

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

While back, a British newspaper, *The Times*, interviewed a prominent member of the Jewish community and a member of the House of Lords – let's call him Lord X – on his 92nd birthday. The interviewer said, "Most people, when they reach their 92nd birthday, start thinking about slowing down. You seem to be speeding up. Why is that?"

Lord X's reply was this: "When you get to 92, you see the door starting to close, and I have so much to do before the door closes that the older I get, the harder I have to work."

We get a similar impression of Abraham in this week's parsha. Sarah, his constant companion throughout their journeys, has died. He is 137 years old. We see him mourn Sarah's death, and then he moves into action. He engages in an elaborate negotiation to buy a plot of land in which to bury her. As the narrative makes clear, this is not a simple task. He confesses to the local people, Hittites, that he is "an immigrant and a resident among you" (Gen. 23:4), meaning that he knows he has no right to buy land. It will take a special concession on their part for him to do so. The Hittites politely but firmly try to discourage him. He has no need to buy a burial plot: "No one among us will deny you his burial site to bury your dead." (Gen. 23:6) He can bury Sarah in someone else's graveyard. Equally politely but no less insistently, Abraham makes it clear that he is determined to buy land. In the end, he pays a highly inflated price (400 silver shekels) to do so.

The purchase of the Cave of Machpelah is evidently a highly significant event, because it is recorded in great detail and highly legal terminology, not just here, but three times subsequently in Genesis (here in 23:17 and subsequently in 25:9; 49:30; and 50:13), each time with the same formality. Here, for instance, is Jacob on his deathbed, speaking to his sons: "Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebecca were buried, and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites." (Gen. 49:29-32)

Something significant is being hinted at here, otherwise why specify, each time, exactly where the field is and who Abraham bought it from?

Immediately after the story of land purchase, we read, "Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and God had blessed Abraham with everything." (Gen. 24:1) Again this sounds like the end of a life, not a preface to a new course of action, and again our expectation is confounded. Abraham launches into a new initiative, this time to find a suitable wife for his son Isaac, who at this point is at least 37 years old. Abraham instructs his most trusted servant to go "to my native land, to my birthplace" (Gen. 24:2), to find the appropriate woman. He wants Isaac to have a wife who will share his faith and way of life. Abraham does not stipulate that she should come from his own family, but this seems to be an assumption hovering in the background.

As with the purchase of the field, this course of events is described in more detail than almost anywhere else in the Torah. Every conversational exchange is recorded. The contrast with the story of the Binding of Isaac could not be greater. There, almost everything – Abraham's thoughts, Isaac's feelings – is left unsaid. Here, everything is said. Again, the literary style calls our attention to the significance of what is happening, without telling us precisely what it is.

The explanation is simple and unexpected. Throughout the story of Abraham and Sarah, God promises them two things: children and a land. The promise of the land ("Rise, walk in the land throughout its length and breadth, for I will give it to you," Gen. 13:17) is repeated no less than seven times. The promise of children occurs four times. Abraham's descendants will be "a great nation" (Gen. 12:22), as many as "the dust of the earth" (Gen. 13:16), and "the stars in the sky" (Gen. 15:5); he will be the father not of one nation but of many (Gen. 17:5).

Despite this, when Sarah dies, Abraham has not a single inch of land that he can call his own, and he has only one child who will continue the covenant, Isaac, who is currently unmarried. Neither promise has been fulfilled. Hence the extraordinary detail of the two main stories in Chayei Sarah: the purchase of land and the finding of a wife for Isaac. There is a moral here, and the Torah slows down the speed of the narrative as it speeds up the action, so that we will not miss the point.

God promises, but we have to act. God promised Abraham the land, but he had to buy the first field. God promised Abraham many descendants, but Abraham had to ensure that his son was married, and to a woman who would share the life of the covenant, so that Abraham would have, as we say today, "Jewish grandchildren."

Despite all the promises, God does not and will not do it alone. By the very act of self-limitation (tzimtzum) through which He creates the space for human freedom, God gives us responsibility, and only by exercising it do we reach our full stature as human beings. God saved Noah from the Flood, but Noah had to make the Ark. He gave the land of Israel to the people of Israel, but they had to fight the battles. God gives us the strength to act, but we have to do the deed. What changes the world, what fulfils our destiny, is not what God does for us but what we do for God.

