

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

In 1966 an eleven-year-old black boy moved with his parents and family to a white neighbourhood in Washington. Sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. They were not. Passers-by turned to look at them but no one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later, writing about those first days in their new home, he says, "I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here..."

As he was thinking those thoughts, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children and with a broad smile said, "Welcome!" Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment -- the young man later wrote -- changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. It made him realise, at a time when race relations in the United States were still fraught, that a black family could feel at home in a white area and that there could be relationships that were colour-blind. Over the years, he learned to admire much about the woman across the street, but it was that first spontaneous act of greeting that became, for him, a definitive memory. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends.

The young man, Stephen Carter, eventually became a law professor at Yale and wrote a book about what he learned that day. He called it *Civility*. (*Civility*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, pp. 61-75.) The name of the woman, he tells us, was Sara Kestenbaum, and she died all too young. He adds that it was no coincidence that she was a religious Jew. "In the Jewish tradition," he notes, such civility is called *chesed* -- "the doing of acts of kindness -- which is in

turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God." Civility, he adds, "itself may be seen as part of *chesed*: it does indeed require kindnesses toward our fellow citizens, including the ones who are strangers, and even when it is hard." To this day, he adds, "I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever." (*Ibid.*, pp. 71-72)

I never knew Sara Kestenbaum, but years after I had read Carter's book I gave a lecture to the Jewish community in the part of Washington where she had lived. I told them Carter's story, which they had not heard before. But they nodded in recognition. "Yes," one said, "that's the kind of thing Sara would do."

Something like this thought was surely in the mind of Abraham's servant, unnamed in the text but traditionally identified as Eliezer, when he arrived at Nahor in Aram Naharaim, northwest Mesopotamia, to find a wife for his master's son. Abraham had not told him to look for any specific traits of character. He had simply told him to find someone from his own extended family. Eliezer, however, formulated a test:

Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a young woman, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too' -- let her be the one You have chosen for Your servant Isaac. By this I will know that You have shown kindness [chesed] to my master." (Gen. 24:12-14)

His use of the word *chesed* here is no accident, for it is the very characteristic he is looking for in the future wife of the first Jewish child, Isaac, and he found it in Rebecca.

It is the theme, also, of the book of Ruth. It is Ruth's kindness to Naomi, and Boaz's to Ruth, that Tanach seeks to emphasise in sketching the background to David, their great-grandson, who would become Israel's greatest King. Indeed the Sages said that the three characteristics most important to Jewish character are modesty, compassion, and kindness. (Bamidbar Rabbah 8:4) *Chessed*, what I have defined elsewhere as "love as deed," is central to the Jewish

Happy birthday Nana Devora Wenger!
Watching you live Torah inspires us every day.
We love you!
Susy and Emile

value system. (To Heal a Fractured World, pp. 44-56)

The Sages based it on the acts of God himself. Rav Simlai taught: "The Torah begins with an act of kindness and ends with an act of kindness. It begins with God clothing the naked -- "The Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and clothed them," (Gen. 3:21) -- and it ends with Him caring for the dead: "And He [God] buried [Moses] in the Valley." (Deut. 34:6). (Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a)

Chessed -- providing shelter for the homeless, food for the hungry, assistance to the poor; visiting the sick, comforting mourners and providing a dignified burial for all -- became constitutive of Jewish life. During the many centuries of exile and dispersion Jewish communities were built around these needs. There were chevrot, "friendly societies," for each of them.

In seventeenth-century Rome, for example, there were seven societies dedicated to the provision of clothes, shoes, linen, beds and warm winter bed coverings for children, the poor, widows and prisoners. There were two societies providing trousseaus, dowries, and the loan of jewellery to poor brides. There was one for visiting the sick, another bringing help to families who had suffered bereavement, and others to perform the last rites for those who had died -- purification before burial, and the burial service itself. Eleven fellowships existed for educational and religious aims, study and prayer, another raised alms for Jews living in the Holy Land, and others were involved in the various activities associated with the circumcision of newborn boys. Yet others provided the poor with the means to fulfil commands such as mezuzot for their doors, oil for the Chanukah lights, and candles for the Sabbath. (Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, London, Edward Goldston, 1932, pp. 348-363.)

