

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L**

### Covenant & Conversation

**H**e was 137 years old. He had been through two traumatic events involving the people most precious to him in the world. The first involved the son for whom he had waited for a lifetime, Isaac. He and Sarah had given up hope, yet God told them both that they would have a son together, and it would be he who would continue the covenant. The years passed. Sarah did not conceive. She had grown old, yet God still insisted they would have a child.

Eventually it came. There was rejoicing. Sarah said: "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." Then came the terrifying moment when God said to Abraham: "Take your son, your only one, the one you love," and offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham did not dissent, protest or delay. Father and son traveled together, and only at the last moment did the command come from heaven saying, "Stop". How does a father, let alone a son, survive a trauma like that?

Then came grief. Sarah, Abraham's beloved wife, died. She had been his constant companion, sharing the journey with him as they left behind all they knew, their land, their birthplace and their families. Twice she saved Abraham's life by pretending to be his sister.

What does a man of 137 do -- the Torah calls him "old and advanced in years" -- after such a trauma and such a bereavement? We would not be surprised to find that he spent the rest of his days in sadness and memory. He had done what God had asked of him. Yet he could hardly say that God's promises had been fulfilled. Seven times he had been promised the land of Canaan, yet when Sarah died he owned not one square-inch of it, not even a place in which to bury his wife. God had promised him many children, a great nation, many nations, as many as the grains of sand in the sea shore and the stars in the sky. Yet he had only one son of the covenant, Isaac, whom he had almost lost, and who was still unmarried at the age of thirty-seven. Abraham had every reason to sit and grieve.

Yet he did not. In one of the most extraordinary

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sequences of words in the Torah, his grief is described in a mere five Hebrew words: in English, "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her." Then immediately we read, "And Abraham rose from his grief." From then on, he engaged in a flurry of activity with two aims in mind: first to buy a plot of land in which to bury Sarah, second to find a wife for his son. Note that these correspond precisely to the two Divine blessings: of land and descendants. Abraham did not wait for God to act. He understood one of the profoundest truths of Judaism: that God is waiting for us to act.

How did Abraham overcome the trauma and the grief? How do you survive almost losing your child and actually losing your life-partner and still have the energy to keep going? What gave Abraham his resilience, his ability to survive, his spirit intact?

I learned the answer from the people who became my mentors in moral courage, namely the Holocaust survivors I had the privilege to know. How, I wondered, did they keep going, knowing what they knew, seeing what they saw? We know that the British and American soldiers who liberated the camps never forgot what they witnessed. According to Niall Fergusson's new biography of Henry Kissinger, who entered the camps as an American soldier, the sight that met his eyes transformed his life. If this was true of those who merely saw Bergen-Belsen and the other camps, how almost infinitely more so, those who lived there and saw so many die there. Yet the survivors I knew had the most tenacious hold on life. I wanted to understand how they kept going.

Eventually I discovered. Most of them did not talk about the past, even to their marriage partners, even to their children. Instead they set about creating a new life in a new land. They learned its language and customs. They found work. They built careers. They married and had children. Having lost their own families, the survivors became an extended family to one another. They looked forward, not back. First they built a future. Only then -- sometimes forty or fifty years later -- did they speak about the past. That was when they told their story, first to their families, then to the world. First you have to build a future. Only then can you mourn the past.

Two people in the Torah looked back, one explicitly, the other by implication. Noah, the most righteous man of his generation, ended his life by

making wine and becoming drunk. The Torah does not say why but we can guess. He had lost an entire world. While he and his family were safe on board the ark, everyone else -- all his contemporaries -- had drowned. It is not hard to imagine this righteous man overwhelmed by grief as he replayed in his mind all that had happened, wondering whether he might have done something to save more lives or avert the catastrophe.

Lot's wife, against the instruction of the angels, actually did look back as the cities of the plain disappeared under fire and brimstone and the anger of God. Immediately she was turned into a pillar of salt, the Torah's graphic description of a woman so overwhelmed by shock and grief as to be unable to move on.