That is what leaders understand, and it is what made Abraham the first Jewish leader. Leaders take responsibility for creating the conditions through which God's purposes can be fulfilled. They are not passive but active – even in old age, like Abraham in this week's parsha. Indeed in the chapter immediately following the story of finding a wife for Isaac, to our surprise, we read that Abraham remarries and has eight more children. Whatever else this tells us - and there are many interpretations (the most likely being that it explains how Abraham became "the father of many nations") - it certainly conveys the point that Abraham stayed young the way Moses stayed young, "His eyes were undimmed and his natural energy unabated" (Deut. 34:7). Though action takes energy, it gives us energy. The contrast between Noah in old age and Abraham in old age could not be greater.

Perhaps, though, the most important point of this parsha is that large promises – a land, countless children – become real through small beginnings. Leaders begin with an envisioned future, but they also know that there is a long journey between here and there; we can only reach it one act at a time, one day at a time. There is no miraculous shortcut - and if there were, it would not help. The use of a shortcut would culminate in an achievement like Jonah's gourd, which grew overnight, then died overnight. Abraham acquired only a single field and had just one son who would continue the covenant. Yet he did not complain, and he died serene and satisfied. Because he had begun. Because he had left future generations something on which to build. All great change is the work of more than one generation, and none of us will live to see the full fruit of our endeavours.

Leaders see the destination, begin the journey, and leave behind them those who will continue it. That is enough to endow a life with immortality. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of*

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd Abraham was old, well-stricken in age..." (Gen. 24:1) In addition to their shared ideals, the symbiotic relationship between Abraham and Isaac includes a remarkable likeness in physical appearance. Interestingly, one of the consequences of their physical similarity is the basis for one of the most curious statements in the Talmud. On the verse in our portion, "Abraham was old, well-stricken in age", our Sages conclude that at this point in time, the symptoms of old age were introduced to the world [Talmud Bava Metzia 87a].

The reason? People seeking out Abraham would mistakenly address Isaac, and those seeking out Isaac would approach Abraham. Disturbed by the confusion, Abraham pleads for God's mercy to make him look old, and Abraham's plea is answered: a 120 year-old man will never again look like his 20 year-old son!

How do we understand why Abraham was so upset by this case of mistaken identities? After all, what's wrong with being mistaken for your son? Doesn't every aging parent dream of slowing down the aging process and remaining perpetually young?

We find the answers hidden between the lines of this teaching, in which the dialectic of the complex relationship between father and son is expressed. Despite our desire for closeness between the generations, a father must appear different from his son for two reasons.

First, it is so that he can receive the filial obligations due to him as the transmitter of life and tradition. This idea is rooted in the Biblical commandment that the younger generation honors the elder. In fact, the last will and testament of Rabbi Yehudah the Pious (12th Century Germany) forbade anyone from taking a spouse with the same first name as that of their parents. This, explained Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik zt'l, was to avoid giving the impression that a child would ever address a parent by their first name. We may be close to our parents, but they are not to be confused with our friends.

Second, the son must appear different from his father so that the son understands his obligation to add his unique contribution to the wisdom of the past. Abraham pleads with God that Isaac's outward appearance should demonstrate that he is not a carbon copy of his father, but rather a unique individual. After all, when Isaac becomes a patriarch himself, he will represent the trait of gevurah, that part of God's manifestation of strength and justice that provides an important counterbalance to Abraham's trait of hesed (loving-kindness).

Abraham, the dynamic and creative world traveler, stands in contrast to the introspective and pensive Isaac, who never stepped beyond the sacred soil of Israel. With great insight, Abraham understood that unless the confusion in appearance ceased, Isaac might never realize the necessity of "coming into his own" and developing his own separate identity.

A Talmudic teaching of the pedagogic relationship between grandparents and grandchildren illustrates the importance of the dynamic and symbiotic relationship between the generations. Rabbi Hiya bar Abba states, "Whoever hears Torah from his grandchild is equivalent to having received it from Sinai!" [Kiddushin 30a] This concept reveals that the line between Sinai and the present can be drawn in both directions. Not only do grandfathers pass down the tradition to their children and grandchildren, but grandchildren pass the tradition up to their forebears.

