of the Jewish masses. Could anyone imagine that Avraham was a simpleton? I decided to investigate the matter, and went to check how many times our Sages say, "This is what people say"-i.e., how many times they quote folk sayings. I thought that I would find twenty appearances, but I discovered that it appears no less than 180 times! In other words, our Sages attach importance to the things that ordinary people say, and to the way in which they perceive things. There is something about Avraham that gives an impression of simplicity and wholeheartedness. He is hospitable toward strangers; he obeys G-d's commands without complaint. The Torah wants to teach us that simplicity and wholehearted innocence are also ways of drawing close to G-d. Indeed, G-d may show greater esteem for a simple man who is wholeheartedly trying to serve Him, or for a simple woman with her maternal instincts, than He does for more sophisticated scholars or worldly people. "The Lord knows the days of the temimim'... [Sara] was as innocent as a calf." (*This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Chayei Sara 5765 [2004].*)

RABBI YAACOV HABER

Jews in the Headlines

“A tzaddik says little, but does a lot. A rasha says a lot, but, in the end, does nothing.”

The events in this week's parsha bring me to one of my favorite Gemaras. In Bava Metzia it says: "A tzaddik says little, but does a lot. A rasha says a lot, but, in the end, does nothing." The proof for the first statement is taken from last week's parsha (Vayera), when Abraham said to his three angelic visitors: "I will bring you a piece of bread", but actually had a calf slaughtered to provide them with a good meal.

The proof for the second statement is taken from this week's parsha, when Abraham negotiates with Ephron the Hittite to buy the cave of Machpelah, so as to bury his wife Sarah there. Ephron starts off by offering to give Abraham not only the cave, but the field containing it, and ends up by taking 400 shekels for it.

I was thinking: What's so terrible about what Ephron did? If you read the story, you see that he made a generous offer to begin with. He could have simply refused to part with his land! Then, when pressed by Abraham to accept money, he did what most of us

would probably do in such circumstances, and named a price.

The following answer occurred to me. We all know that there are many people who engage in dishonest business and professional practices. And yet, if you were to ask such a person, when he was just starting out, how he intended to run his business or profession, he might very well say: "I'm going to do this properly. So-and-so cheats his customers, or provides shoddy goods, and so-and-so has no time left over for his family; but I'm not going to do any of that. I'm going to run a classy operation!"

If you were to ask a high school student how he wanted to earn a living, you would be unlikely to hear that his plans were to be a racketeer!

The interesting thing is that such people actually mean what they say. They talk a lot (sincerely!), and don't realize the force of the yetzer hara (evil inclination). The result is that when temptation comes their way, they succumb to it. A tzaddik, on the other hand, does not underestimate the yetzer hara, and is not sure whether he will be able to withstand it when the time comes, and so he says nothing. The result is that, precisely because he does not underestimate the temptation, he passes such a test when the time comes.

Ephron started out full of goodwill. But, in the end, he failed the test miserably. He said a lot at the start, but in the end, he did absolutely nothing. According to chazal, he overcharged for the field. He did not even give Abraham a discount!

It is my prayer that we do not underestimate the strength of the temptations which face us and others. In this way, the headlines should be filled not with people's crooked practices, but with their good deeds. © 2007 Rabbi Y. Haber & torahlab.org

RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

This week's portion begins with the death of our matriarch, Sarah. The Torah tells us (Genesis 23:2) that upon Sarah's passing, Abraham eulogized her and wept. According to our tradition, the letter kaf in the word "v'livkota" ("and he wept over her") is written smaller than the other letters in the word. The commentator Kohelet Isaac understands this small kaf as an indication that Abraham cried only a little bit over Sarah's passing.

We might find this comment surprising. Surely Abraham was devastated over the loss of his beloved wife. Why would he cry only a little bit?

This question becomes even stronger when we look at Rashi's comment (Genesis 23:2) regarding the juxtaposition of the binding of Isaac and the death of Sarah. According to Rashi, when the news reached Sarah that Abraham had brought Isaac as an offering to G-d, Sarah was so overwhelmed that she died. How

can we understand Abraham weeping only minimally in such a situation? Not only did his wife pass on; it seems that, indirectly, his own actions actually killed her!

A deeper examination of Abraham's motives will help us resolve this troubling question. When Abraham returned from Mount Moriah to find that Sarah had died, he could easily have regretted following G-d's will. This would have been an understandable reaction; after all, his obedience to G-d resulted in the death of his beloved wife! Yet Abraham understood the tremendous power of regret to undo the effect of past actions. When repentance is used positively, as part of the teshuva process, it has the ability to erase our misdeeds. But repentance can also erase the reward we receive for performing mitzvot. Had Abraham regretted bringing Isaac as an offering, countless future generations would have lost the ability to draw from the merit of his actions.

Therefore, Abraham cried only a little bit over the passing of his beloved wife to show that, despite the challenges, he did not regret having performed the Divine will. He knew that there are no negative consequences to performing mitzvot wholeheartedly, and that his actions could therefore not have been the true cause of Sarah's death. In overcoming this test of faith, Abraham preserved the merit of the binding of Isaac as a powerful spiritual inheritance for generations to come.

This idea also helps us understand a puzzling passage from the evening prayers. Before reciting the Amidah of the evening Ma'ariv, we beseech G-d to remove the Satan from before us and from after us (v'haser satan mil'faneinu u'mei'achoreinu). What does this strange phrasing signify?

The Satan is the evil inclination (yetzer hara) that challenges our connection to G-d. The Satan "before us" is the yetzer hara that tries to prevent us from performing mitzvot and following the Divine will. If the yetzer hara does not succeed in convincing us to give up before we've even started, however, it tries again after the fact. This is the Satan "after us," that wants to undo the positive effect of the mitzvot we have performed by causing us to regret our actions. If the yetzer hara can make us think we've lost out in some way by doing mitzvot, then we are robbed of the reward for performing them.

Thus, we ask G-d both for the strength to resist temptation "before us"- so that we can carry out His will, as well as for the ability to remain committed to our decisions after the fact and not lose the reward.

May we merit to perform all the mitzvot and to be happy with them, knowing with certainty that no negativity or bitterness is caused by our fulfillment of the Divine will. May our wholehearted performance of mitzvot cause us to be blessed with reward-both in this world and the next. ©2007 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & aish.com