Chessed, said the Sages, is in some respects higher even than tzedakah: Our masters taught: loving-kindness [chessed] is greater than charity [tzedakah] in three ways. Charity is done with one's money, while loving-kindness may be done with one's money or with one's person. Charity is done only to the poor, while loving-kindness may be given both to the poor and to the rich. Charity is given only to the living, while loving-kindness may be shown to the living and the dead. (Talmud Bavli, Succah 49b)

Chessed in its many forms became synonymous with Jewish life and one of the pillars on which it stood. Jews performed kindnesses to one another because it was "the way of God" and also because they or their families had had intimate experience of suffering and knew they had nowhere else to turn. It provided an access of grace in dark times. It softened the blow of the loss of the Temple and its rites: Once, as R. Yohanan was walking out of Jerusalem, R. Joshua followed him. Seeing the Temple in ruins, R. Joshua cried, "Woe to us that this place is in

ruins, the place where atonement was made for Israel's iniquities." R. Yohanan said to him: "My son, do not grieve, for we have another means of atonement which is no less effective. What is it? It is deeds of loving-kindness, about which Scripture says, 'I desire loving-kindness and not sacrifice'" (Hosea 6:6). (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, 4)

Through chessed, Jews humanised fate as, they believed, God's chessed humanises the world. As God acts towards us with love, so we are called on to act lovingly to one another. The world does not operate solely on the basis of impersonal principles like power or justice, but also on the deeply personal basis of vulnerability, attachment, care and concern, recognising us as individuals with unique needs and potentialities.

It also added a word to the English language. In 1535 Myles Coverdale published the first-ever translation of the Hebrew Bible into English (the work had been begun by William Tyndale who paid for it with his life, burnt at the stake in 1536). It was when he came to the word chessed that he realised that there was no English word which captured its meaning. It was then that, to translate it, he coined the word "loving-kindness."

The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to say, "When I was young I admired cleverness. Now that I am old I find I admire kindness more." There is deep wisdom in those words. It is what led Eliezer to choose Rebecca to become Isaac's wife and thus the first Jewish bride. Kindness brings redemption to the world and, as in the case of Stephen Carter, it can change lives. Wordsworth was right when he wrote that the, "Best portion of a good man's [and woman's] life" is their "little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love." (From Wordsworth's poem, 'Tintern Abbey'.) *Covenant and Conversation 5775 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 5775 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**W**hen Rebecca looked up and saw Isaac, she fell from the camel. And she asked the servant: 'What man is this walking in the field to meet us?' And the servant responded, 'It is my master.' And she took her veil and covered herself" (Gen. 24:62-65). The fascinating marriage of Isaac and Rebecca -from the circumstances surrounding their arranged nuptials to the devastating family split over their twin sons' bitter rivalry – contains vitally important lessons for couples in every generations. On the one hand, the Torah's description of the tenderness of their marriage is extraordinary: "And Isaac brought [Rebecca] into the tent of his mother, Sarah...and [Rebecca] became his wife; and he loved her. And

Isaac was comforted over the loss of his mother" [ibid., 24:67].

The Torah also mentions the impassioned prayers of Isaac on behalf of Rebecca, who was struggling with infertility [ibid., 25:21], as well as their lovemaking while in the land of Gerar [ibid., 26:8].

Nevertheless, and tragically, what seems to be missing from their relationship is open communication. Perhaps no better evidence for the distance between them is their un verbalized dispute surrounding the bekhora, the spiritual blessings bequeathed from father to son.

Differences of opinion between parents will always exist, but if the father prefers Esau and the mother prefers Jacob regarding an issue as momentous as who will don the mantle of spiritual heir to Abraham, ought there not be a discussion and an opportunity to examine the true nature of their sons' very different characters in order to arrive at a consensus?

Instead, Rebecca resorts to ruse, casting the otherwise-guileless Jacob into a role of deception for which he is unnaturally suited. Not only does he perpetrate an act that will haunt him for the rest of his life, but what begins as a split between brothers comes to signify the far greater division between Jews and gentiles throughout history.

Why must Rebecca resort to deception? Why could she not simply have raised the issue with Isaac? The answer can be found in the initial encounter between Isaac and Rebecca, which reflects the gulf that separates them. Isaac had been meditating in the fields, and with the approach of Eliezer and the bride-to-be, he raises his eyes:

"When Rebecca looked up and saw Isaac, she fell from the camel. And she asked the servant: 'What man is this walking in the field to meet us?' And the servant responded, 'It is my master.' And she took her veil and covered herself" [ibid., 24:62-65].