We can and must glean insights into the Torah from the younger generations. Consider the fascinating Talmudic passage that describes how, when Moses ascended on High to receive the Torah from the Almighty, the master of all prophets found God affixing crowns (tagim) to the holy letters of the law [Talmud, Menahot 29b]. When Moses inquired about their significance, God answered that the day would arrive when a great Sage, Rabbi Akiva, would derive laws from each twirl and curlicue.

Whereas Moses was given the fundamentals, namely the Biblical words and their crowns (corresponding to the laws and methods of explication and extrapolation), Rabbi Akiva, in a later generation, deduced necessary laws for his day, predicated upon the laws and principles that Moses received at Sinai.

This is the legitimate march of Torah that Maimonides documents in his introduction to his commentary of the Mishna, and it is the methodology by which modern-day responsa deal with issues such as electricity on the Sabbath, brain-stem death/life-support, and in-vitro fertilization, and more. The eternity of Torah demands both the fealty of the children to the teachings of the parents and the opportunity for the children to build on and develop that teaching. This duality of Sinai enhances our present-day experience.

Abraham prays for a distinctive old age to enable Isaac to develop his uniqueness. Sons and fathers are not exactly the same, even if many fathers would like to think that they are. Only if sons understand the similarity, and if fathers leave room for individuality, can the generations become truly united in Jewish eternity. ©2020 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Jewish tradition teaches us that the house of our mother Sarah had unique qualities. I have written

about this often but add the following nuance to my previous writings. We are taught that in the tent of Sarah there were three outstanding qualities: the blessing of bountiful bread that is the quality of hospitality, the cloud of spirituality that always hovered over her home and the fact that the candle lit for the Sabbath burned throughout the entire week until the entrance of the next Sabbath.

This idea of that candle contains within it the great message that every day of the week is only a prelude to the great day of the Sabbath. We say so in our prayers when we count our days according to the upcoming Sabbath. This is the Jewish soul that constantly yearns for the Sabbath throughout the mundane activities of the weekday world. The Jew cannot believe that somehow the troubles, travails, distractions, and challenges of ordinary life which are omnipresent are really the basic issues of our existence and define our purpose in life.

Those who think that way are hardly removed from the rest of the animal kingdom that exists only in the moment, for the present, without any great vision as to what life should be and what one's purpose in existence is. It is only the Sabbath day that puts the whole week into perspective and enables us to see the greatness that the creator intended for all of us.

Throughout the ages, Jews always defined themselves in terms of the Sabbath. The criterion for Jewish legitimacy always was that one was a Sabbath observer. Jews took the Sabbath and made it their given name and, later in history, even their surname. They always wanted to be identified with the Sabbath, because they realized that the candle of life burns from one Sabbath to the next, and is never extinguished, thereby giving one the glimpse and goal of eternity in an otherwise finite world.

There have been many great works written about the Sabbath: halachic, philosophical, fanciful, inspirational, and psychological. All of them deal with special facets of the Sabbath, which is like a diamond that sheds light in all directions, no matter which way it is turned. The Sabbath became the object of love and endearment, and not only of identity and Jewish pride. Jews understood that the destruction of the Sabbath, God forbid, would mean the eventual destruction of the nation and its purpose as being a holy people.

This is the treasure that our mother Sarah bequeathed to us – a flame from a lonely candle that lights our way through an often dark and dangerous weekday world. We are witness to the tragedy that engulfs individuals and entire sections of the Jewish people who are devoid of the Sabbath and do not possess that candle of light that only the Sabbath can provide. That is why this week's Torah reading is entitled "The Life of Sarah", because as long as the Sabbath lives within the Jewish world, our mother Sarah is with us, to comfort and guide us, and to help

raise us to eternal greatness. ©2020 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

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Years ago I was privileged to be in Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik's shiur (Torah class). Although most know him for his extraordinary Talmudic knowledge, it was his Thursday classes of hashkafah in which he taught the portion of the week that I especially loved.

To this day I remember the class he gave on this week's portion. He asked a very simple question: Why did Avraham have to acquire land - the cave of Machpelah in Hevron - to bury Sarah? Over and over God had promised the land to Avraham (Abraham). The acquisition process seems unnecessary.