It is the background of these two stories that helps us understand Abraham after the death of Sarah. He set the precedent: first build the future, and only then can you mourn the past. If you reverse the order, you will be held captive by the past. You will be unable to move on. You will become like Lot's wife.

Something of this deep truth drove the work of one of the most remarkable survivors of the Holocaust, the psychotherapist Viktor Frankl. Frankl lived through Auschwitz, dedicating himself to giving other prisoners the will to live. He tells the story in several books, most famously in *Man's Search for Meaning*. He did this by finding for each of them a task that was calling to them, something they had not yet done but that only they could do. In effect, he gave them a future. This allowed them to survive the present and turn their minds away from the past.

Frankl lived his teachings. After the liberation of Auschwitz he built a school of psychotherapy called Logotherapy, based on the human search for meaning. It was almost an inversion of the work of Freud. Freudian psychoanalysis had encouraged people to think about their very early past. Frankl taught people to build a future, or more precisely, to hear the future calling to them. Like Abraham, Frankl lived a long and good life, gaining worldwide recognition and dying at the age of 92.

Abraham heard the future calling to him. Sarah had died. Isaac was unmarried. Abraham had neither land nor grandchildren. He did not cry out, in anger or anguish, to God. Instead, he heard the still, small voice saying: The next step depends on you. You must create a future that I will fill with My spirit. That is how Abraham survived the shock and grief. God forbid that we experience any of this, but if we do, this is how to survive.

God enters our lives as a call from the future. It is as if we hear him beckoning to us from the far horizon of time, urging us to take a journey and undertake a task that, in ways we cannot fully understand, we were created for. That is the meaning of the word vocation, literally "a calling", a mission, a

task to which we are summoned.

We are not here by accident. We are here because God wanted us to be, and because there is a task we were meant to fulfill. Discovering what that is, is not easy, and often takes many years and false starts. But for each of us there is something God is calling on us to do, a future not yet made that awaits our making. It is future-orientation that defines Judaism as a faith, as I explain in the last chapter of my book, *Future Tense*.

So much of the anger, hatred and resentments of this world are brought about by people obsessed by the past and who, like Lot's wife, are unable to move on. There is no good ending to this kind of story, only more tears and more tragedy. The way of Abraham in Chayei Sarah is different. First build the future. Only then can you mourn the past. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd Abraham said unto his servant, the elder of his house, that ruled over all that he had: 'Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh... You shall go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son, even for Isaac.'" (Genesis 24: 2-4) The portion of Chayei Sarah comprises two chapters of the Book of Genesis: Chapter 23 deals with the death and burial of the matriarch Sarah, and Chapter 24 deals with the selection of a suitable wife for her son, Isaac.

The connection between these two themes is clear: With the loss of his beloved life partner, a bereft Abraham understands the awesome responsibility that lies before him to find a suitable mate for his heir to the covenant, Isaac. For this formidable and momentous task he chooses "his trusted servant, the wise elder of his household, who controlled all that was his," Eliezer (Genesis 24: 2).

Eliezer demonstrates great skill in understanding what is required for the wife of Isaac. He understands that she must be a member of the Abrahamic family (Rebekah is indeed the granddaughter of Abraham's brother, Nahor), and must not dwell among the evil and accursed Canaanites. He further understands that the young woman must be willing to live with Isaac in Abraham's domain rather than removing Isaac to the home of her family; Rebekah must come under the influence of Abraham. Most of all, he understands Isaac's bride must have the character of Abrahamic hospitality, to the extent that she will not only draw water from the well for him, the messenger, but will also draw water for his camels. And of course, he must arrange for the young woman to make the journey to Isaac and live her life in the Land

of Israel and under the tent of Abraham.

Eliezer arranges a match that will determine the destiny of God's covenantal nation with wisdom, tact and sensitivity.

The Bible states that Eliezer set out for his mission "with all the bounty [goodness] of his master in his hand" (Ibid 24:10). Rashi takes this to mean that Abraham gave Eliezer a blank check; he would pay any price for the right wife for Isaac. Rabbi Moshe Besdin gives the verse a very different thrust: All the bounty and goodness that had been expressed by Abraham was now placed in the hands of his most trusted servant because the future of Abraham was dependent upon Isaac, his heir apparent, and the future of Isaac depended on his future wife.