The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin (19th Century Poland), in his commentary Ha'Emek Davar, explains that Rebecca fell because she had never before seen a religious personality, a spiritual persona who communed with nature and actually spoke before God.

So awesome was the sight of Isaac transformed by prayer that she was literally knocked off her feet. Compared to the lying and cheating world of her father, Betuel, and her brother, Laban, Isaac projected a vision of purity with which Rebecca had no previous experience.

When Eliezer revealed the man's identity, she took the veil and covered herself, not only as a sign of modesty, but as an expression of her unworthiness. From that moment on, the veil between them was never removed. She felt she could never speak to her husband as an equal. She never felt that she had the

right to offer a dissenting opinion.

Granted that the veil comes to symbolize the distance between their worlds, but why was Isaac unable to bridge that gap?

The harrowing experience of the Akedah left Isaac in a permanent state of shock. In fact, a part of him always remained behind on Mount Moriah, as hinted at in the final verse of the Akedah: "Abraham returned to his young men, and together they went to Be'er Sheva, and Abraham resided in Be'er Sheva" [ibid., 22:19].

Where is Isaac? Why is he not mentioned? Very likely, the verse alludes to the fact that only Abraham came down from the mountain, while Isaac, or part of him, remained behind on the altar. Thus it is not surprising that the traumatized Isaac became a silent, non-communicative survivor. Indeed, Elie Wiesel referred to Isaac as the first survivor.

And if neither wife nor husband could speak openly with each other, there could be no real communication between them.

In my many years of offering marital counseling, I am never put off when one partner screams at the other. As a wife once said to her husband who complained that she yelled at him too often: "With whom then should I let out my frustrations? The stranger next door?" Of course, I am not advocating shouting, but a far more serious danger sign is silence – non-communication – between the couple.

A crucial lesson, then, from the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca is that we must spend a lifetime working on ourselves and on our relationship with our spouse. Most importantly, we must be honest with ourselves and honest with our spouse: loving them as we love ourselves, and learning how to disagree lovingly and respectfully. ©2021 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah records for us the years of the life of our mother Sarah. It is done in a lengthy fashion counting one hundred years, twenty years and then seven years, instead of merely stating that she lived for 127 years. Rashi, in his famous commentary, states that this teaches us that that all her years were good ones.

At first glance, this is difficult to understand and accept. In reviewing the life of our mother Sarah, we are aware of the difficulties, dangers and frustrations that marked her experiences in life. Always threatened to be taken and abused by powerful kings, a woman who is barren and longs for children, a wife who has a concubine living in her home and presents her with a stepchild who is uncontrollable, and one who is finally challenged by the fact that her only miraculous child is going to be sacrificed by his own father.

One could hardly conclude that she had a so-called good life. In fact, I would say that most people would not wish such a life experience upon themselves. Yet, we find this to be the pattern in the experiences of all our forefathers and mothers, with very difficult lives. Rashi will later comment that when Jacob wished to have a more peaceful and serene existence, only then did the dispute regarding Joseph and the brothers blossom and explode. Rashi explained there that Heaven somehow is saying that the reward for the righteous is in the eternal world, and that they are, so to speak, not entitled to a leisurely and tranquil life in this world. And yet, in our Parsha, Rashi states that all the years of our mother Sarah, her entire lifetime, can be summed up as a good life.

Over the ages, many thoughts and ideas have been devoted by our great commentators to try and explain this statement and attitude. One of the main ideas is that a person can have a good life only if he or she learns the secret of accepting life in its basic terms and as it occurs. Lofty expectations always bring about disappointment and frustration. Low expectations can allow us to overcome the unavoidable vicissitudes that inflict all human beings during one's lifetime.

Sarah has no illusions about life and about the challenges that she will face, having embarked on the path of her husband Abraham and the founding of the Jewish people. She will view all the occurrences of her lifetime, even those that apparently are negative and dangerous, if not even tragic, with equanimity and fortitude. There is a higher goal that she is striving to achieve, and this goal is always present in her assessment of life.