Here, Rav Ahron distinguished between legal ownership and psychological ownership. The former means that one has the legal contractual right to a particular object or piece of land. The latter means however, that the property which is mine was acquired through personal effort, extraordinary input and a serious expense of energy.

From this perspective, an inherited business is legally owned. It's the heir's even if the inheritor has not toiled in the business. But it is only psychologically mine if I have worked through my own efforts to create the business.

In this spirit, the Mishna declares that if one is given a bushel of apples to watch and the apples begin to rot, it is best not to sell them for good apples. The Talmud explains that the owner would prefer to have returned the original apples that he produced, even if fewer, rather than those that were the work of someone else. (Baba Metzia 38a)

I can still hear Rav Ahron as he illustrated this point with a delightful tale. In Europe, Yeshivot were often engaged in good-natured competition. The Telshe Yeshiva was known for its sharp students who were geniuses in pilpul (sharp analysis) and whose logic sometimes turned on the splitting of a hair.

As the story goes, a student in a competing Yeshiva declared that in Telshe they'd even ask how tea became sweet. Is it the pouring of sugar into the water or is it the actual stirring. The conclusion reached in laughter was that at Telshe it would be said that it is the stirring that makes the tea sweet but with one pre-requisite - that the sugar was first placed in the tea.

With a smile Rav Ahron declared that for him it is the stirring that is paramount. When you stir the tea you are using energy and thus you feel you have invested part of yourself in the making of the tea.

And so it is with life. And so it is with that that is most precious. The more we toil, the more we struggle, the more it becomes ours. ©2020 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

"And Sarah died in the area of "the four", that is, Chevron, in Canaan..." (Beraishis 23:2) The Midrash tells us that when Avraham "ran to the cattle" the calf he chose ran away. He gave chase, and finally caught up with it at Me'aras HaMachpeila, the "double cave" where Avraham found Adam and Chava buried. Now when it was time to bury Sarah, this is where he would buy a burial plot. Indeed, numerous Gemaras tell us that Chevron was used as a burial place for Jews throughout the generations.

That's all well and good, but what is the point of telling us where she died? Even if she had died in Tiveria, Avraham would have transported her to Chrvon for burial. Further, why tell us that the locals called it Kiryat Arba, which we know as Chevron?

Rashi explains the meaning of the name Kiryat Arba. He says "the four" referred to, were the giants, Achiman, Talman and Shaishai, and their father. These are the family of giants called "Anakim" who were there when the Meraglim went to spy out Canaan.

We first find mention of them in Beraishis (6:4) where they were called "Nefilim, the fallen ones." They were angels who became enamored with women and "fell" from heaven. They sired giants who were men of renown, and that's who Kiryat Arba was named for. Rashi says they were called Nefilim because they fell and caused the world to fall with them, and in Ivrit, they are known as Anakim.

Rashi on our posuk gives another explanation of the name; that it referred to the four couples who would be buried there: Adam and Chava, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka, and Yaakov and Leah. Since they hadn't been buried there yet, Kiryat Arba could not have been referred to that at the time, so why mention the four couples?

By looking at both answers of Rashi, we find a striking lesson. The place Kiryat Arba was known as the place of the "four." Whether the giants of Canaan, or the giants of the Jewish People, this place recalled their memory. The Nefilim fell and brought the world down with them. On the other hand, the four couples uplifted themselves and the world with them. In fact, when Avraham bought the field of Machpela, the Torah tells us the field was uplifted (23:17 see Rashi).

It seems that the Torah is telling us that in life we can choose. Are we going to go up and uplift everyone with us, like the four couples buried in

Me'aras HaMachpela, or are we going to be like the Nefilim, who brought everyone down along with them? Kiryat Arba was mentioned because it wasn't just the name of a place where an event "happened" to occur. Rather, it was noteworthy because of the choices made by those recalled in its name.

R' Elchonon Wasserman HY"D had a boyhood friend who became a successful attorney. R' Elchonon visited him many years later, when he was fundraising for his Yeshiva. The attorney said to him: "You know, when we were in school, it was apparent that you had a much better head than I did. If you'd used that intellect to go into law you'd have been even more successful than me."