Strangely, throughout this lengthy biblical tale, Eliezer's name is not mentioned.

He is referred to as "eved" (the servant) 10 times and as "ish" (the personage) seven times, but never once by his name.

Wouldn't such an important individual, entrusted with such a significant mission, deserve to have his name in lights for everyone to see and remember? I believe that is exactly the point of the biblical record. Eliezer the individual has been completely overwhelmed by the immensity of this task: He is the servant of Abraham, committed to performing an act that will determine the continuity of the Abrahamic vision. A midrash even suggests that Eliezer had a daughter of marriageable age, whom he had expected to wed to Isaac, allowing his grandchildren to inherit the Abrahamic dream and wealth. But Eliezer forgets any of his personal ambitions or goals; he is the consummate servant of Abraham, using all of his wisdom and ingenuity to carry out his master's will (see Rashi on verse 24: 39 quoting Bereishit Rabbah 59: 9).

In this he is like Moses, who utilizes all of his spiritual and intellectual prowess in the service of his Master, the Lord, God of Universe.

Just as Moses was both an eved and an ish at the same time (See Deut. 33:1 and 34:5) – with his individual personality dedicated to God's will – so Eliezer was an ish and an eved simultaneously. ©2022 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI AVI SHAFRAN**

## Cross-Currents

**A** riddle I like to ask people is how many times Eliezer's name is mentioned in parshas Chayei Sara, where his being charged with finding a wife for Yitzchak and his mission's success are recounted at length. If a hint is needed, I offer the fact that it's a round number.

Very round.

Literally. It's zero.

That's surprising, of course, considering the important role Eliezer plays in making that crucial

shidduch between Yitzchak and Rivka. His mission is in fact recounted in detail, twice -- once in conversation with Avraham and again when it takes place.

Why he is only referred to as "the servant of Avraham" and not by his name seems a pregnant fact.

What occurs is that, even though Eliezer had hoped that his own daughter might be the one Yitzchak would marry (a hope hinted in the word ulai, "perhaps," spelled eilai, "to me" -- Beraishis 24:39), once he received his marching orders, he acted entirely altruistically, as a totally dedicated servant, as someone without... any sense of self. And, thus, in the Torah's account, without a name -- the reification of self.

A sense of self is a terribly hard thing to shed. As the Ramban notes in his Perush Mishnayot (Makkos, 3:16), while it is rare for anyone to do a mitzvah entirely altruistically, without any concern whatsoever for result or reward or how his act will be perceived by others, achieving that even a single time renders one a ben olam haba.

And Eliezer's efforts on Avraham's behalf are an example of such pure altruism, and perhaps evidenced in the dearth of his name in the parsha.

Ironically, though -- or, perhaps, understandably (and certainly uniquely, considering he was a Canaanite) -- his name was chosen for a tanna, and by countless Jewish parents over the centuries when naming their sons. ©2022 *Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org*

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**O**ur matriarchs of Israel were very strong personalities and were formidable women. The life experiences of our mother Sarah are an excellent example of this assessment of character and behavior. From the Torah narrative we are informed early on that she is infertile, unable to conceive and give birth naturally. Nevertheless, we do not hear despair from her. She is willing to bring another woman into her house and to share her husband, so to speak, with that woman in the hope that this would somehow facilitate her own becoming pregnant.

Having Hagar in her home and watching her arrogant behavior forces her to chastise Avraham's attitude towards this complex relationship. She takes action to bring Hagar in line and thus preserve the primacy of her relationship to Avraham. Having escaped from the clutches of the Pharaoh and being aware of the dangers facing a beautiful woman in a cruel and violent society, she nonetheless continues her life's mission of advancing monotheism and morality in a surrounding society that condones evil and violent paganism.