No matter what occurs in life, it somehow can push her forward on that path towards her ultimate goal. This notion transforms everything that transpires in her life to point towards good and eternity. In her eyes, all her experiences in life had a purpose, a noble one, that transforms the fabric of her life, and enables her to become the mother of Israel for all generations. ©2021 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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Onen

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

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

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

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

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

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

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As he buys a burial plot for his wife Sarah, Abraham identifies himself as a *ger v'toshav* (Genesis 23:4). The term is enigmatic. *Ger* means alien, while *toshav* means resident. How could Abraham be both alien and resident when those terms seem to be mutually exclusive?

Rashi explains that, on a simple level, Abraham 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 Abraham 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 God promised to His children" (Bereishit Rabbah 58:6).

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik sees this apparent contradiction differently. For him, Abraham 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.

These explanations raise an additional possibility. Abraham 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, the term ger toshav reflects one’s outlook on life. As much as one may feel like a toshav, like a resident who is in control of life, one is at the same time a ger, a stranger – here one day and gone the next.

The reverse is equally true. Even if one feels like a stranger, unsure of one’s status or abilities, one should try to develop a belief that all will be well and that one will experience life like a toshav, comfortable and certain of one’s standing. Thus, the phrase ger v’toshav speaks to the complexities of human nature and the need for the binary feelings of ger and toshav to coexist sometimes in tension, sometimes in harmony. ©2021 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 AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

If He Only Knew...

This Parsha relates the story in which, after the death of Sarah, Avraham purchases the Ma’arat Hamachpela as a family burial site.

Efron, the owner of the plot, seems eager to do business with the respected Avraham, who is considered a prince by the residents of the region. At first, he offered to give Avraham the cave for free. Understanding the implications of accepting such a “gift”, Avraham declines and offers to pay full value.

At this point, Efron mentions the price of 400 silver coins, a price far beyond the true value of the land. In a matter of seconds, the “noble” Efron changes from the benevolent benefactor to someone seeking to squeeze Avraham for every shekel possible.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָהָם אֶל-עֲפְרוֹן וַיִּשְׁקַל אַבְרָהָם לְעִפְרוֹן אֶת-הַכֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר בְּאָזְנוֹ בְּנִיחַת אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל לְטֹסֵף עֶבֶר: And Avraham listened to Efron, and Avraham weighed out to Efron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the sons of Chet, four hundred shekels of silver, accepted by (any) merchant.

Not only did Avraham accept Efron’s terms, he paid with coins that were of the highest value and accepted universally. There could be no question as to

the validity of this transaction.

When mentioning Efron in the payout, the Torah spells his name עֲרוֹן, without a “i”. Although the word reads the same, there is usually a lesson to be learned in such a case.

Rashi tells us that this alternative spelling teaches that Efron spoke “a lot, but didn’t do even a little”. He went from offering the field for free to charging far beyond the true value. As opposed to Avraham whose actions went above and beyond his words.

The “punishment” for Efron’s behavior seems to be insignificant. His name is missing one letter that doesn’t change its pronunciation or meaning. Does it really matter to someone like Efron?

In truth, the consequences are much deeper and far reaching than simply an absent letter.

From time immemorial, students of the parsha will see that missing “vav” and relate how Efron the profit-seeker tried to “pull one over” on Avraham.

Not exactly the “best PR” for such a central figure in history.

Efron was not a poor man. The Ma’arat HaMachpela was but one of his many possessions. Charging Avraham a fair price would not have made any difference in his personal wealth. Efron could have gone down in history as the one who dealt honestly and sincerely with our forefather Avraham by providing the Ma’arat HaMachpela at a reasonable and fair price

Instead, Efron chose to talk a good talk but walk a very different walk. That double speak (and double charge) is recorded forever.

I am certain that if Efron would have known the consequences of his behavior, he would have done things differently. Efron wasn’t a bad guy, he was an opportunist. Unfortunately, the opportunity to make a bit more profit overshadowed his opportunity to be recorded positively for all of history.

And that is why the missing “i” is so relevant. The letter “Vav” in Hebrew is used as a connector, to bring together thoughts, ideas and events.

Had Efron “connected” his original verbal offer of a gift with action, the story could have played out much better for him.

His words and his deeds did not line up. Efron promised much and delivered little.

Avraham’s actions always matched and, in most cases, surpassed his words.

While Efron lost his stature, Avraham only gained.

As the descendants of Avraham, his legacy should be our example.

Are our words and actions congruent? Do we aim to do even more than we say? Do we under-promise and over-deliver?

Do we consider the long-term consequences of our behavior, actions and daily conduct?

Every day provides opportunities to make a

difference for our families, our communities and the world.