R' Elchonon replied, "Let me ask you a question. Two trains are sitting on the tracks at the station. One is older and has bare wooden benches while the other is brand new with plush velvet seats and all the amenities. Which train do you take?"

"Why," exclaimed the man, "of course you take the new, luxurious one!" "Actually," smiled R' Elchonon, "It depends on which one is heading to your desired destination." © 2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

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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 DAVID LEVIN

In the Midst of the City

In this week's parasha, we are introduced to Rivka's brother who is also the grandson of Avraham's brother, Nachor. This is Lavan, which in Hebrew means white. Lavan is looked upon so disdainfully by the Rabbis that HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch reports that they criticized his name and said that the only thing about him that was Lavan (white, pure) was his name. We know of his lies and deceits in the future, and much of his character is foretold in the few sentences in which he occurs in Parashat Chayei Sarah. While some Rabbis attribute some good qualities to Lavan, the majority of Rabbis place even his meaningless actions in a bad light.

Eliezer, Avraham's servant, was sent back to Avraham's family to find a wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer came to the well of the city and found Rivka there. She fulfilled the test which Eliezer had proposed to Hashem, and he rewarded Rivka with gold bracelets and nose rings. She rushed to her mother's tent to tell her of the visitor. At this point, the Torah introduces Lavan, and his actions are scrutinized and analyzed by the Rabbis. "The young girl ran to her mother's house and reported the words (of Eliezer). And Rivka had a brother whose name was Lavan, and Lavan ran outside to the man, to the spring. For upon seeing the nose ring and the bracelets on his sister's hands, and upon hearing his sister, Rivka's words, saying, 'Like this spoke the man to me,' he came to the man, and, behold, he was standing over the camels by the spring. He said, 'Come, blessed of Hashem, why should you stand outside when I have cleared the house, and place for the camels?'"

There appears to be some confusion over the order of the sentences which allows for some confusion as to the motives of Lavan in approaching Eliezer. If we look carefully at the sentences, we notice that it appears that Lavan runs to Eliezer and then notices the gifts that were given to Rivka. There are two sets of

Rabbis who view Lavan's actions quite differently. On one side we have Rashi and Hirsch who attribute evil to all of Lavan's actions. The translation used here follows the interpretation of Rashi, which implies that the reason for Lavan's rush to greet Eliezer was that he saw the gifts and assumed there would be more gifts for himself. According to Hirsch, "the sight of gold at once exercised its magic: 'Ha, there will be more where this comes from, if this is what he pays for a drop of water, what will it be for board and lodging!'" Hirsch continues with his scathing criticism of Lavan's actions, saying that Lavan expected to see a man decked out in fine clothes with many servants. When Lavan saw that Eliezer was standing over the camels himself, he lost all respect for him and did not speak politely when inviting him to his house. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin also criticizes Lavan for overstepping his bounds by rushing to invite the visitor before first consulting his parents. This continued when Lavan answered before his father and before his mother when dealing with the requests of Eliezer. In Jewish law it is considered a grave sin to answer in place of one's parents or Rabbi when they are present; it is an insult to their authority and position.

These opinions are based not only on the sentences here but on the tradition of using the word *rasha*, evil one, when referring to Lavan. It is difficult to know whether this reality stems also from Lavan's actions here. The Ramban, the Ohr HaChaim, and others do not feel that Lavan acted poorly in this introductory passage. The Ohr HaChaim argues that the Torah places a Tzaddik's name after the word "name." In this case, the phrase "and his name was Lavan" indicates that Lavan, at least at this time, was considered a Tzaddik (righteous person). A wicked person's name precedes the word "name" as in "Naval is his name (Sam.1:25:25)." The Ohr HaChaim asks why the Torah uses the form for a Tzaddik with Lavan, the Evil One. He dismisses those who say that Lavan was interested in the gold and jewelry that he saw, and that he ran to Eliezer out of greed. Lavan actually had two stages of his actions. He first saw that his sister had come home with gifts and zealously ran to protect her. He was afraid that this stranger had seduced her and these were payments for his attack on her purity. Later when he heard his sister's account of what had taken place and that the man had asked about a place for his camels to stay and be fed, he ran, once again, to offer him hospitality. Hashem used the term "and his name was Lavan" to indicate that Lavan must be considered a Tzaddik for these two actions.