She is wondrously shocked, almost to disbelief, when informed by a stranger who appears as a Bedouin Arab that she will conceive and bear a son to

Avraham. At that moment she realizes that she will not only become an “ordinary” mother but rather the matriarchal figure that will preside over an eternal people that will influence all future societies.

To protect and safeguard that eternity, she is forced to expel Yishamael from her home. She does not flinch at performing this distasteful task. In this respect, she is stronger than Avraham...and Heaven, so to speak, backs up her position. She is the woman of iron that acts to guarantee the future survival of the Jewish people.

Sarah serves as the paradigm for the matriarchs that follow her in the Torah narrative of the book of Bereshith. Rivka is certainly the strong force in the house of Yitzchak who recognizes the darkness of Eisav in comparison to the heavenly potential of Yaakov. She shows strength in having to do family triage, so to speak, and knowingly to accept the consequences of such a painful and agonizing decision. The ability and strength that she exhibits, in switching her husband's blessings from the older son to the younger one, is indicative of the certainty of commitment and clarity of vision that so characterized all of the matriarchs of the people of Israel.

Sarah lived on in Rivka and her life's decisions. The same thing is true regarding Rachel and Leah who are more aware of the nefarious and dangerous ways of their father Lavan than is their husband Yaakov. It is they who finally force Yaakov to heed the Heavenly voice that directs him to leave Aram and return home to the Land of Israel.

Again it is the strength of character and will that decides the ultimate issue, and it is that decision that tips the scales of eternity in favor of Jewish survival. If Chava is recorded as being the mother of all living things, it is Sarah who is the mother of the loving, vibrant and eternal people of Israel. ©2022 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**J**ewish organizations rely heavily on individual donors. Often, however, ethical dilemmas arise.

For some beneficiaries, these ethical struggles are irrelevant. After all, many agencies are so strapped for resources that they must raise massive amounts of money to survive. In some circles, the attitude seems to be Take the money; never mind where it comes from.

Fundraising shouldn't be this way. Charities should be more selective about their financial sources. While donors perform a mitzvah in giving, recipients play no less a role in the mitzvah by providing the opportunity to give. In Jewish tradition, it is an honor to give. Hence, recipients have a right as well as an

obligation to develop criteria for donors.

Donations – large or small – should come from ethical endeavors only. This idea accords with an age-old tradition recorded in the Mishnah. The obligation for the lulav ritual (the commandment to take lulav and etrog on Sukkot) cannot be fulfilled with a stolen lulav (Sukkah 29b).

A more difficult policy to implement is one stating that even money earned ethically should be rejected if given by someone who lives contrary to Jewish values. This principle raises the question of who, for the purpose of receiving tzedakah, falls into this category. Where is the line to be drawn? Spousal abuse? Eating on Yom Kippur? Violating the Sabbath? Tax evasion?

I believe the litmus test should be the way in which potential donors conduct their relations with others. We should leave it to God to decide who is sinning against Him. But in the area of interpersonal relationships, we must take a stand and say that we will not be party to the mistreatment of others.

This point is illustrated in Parashat Chayei Sarah. Commentators ask why Abraham the patriarch preferred a wife from his birthplace for his son Isaac rather than a woman from Canaan. After all, both were places of idolatry, and Abraham and Isaac were living in Canaan.

Rabbenu Nissim answers that in Canaan, people mistreated each other. In Abraham's birthplace, they may have sinned against God, but there was respect and love between people (Derashot Haran 5).

In other words, explains Nehama Leibowitz, “it was not the ideas and beliefs of the family of the girl destined to be the mother of the nation that were apt to endanger the whole nation, but the evil deeds.” Organizations must likewise avoid the endangering influence of contributors who harm other people.

Those who donate must be given credit and honor; they play a critical role in the Jewish community. But we must remember that giving is a privilege. There is, after all, an ethic not only of giving but also of receiving. ©2022 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

### **Migdal Ohr**

**"A**nd Avraham became old, coming in days, and Hashem blessed Avraham with everything.” (Beraishis 24:1) Much is discussed about the definition of “everything.” Just what was it that Avraham was blessed with which is considered, “having it all”? The Gemara records a disagreement regarding a daughter. R' Meir said, “bakol” was that he didn't have a daughter. Presumably, having a daughter in a time

and place like that would have been extremely challenging.