Rather than live for the moment, we must live in the moment and consider how what we say and do right now can and will have lasting positive effects.

By keeping your eye on the “vav”, you can ensure that that your actions are consistent and reflect the words by which you live. ©2021 Rabbi A. Leventhal, noted educator and speaker, is the Executive Director at Lema'an Achai lemaanachai.org

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Hagar to Keturah - Was That Enough?

Parashat Chayei Sarah contains many interesting characters most of whom we have previously discussed. This week I would like to concentrate on the end of Avraham's life, after the death of Sarah and after the marriage of his son, Yitzchak, to Rivka. Avraham remarries, has several children with his new wife, gives everything to Yitzchak, and gives gifts to these new children and sends them away from the land. There are several aspects to the story which may go unnoticed but which give us several important lessons.

The Torah tells us, “Avraham proceeded and took a wife whose name was K'turah. And she gave birth for him to Zimran, and Yakshan, and M'dan, and Midyan, and Yishbak, and Shu'ach. And Yakshan gave birth to Sh'va and D'dan, and the children of D'dan were Ashurim, L'tushim, and L'umim. And the children of Midyan (were) Eifah and Chanoch, and Avida, and Elda'ah, all of these were the sons of K'turah. And Avraham gave all that was his to Yitzchak. And to the sons of the concubines of Avraham, Avraham gave gifts and he sent them away from Yitzchak his son while he was still alive eastward to the land of the East.”

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that it is not surprising that Avraham remarried since he lived another thirty-five years after Sarah's death. “Apart from that, our sages teach that a man is not “whole” without a wife, the task of a human being (a man) is at all times too great to be able to accomplish by one person alone.” Reb Yehudah tells us in Bereishit Rabbah that K'turah is another name for Hagar. Yitzchak went to the well where she lived and brought her back for Avraham. Rashi tells us that Hagar was renamed K'turah because of the similarity of that word to k'toret, her deeds were pleasant like the sweet-smelling incense of the Beit HaMikdash. This was an indication of her teshuvah much as we see that Yishmael also did teshuvah. Hirsch explains that K'turah comes from keter, a Chaldean word meaning knotted or tied up. This was an indication that Hagar still felt that she was knotted to Avraham even after she

was sent away. Avraham knew that she had not been with another man or he would have been forbidden to take her back.

Not all of the commentators agree with Rashi that K'turah is Hagar. The Gur Aryeh was concerned with Rashi's earlier comment about Hagar when she was sent away, namely, that she worshipped avodah zara. The Gur Aryeh answers his question by saying that her intention was to return to idolatry but when the angel appeared to her at the well, she changed her mind and remained with Avraham's G-d. The Zohar says that she repented and changed her name which indicated that she had done teshuvah. The Ramban also felt that K'turah and Hagar are different women. Both are treated as concubines, pilagshim, and none of the children inherit with Yitzchak. They have no rights of settlement or of owning any portion of it.

The Torah continues with the rights of inheritance. “And Avraham gave all that was his to Yitzchak.” In Eliezer's quest to find a wife for Yitzchak, we found, “and (Eliezer had) all of the best of his master in his hands.” Rashi explained that Eliezer was carrying a legal document in which Avraham had given all his possessions to Yitzchak. The Maharsha believed that there was no document that Eliezer carried but “in his hands” referred to the jewelry that he gave to Rivka. The Kli Yakar explains that here Avraham had given other gifts to his sons with K'turah, yet he left Yitzchak his inheritance as he had promised Sarah when she insisted, “the son of this maidservant will not inherit together with my son with Yitzchak.” The Kli Yakar explains that the gifts that Avraham gave to K'turah's children were from Par'oh, and now were being returned to Par'oh's daughter and her children.

We are told that Yishmael did teshuvah as he is included with Yitzchak in burying Avraham. Further indication of this teshuvah is that Yishmael allows Yitzchak to be named first in this burial even though he is the older son. This demonstrates a new level of humility which we have not seen before. The teshuvah that Yishmael did, could only come when he accepted that he was not to be the leader of the family even though he was the firstborn. His willingness to accept Hashem and his own destiny was his teshuvah. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why the other sons of K'turah do not help bury their father. He answers that these brothers had already been sent to the East and were not close enough to return in time for the funeral.