The Ramban forms an opinion of Lavan's actions from the next sentences in the Torah. "And the man came into the house, and he unmuzzled the camels, and he gave straw and fodder to the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men that were with him." While many of the commentators

attribute the unspecific article "he" to Eliezer alone, the Ramban presents a strong argument that it was Lavan who took care of the camels and brought water for Eliezer and his men. "It must refer to Lavan, for it would be unlikely that it was Eliezer who gave water to wash his own feet and those of his men."

Both the Ramban and the Ohr HaChaim were aware of the fact that Lavan is referred to as Lavan, the Evil One. They were also aware of Rashi's interpretation of these verses which he believed to show Lavan in a negative light. Yet both Ramban and Ohr HaChaim chose to interpret the exact same verses in a positive light. Their message to us is a strong message directly from our greatest Rabbis: *don l'chaf s'chut*, judge each person's actions favorably. These men were aware that Lavan was a wicked person and that his later actions demonstrated that wickedness very clearly. Yet at this time and in these sentences, they were both able to discover a positive slant to Lavan's actions.

We are often frustrated by situations that seem to us perfectly clear, yet others do not seem to comprehend our logic or agree with our assessment. It is easy to assume a myriad of negative motives for their opinions rather than to assume that they also want what is best but simply disagree on the method. Making these assumptions destroys any meaningful communication and any meaningful solutions to the situation which could be agreeable to all. If instead we worked under the principle of "judge each person's actions favorably," we could listen to each other's opinions and realize that our goals are the same. Sometimes the deepest message can only reach us through an unclear passage in the Torah. May we learn to seek those hidden messages as we study each week. © 2020 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AHRON LOPIANSKY

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This parsha discusses great events of Jewish history, such as the acquisition of *meoras hamachpelah* and the marriage of Yitzchak to Rivkah. Hidden within the crevices of this story of the nation of Israel, is the story of personal redemption of Eliezer.

Eliezer was a scion of Canaan, the first person to be cursed. It happened when Noach woke up from his drunken stupor, and realized what Cham had done to him, he cursed Cham's son Canaan that he become enslaved. Eliezer was among the progeny of Canaan, and thus from the cursed family. Though Eliezer was very close to Avraham, he could not break out of that curse, and thus when Avraham was looking for a suitable wife for Yitzchak he rejected Eliezer's daughter out of hand, saying, "my son is blessed and you are cursed, and cursed one can't join a blessed family" (Rashi 24:39.)

And yet, in our very parsha Eliezer becomes redeemed! Lavan calls out, "come in, the one blessed by Hashem" (24:31). The Medrash Rabbah (60:5) says that the words "blessed by Hashem" had been put in Lavan's mouth by Hashem, and indeed he had become blessed. What caused such an incredible transformation?

Let us first explore the concept of "cursed". While we think of a "curse" as being a generic term for failure or evil, and "blessing" as a generally positive term of good being bestowed upon a person. But those words actually have a more specific meaning. They are measures of productivity and fecundity. "Blessing" is the ability to bring forth a lot more than was put in, and "cursed" produces no more than that which was put in. Thus when the earth was cursed in the wake of Adam's sin it would no longer give forth fruit easily. On the other hand, Yitzchak was blessed, and he had reaped a hundred times the seed that he had put in (Breishis 26, 12).

What is the personal quality most associated with beracha, and inversely with klala? We are told in Mishlei (28:20), "a trustworthy person is full of blessing." Why a "trustworthy" person? Doesn't a "trusted" person only retain what he was given? Why would he be blessed (i.e. produce more than given)?

This requires a bit of rethinking on our part regarding where blessing emanates from. We tend to think of our efforts as producing wealth, but in fact our efforts can only reorganize that which already exists. For example, I can take a tree, saw it into planks, and make a table, but I have merely rearranged the wood. Producing more than I invested is not the product of human effort; planting one seed and producing a tree which yields hundreds of apples is achieved by tapping into "blessing", a force beyond our world. Similarly, when a person starts a business, the earnings commensurate to the effort invested can be described as being the result of his industriousness, but the extraordinary wealth that a successful business can generate is a blessing sourced from somewhere outside of us.