R' Yehuda, on the other hand, says it means that Avraham DID have a daughter. Despite the challenges inherent in that and in finding her a proper husband, having a daughter made Avraham's life complete. (Especially according to the opinion that one fulfills the mitzva of Pru U'rvu, to be fruitful and multiply, by having a boy and a girl.)

Others comment that he had longevity, wealth, honor and children, all that a man could want. But is this truly the case? Had Avraham Avinu not recently lost his wife, Sarah Imeinu? After waiting so many years for a child, they would not both walk him down to the chupah; not merit to share the joy of grandchildren together. How can the Torah say that Avraham had everything a man could wish for?

We'd like to suggest that what Avraham had was a mission. He had a reason to continue living and things to accomplish. Though his wife, his life's partner in all the good that he did, was gone, his value and purpose were not. Rashi tells us that the word "bakol" has the numerical value of "ben, son." He says Avraham had a son and therefore had to marry him off. Indeed, this is one of the mitzvos a father is to do for his child, as per the Gemara in Kiddushin (29a-b). The way Rashi writes it, we can understand that the requirement to marry off his child is a manifestation of "having it all."

The Haamek Davar comments that Avraham sent Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak and did not go himself because there were people who would come to Avraham and ask for his advice. He would pray for people, give them blessings, and teach them Emunah. Avraham had a very fulfilling and important role to play even after Sarah passed away.

This, then, may be what it means that Avraham was blessed with everything. Old age is not a time to retire and do nothing. It's not a time to sit back and rest on your laurels. Though Avraham was "old," he was "coming in days," meaning that each day was filled with purpose and goodness. Each day could come forward to testify what Avraham had accomplished and achieved in it, and each day would continue to come forward as he never stopped.

This is the way to enjoy a life of having it all. By knowing that each day is an opportunity and an obligation to grow, achieve, help, and serve Hashem, we can work towards filling them with all manner of good. When our days are full, we will remain vibrant and accomplished, and who could ask for more than that?

*When the Manchester Rosh Yeshiva lived with his daughter, he asked what he could do to help her each morning. She replied that she did not want him to serve her as he was her father and it was her job to respect him, not the other way around.*

*R' Segal z"l said softly, "When your mother was alive, I would make her a cup of coffee each morning before I went to daven. That way, I had a chesed in my pocket when I approached the Ribono Shel Olam.*

*Now that she is gone, I have no one else to do chesed with, so I want to do something for you in the morning." He understood that every day there is room to grow and achieve. ©2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr*

## ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

### Onen

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**W**hen 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 DAVID LEVIN**

## At the Well

**W**hen Avraham's servant, Eliezer, came to Haran to find a wife for Yitzchak, he stopped at the Well of the city: "He made the camels kneel down outside the city towards a well of water at evening time when women come out to draw water. And he said, 'Hashem, G-d of my master, Avraham, may You so arrange it for me this day that you do kindness with my master, Avraham. See, I stand here by the spring of water and the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw. Let it be that the maiden to whom I shall say, "Please tip over your jug so that I may drink," and who replies, "Drink and I will even water your camels," her will you have designated for Your servant, for Yitzchak; and may I know through her that You have done kindness with my master.'"

Here we see the prayer that Eliezer uttered to Hashem, a plea to guide him to find the right wife for Yitzchak from among the women of Avraham's family. It should be noted that Eliezer hoped that his own daughter would become Yitzchak's wife, but he chose to fulfill the wishes of his master and called upon Hashem to assist him. Through his prayer to Hashem, the Well became both the meeting place for this assistance and the vehicle through which this assistance would be proven. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that it is also important that the Well was outside of the city, as Eliezer would have not been able to utter his prayer to Hashem in a city that was filled with idols and inappropriate behavior.