K'turah/Hagar is an interesting person. Hagar (Keturah) had become haughty and looked down upon Sarah when she became pregnant. She was responsible for raising Yishmael but did not prevent him from being influenced by avodah zara. When she and Yishmael were sent away, she placed him far away from her so that she would not see him die of thirst, instead of comforting him. She did not turn to Hashem and pray. She then gave her son an Egyptian wife

without any concern of the effect that she might have on him. Only later, when Hagar realized her mistake, was she able to become K'turah. Even though Keturah had changed, she had not changed enough for Avraham to consider her a full wife (with a marriage document, ketuvah). She is not buried with him in the Ma'arat HaMachpeila in Chevron, nor do her children with Avraham become like Yitzchak and receive a portion of the land.

It is hard to dismiss one's past. A person who does not grow up being fully committed to Hashem may do Teshuva, but must continue to struggle with ideas and emotions from his youth. Much of a person's character is formed before the age of four. This can limit one's growth if one allows it to. Hagar became Keturah, but, perhaps, Avraham noticed that she was still attached to her childhood understanding of a Supreme Being. She brought Yishmael an Egyptian wife, and she continued to live by the Well where the angel had spoken to her, as if this was the only place where she could be with Hashem. Hagar improved, but she had not changed enough to warrant that her children also inherit from Avraham. She needed more adjustment to commit fully to Hashem. May we learn to adjust all of our actions and ideals to those which Hashem demands of us. Only in that way can we complete our return to Hashem. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Lelamed Weekly Dvar

Avraham negotiates and (over)pays for the plot of land in which he will bury his wife (23:1-16). It is noteworthy that Avraham never questions G-d's promise that the land he's buying is in fact his. According to the Midrash, the Akeida (binding of Yitzchak) is G-d's tenth and final test for Avraham. Why isn't this (need to purchase land that was already promised to him) counted as another of Avraham's tests?

Rav Shimon Schwab proposes that Avraham had reached a level of acceptance such that he would never question events in his life. This inner peace and understanding that whatever happens is part of G-d's plan for him meant that no obstacles or hardships would be too challenging to accept or overcome. Life happens just as it's meant to happen, and this acceptance brought an unwavering inner peace to Avraham, and it should do the same for us all. © 2021 Rabbi S. Ressler and Lelamed, Inc.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And if the woman does not want to go after you, you will be clean from this oath of mine, but do not bring my son there." (Beraishis 24:8) Avraham knew he had to find the right girl for Yitzchak. He therefore sent his trusted servant Eliezer to

Avraham's homeland to find a wife for Yitzchak from their kin. Additionally, Avraham made Eliezer swear he would not take a girl from the Canaanites. When Eliezer asked what to do if the girl refused to come back with him, Avraham told him, "In that case, you are free from THIS oath, to bring his wife from my family. However, you will not be absolved of the other oath, to not marry him to a Canaanite girl. That remains in effect."

We see some very key lessons from Avraham Avinu in this exchange. This was a matter of great importance, but how far would he be willing to go to achieve his goal? He knew that there was a line not to be crossed; that Yitzchak could not go back there. He was too holy to leave the land Hashem promised to Avraham's children no matter how great the stakes.

Though Avraham wanted a girl from his family for his son, he understood there were limits and he might not get his way. However, Avraham had limits in the other direction as well. Even if Eliezer was unable to secure a bride from Avraham's family, he was not free to choose just anyone for Yitzchak. He still had to prevent Yitzchak from marrying a Canaanite girl.

The Ohr HaChaim puts it succinctly: "You are free from the oath to take a girl from my homeland, but from the oath not to take a Canaanite girl you are not absolved, for this is in your power to do."

Avraham Avinu was teaching us here that in life, you are supposed to identify what's important and strive to reach your goals. You should exert yourself to accomplish your objectives, but remember that some things are not in your control. Eliezer could not force the girl to come back with him; that was her choice. However, taking a girl from Canaan would be Eliezer's choice, and that was not appropriate.

We do what we can, but when we can't achieve our goals, we don't cross lines that shouldn't be crossed in the effort to do so. By the same token, being thwarted from reaching our desires doesn't mean we should give up entirely on our ambitions and aims. Instead, we do what we can and leave the rest up to Hashem.