It appears that Eliezer's conditional prayer could be considered a form of magic or sorcery. The Torah is very opposed to seeking omens to determine one's future actions. It is inappropriate to place one's trust in a random occurrence that is unrelated to one's task (if it rains tomorrow, I will get married). The Ran in Gemara Chulin (95b) explains that Eliezer's conditional statement is appropriate, as he is searching for a woman with the qualities of that action as a suitable wife for Yitzchak. Still, our Rabbis wish to know why Eliezer did not simply ask to be shown which maiden came from Avraham's family in Haran. We see that Ya'akov at the Well first inquires of the shepherds there if they know Lavan, the son of Nachor. Yet Lavan is not the son of Nachor but his grandson. Ya'akov's inquiry is to determine that this is the Lavan who is descended from the acceptable family of Avraham's brother. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that Eliezer believed that Rivkah's family would never allow her to travel to a distant land with a stranger, so he arranged this apparent omen as a sign which they would not ignore for fear of antagonizing their gods.

Eliezer's test involves the Well: "Please tip

over your jug so that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink and I will even water your camels,' her will you have designated for Your servant, for Yitzchak." Eliezer had not chosen a difficult task, but a task that would indicate the kind of woman who would be a good match for Yitzchak. This young woman would need to demonstrate kindness, compassion, and an understanding of the extent of a person's needs. We see this clearly in Eliezer's actual request of Rivka: "Let me sip, if you please, a little water from your jug." The Or HaChaim points out that this phrase, using the Hebrew word "hagmi'eini, let me sip", is a minimization of the stipulation that Eliezer set as the standard by which he would see the fulfillment of Hashem's assistance. Eliezer also did not ask her to lower her pitcher so that he could drink, thus minimizing any effort that she would exert. The Or HaChaim states that Eliezer understood that even this minimum request would be something unusual for the Canaanite women to fulfill unless they were of the Holy seed of Avraham. For that reason, Eliezer minimized the effort necessary to accomplish his request so that it would be easy in the eyes of the person he chose.

Rivka's response went far beyond Eliezer's statement which is evident by her use of the word, "shtei, drink." This indicated that she understood his need and gave him as much water as he would drink. She also gave his camels enough water to satiate them. According to Professor Nechama Leibovits, Rivka would have had to spend several hours to complete this task, far exceeding Eliezer's expectations. "The man was astonished at her, reflecting silently to know whether Hashem had made his journey successful or not." HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the astonishment was due to the immediate fulfillment of his prayer. The Kli Yakar explains that Eliezer waited to discover his success, even though Rivka had already fulfilled the task by offering water to his camels. Eliezer was concerned because many people offer what they are not prepared to fulfill.

When Rivka had finished watering all the camels, Eliezer presented her with gifts of a golden nose ring and bracelets. After giving her these gifts, the Torah tells us, "And he said, 'Whose daughter are you? Pray tell me. Is there room in your father's house to spend the night?' She said to him, 'I am the daughter of Betuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nachor.' And she said to him, 'Even straw and feed is plentiful with us as well as a place to lodge.'" Once again Rivka went beyond the limits of Eliezer's request by offering housing and food for his camels. Since this request was before Eliezer had determined that Rivka was from Avraham's family, some wonder whether Eliezer gave Rivka the gifts before knowing for certain whether she was related. Rashi believes that Eliezer was certain that Hashem had led him to the correct

young lady and gave her the gifts even before ascertaining her ancestry. The Rashbam explains that he asked who she was before giving her the gifts, but the Torah did not want to interrupt his and her comments in the next section, so it spoke of the gifts prior to the second part of the conversation. The Ramban explains that Eliezer merely showed her the nose ring and bracelets, and only gave them to her after discovering her ancestry. One might also wonder whether Eliezer had increased the initial request by adding on another layer, a place to stay at her father's house. This is unlikely to be seen as a test but instead to see whether the same quality of "hachnasat orchim, welcoming guests" was also a tradition in Avraham's relatives.

The Well in Torah is representative of the Torah itself. The water in the Well sustains life, just as the words of the Torah sustain our lives. It is no wonder, then, that so many important events in the Torah take place at a Well. May we see the importance of the Well of Torah in our lives, and may we be nurtured and sustained through our constant study of all that is contained within. © 2022 Rabbi D. Levin

**RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG**

## Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Last week I met with a good friend, someone whom I have been studying with for over twenty years. I happened to mention that my daughter, who moonlights as a shadchan (matchmaker), suggested a young woman as a possible match for my twenty-five-year-old son. Since the woman's mom had grown up in Miami Beach, I wondered if he knew the family. He looked at me, shell shocked -- yes, he knew her mother -- she was a former classmate of his. He literally could not believe that children of his classmates were now of age to be married.

I've repeatedly told him that if he didn't settle down soon (he's forty-one) then even if he eventually does have kids and they follow his example, he will never really know his own grandchildren or be a meaningful part of their lives. He would miss out on one of life's greatest gifts and purest pleasures. No matter how successful or accomplished one is -- you cannot turn back the hands of time. Getting the opportunity to really know one's grandchildren is going to be out of reach for many.

I am reminded of the following joke. Bob and Joan take their ten-year-old son over to Bob's mother for Thanksgiving dinner. Grandma goes all out and prepares a terrific holiday meal with all the "fixings." The young child fills his plate and tucks right in. Bob looks at his son sternly and says sharply, "Stephen! Don't you remember that before we eat we have to say a blessing and utter a prayer?!?" The young child answers, "Dad, that's what we do at home, but now we are at grandma's and she actually knows how to cook."

Unfortunately, my middle aged friend is not alone. For the last seven decades birth rates have steadily declined. In 1950, women typically had five births each; globally, last year, it was 2.3 births. By 2050, the UN projects a further global decline to 2.1 births per woman (2.1 births is the generally accepted baseline for preventing a total population collapse).

But it's really much worse than that. Nearly every developed country has less than 2 births per woman. In 1950, in the US it was 3.6 births per woman. According to the World Bank, by 2020 that number had slipped to 1.6, and even less in Europe and Asia. In Italy, it was 1.2; in Japan, it was 1.3; in China, 1.2. (Africa is the continent that keeps the global birth rate average up -- there are 15 countries that average 5 births per woman.)

I grew up in the 1970's and the liberal political movement of that time was known as Zero Population Growth (also known as ZPG). Yale University was a stronghold of ZPG activists who believed "that a constantly increasing population is responsible for many of our problems: pollution, violence, loss of values, and of individual privacy." Thus their goal was a net zero population growth. (I was made aware of this because my seventh grade science teacher was a fanatic on the subject. Proponents of ZPG also preoccupied themselves with feminism and environmentalism -- trying to tie them all together in a neat little bow.)

Of course, Elon Musk has something to say on the matter; earlier this year he tweeted, and not for the first time, that "population collapse due to low birth rates is a much bigger risk to civilization than global warming." Although today Mr. Musk is likely much more concerned with the possible collapse of Twitter, he also kind of missed the point.

It's going to take a long time for the world wide population to begin to decline. By 2080, the world's population is expected to peak at 10.4 billion. Then there's a 50% chance that the population will plateau or begin to decrease by 2100. More conservative models anticipate the global population would be about 8.8 billion people by 2100.

But of great concern is the underlying reason for what's driving current population growth; fewer people are dying young. Global life expectancy in 1950 was 49.1 years, this improved to 72.8 years in 2019 -- with an increase of nine years strictly between 1990 and 2019. It is expected to increase to 77.2 years by 2050. Thus, most developed countries are going through a HUGE demographic transition.

In 1960, there were five active workers for every retired and disabled worker in the United States. The ratio slipped below three to one in 2009 and is headed toward two to one by 2030, according to the Social Security Administration. As this trend continues to deteriorate the pressure on the paychecks of the

younger generation will be more and more devoted to maintaining safety nets for the elderly. Centuries of improved quality of life for succeeding generations will grind to a halt.