Avraham did all he could to fulfill Hashem's will by sacrificing his son, but he was "thwarted" at the last moment by the angel calling out to stop him. Rather than allow this mission to be completely foiled, he sacrificed the ram he found to show his love and devotion to Hashem. So must we all seek to do all we can for Hashem, not becoming disillusioned or giving up. Every bit we do is important, and the rest is out of our hands.

Late one night, there was a knock on the door of R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l. A chasan and kalla, both of whom were baalei teshuvah, entered, with a difficult question. Their wedding was a week away, and it had suddenly been revealed that the kalla was pasul for marriage, and it was forbidden for them to marry. They implored R' Shlomo Zalman, "What should

we do?"

He sadly gestured that there was nothing he could do. Then he said, "You're asking me what to do, but I know that there's nothing to be done; can I provide a heter for someone forbidden to marry? No, I cannot. However, there is one thing in my power to do for you -- I can cry." He then burst out in heart-rending weeping.

Not twenty-four hours passed and the couple returned to the sage's house. They told him that a man had suddenly arrived from Argentina who knew the kalla's family well and testified that she was not forbidden. The information they had received previously was false.

R' Yitzchak Zilberstein, who retold this story, commented that, in his opinion, the tears of R' Shlomo Zalman were the very cause of the almost miraculous happy ending to the story. ©2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Who's on First?

A number of weeks ago, I wrote about Ishmael. Actually, I wrote about his mother, and the piece was not so kind to her. I received scores of e-mail, some praising the piece, others railing that it was not strong enough, and still others decrying it, saying that it bordered on racism.

Today, once again, I am going to write about Ishmael. But before you gird your loins, let me tell you that I won't speak about the biblical Ishmael, but rather his namesake, Rabbi Ishmael.

You see, one of the great sages of the Talmud was named Rabbi Ishmael. A fact that should shock our genteel readers. In fact, the Talmud is filled with quotes from Rabbi Ishmael. But how did he get such a name? After all, why would anyone name their child after the "wild-ass of a man whose hand is against everyone, and everyone's hand is against him" (Genesis 16:11)? Rabbi Yishmael's opinions are from the most significant in the entire Talmud yet his name is surely not a Rabbinic one? Or perhaps there is more to Ishmael than we truly know.

The answer is somewhat simple. It is based on two words in the Torah. "Yitzchak and Yishmael." Let me put them in context. You see, the Torah tells us "Abraham expired and died at a good old age, mature and content, and he was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah. (Genesis 25:8-9)." It seems innocuous enough. But alas, the Talmud infers something from two words that turn Ishmael, from the castigated wild-man, to one who is worthy of place in Jewish history, a Talmudic giant bearing his name.

The Talmud in Bava Basra tells us, that from the fact that Ishmael, the older son, yielded the precedence to Isaac, the more holy son, we gather that Ishmael repented of his evil ways and, in fact this is

what is meant by the "good old age" mentioned in connection with Abraham's passing.

Amazing! An entire life's transformed is embodied in the smallest act of letting a younger brother go first. And Ishmael becomes the hero after whom the great rabbi is named! How is that? Just because he let his younger brother go first? Is that really possible?

Richard Busby (1606-1695), headmaster of the prestigious Westminster School was a strict disciplinarian. It is reputed that in his 58 years as headmaster only one pupil passed through the school without being personally beaten by Busby. With its fine reputation, the school was visited by King Charles II.

As Dr. Busby was showing King Charles II around the school, it was noticed that, contrary to etiquette, the headmaster kept his hat on in the royal presence. One of the king's aides, mention this flagrant violation of protocol to the headmaster.

Bushy demurred. He excused himself in these words: "It would not do for my boys to suppose that there existed a greater man on earth than I."

Think about it. Who was at that funeral? All of Ishmael's grandchildren, each strongly entrenched in the belief that they were the descendants of the truly chosen son.

And now comes Avraham's funeral, an occasion attended by hundreds of his followers and admirers. Protocol would have the true heir walk first. It's the perfect setting to make a statement. It is the setting where you can insist that you are the true heir and tell the world, that now, with the passing of Avraham, "there is no greater man on earth than I."

Yet Ishmael defers. He lets Isaac go first. It is perhaps a greater act than laying down a sword or embracing an enemy. It is breaking an ingrained character trait. And breaking a character trait, breaking the desire for a little bit of respect in the eyes of observers is a true sign of greatness.

Thank you Rabbi Yishmael's mom for letting us know that. Thank you Yishmael for being so brave. Pass the message on. ©2013 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