A few weeks ago I lamented that, in my opinion, much of society's problems today stem from a dissolution of societal and personal infrastructure. The wholesale abandonment of religion inevitably leads to a breakdown of communal and family structures as well. To put it plainly, the younger generation, armed with a less than healthy value system, begins to solely focus on themselves in a very selfish way.

In 2020, a team of economists from Wellesley College and the University of Maryland were trying to understand why birth rates continued to fall even after the economy was recovering from the Great Recession of 2007. Those economists concluded that one of the biggest factors was shifting priorities among younger Americans -- namely, away from raising children and toward career and travel aspirations.

It probably comes as no surprise to you that the more religious a family is the more likely they are to have a lot of children. Every major religion puts a high priority on fostering a close family and having children. In Israel, one of the only developed countries to buck the trend of falling birth rates, the growth in the Jewish population is primarily due to the average Orthodox family having an average of 6.6 children. Muslims there have similar birth rates. This is not the same as Nick Canon or Elon Musk fathering many children (10 each, Canon soon to be 12); religious families (of all religions) tend to have a close-knit and healthy family structure.

Of course, seeing as the Torah is the basis for many of the world's biggest religions, it is only natural to find that this tendency towards building family is very prominent in the Torah. In this week's Torah reading, some sixty-seven verses are dedicated to the story of Abraham asking his servant Eliezer to find a wife for his son Isaac and the ensuing details of what happened.

Next, we find eleven verses relating to Abraham taking another wife (after Sarah died) and having more children and grandchildren before passing away at the age of 175. The Torah then spends several more verses discussing the families of Abraham's son Ishmael -- his wives and children.

There is another, perhaps more practical, reason for the success of religious families building continuous generations of families. As anyone who has seen Fiddler on the Roof knows, matchmakers are a significant part of the process. But proposing possible candidates in religious families is far simpler because there is already an 80% commonality in the life goals of potential couples.

For the most part, they already know what their home life will look like, how they want to raise their children, and where they'll send their children to school. There is a mutual understanding of personal and

communal responsibility and where they hope to fit in and contribute to both their family and communal life. The innate structures of their future lives are already mostly aligned.

Of course the other 20% -- chemistry, compatibility, and attraction -- are very important as well and that is where the matchmaker's "magic" comes into play. But most of the relationship variables are already set and, in general, this naturally leads to happier marriages and stronger families. It is this alignment in family values that fosters a deep and lasting emotional bond.

This is why in this week's Torah portion Abraham asked his servant Eliezer to seek a wife from Abraham's homeland and made him promise that he would not find a wife for Isaac from the local Canaanites. Eliezer himself was a very wise man and knowing that the primary ethical value in Abraham's home was the principal of doing kindness for others, he prayed to God and devised the following test for potential mates for Isaac: "When a girl comes out to draw water, I will say to her, 'Let me drink some water from your jug.' If she answers, 'Not only may you drink, but I will also draw water for your camels' then she is the one for my master's son." (Genesis 23:43-44)

Eliezer returned home with Rebecca -- the young girl who passed this test -- and, according to the sages, Rebecca and Isaac were married for over 100 years! © 2022 Rabbi Y. Zweig

**RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

**P**arshat Chaye Sarah records two major transactions, which begs us to wonder about their connection. The Parsha starts with Avraham insisting on paying for his plot of land in which to bury his wife. After much negotiating, Efron agrees to accept payment for the plot. The Parsha then goes into even greater detail describing the efforts of Avraham's servant in finding a suitable wife for Yitzchak, his son. What's the connection, other than then technically both being "transactions"?

One possibility is that the dialog of the first transaction could be the requisite to the completion of the second. In other words, Avraham had to understand and negotiate a FAIR transaction where both sides benefit before he could find a wife for his son. This requirement says a lot about what it takes to find a suitable mate: Give! If you find yourself taking more than you're giving in a given relationship, you need to insist on adjusting it! If any marriage is to work, the first ingredient is mutual respect, which breeds mutual giving. It is this fact that Avraham mastered before venturing to find his son a wife, and it's this lesson that we should master before venturing to find our own mates or business partners. © 2013 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