Imagine a pipe that is a conduit from a reservoir to a sink. The more absorbent the pipe is, the less water flows out to the end; the less absorbent the pipe, the more water will flow through. The more a person sets himself up to merely be a conduit, the more he merits that Hashem will channel benevolence through him.

Canaan was cursed because he attempted to divert -- and subvert -- the blessings that Hashem had intended for the world as a whole to himself (see Rashi 9:25). He therefore became a slave, someone who has that which is needed for subsistence, but never more.

Eliezer displayed integrity to his mission (Midrash, *ibid.*) He could have tried to take Yitzchak, the prize catch, for himself. Instead, he acted with total

integrity, removing himself from the equation totally. When he acted in completely good faith, relating to his mission as its executor and not trying to profit from it, he reentered the realm of the blessed.

This is one of the most counterintuitive lessons of the Torah. We instinctively grab in order to have more and more. The Torah, however, teaches us that the honest and the faithful become the conduit for the blessings of life. ©2020 Rabbi A. Lopiansky and TorahWeb.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd [Avraham] spoke to the Hittites, saying: 'I am a stranger and a dweller with you' (B'reishis 23:3-4). In order to explain how Avraham could claim to be both a "stranger" and a "dweller" if the former connotes someone who is not currently where he lives while the latter refers to someone who does live there, Rashi first suggests that he was referring to both his original status, as he was a "stranger" when he arrived in Canaan, and his current status, as he currently lived there. Rashi then paraphrases the approach of the Midrash (B'reishis Rabbah 58:6), that Avraham was giving them a choice: "if you want, I will be considered a stranger, and if not, I will be a dweller and take it by law, for G-d said to me, 'to your descendants I will give this land.'" The commentators ask how Rashi could suggest that Avraham would be able to take property based on the land belonging to him. After all, he had explained (13:7) the rift between Avraham's shepherds and Lot's shepherds to be based on whether or not the land already belonged to Avraham, with Avraham not allowing his shepherds to graze on private property because the land was not yet given to him. How could Avraham insist that the Hittites sell him property by threatening to take it based on it already being his, if the land didn't belong to him yet?

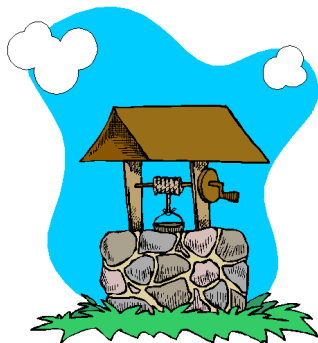
The most common answer given is that since the land was promised to Avraham and his descendants, and at the time of the disagreement between the shepherds, he did not yet have any, the land was not yet his. On the other hand, after Yitzchok (who was obviously his descendant) was born, the land became his; the land had therefore already been his for 37 years (Yitzchok's age when Sara died) when Avraham asked the Hittites to sell him a burial plot.

Other commentators ask several strong questions on this approach. For example, Nachalas Yaakov (23:4) points that the "descendants" mentioned in the promise referred to the generation that entered the land after the exodus from Egypt, not to Yitzchok; since the land never belonged to Avraham in his lifetime, he couldn't have insisted that a burial plot for Sara was already his. B'reishis Rabbah (41:5) says explicitly (paraphrasing G-d), "I said to [Avraham], 'to

your descendants I have given it'; [i.e.] when the seven [Canaanite] nations are uprooted from within it." Until then, though, the land did not belong to Avraham; not when Lot's shepherds wanted to graze on it nor when Avraham wanted to bury Sara in it. Additionally, Avraham kept his animals muzzled even after Yitzchok was born (see Rashi on 24:10), to the extent that everyone knew they were Avraham's animals because of their muzzles (indicating that he must have always kept them muzzled, even at home in Canaan). If the land became Avraham's after Yitzchok was born, why would he have to prevent his animals from grazing on land that he owned? B'er BaSadeh (13:7) adds that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 90) "proves" that the dead will be resurrected from the fact that the land was promised to our forefathers, yet they never actually owned it while they were alive (thereby necessitating their being resurrected in order for G-d to be able to fulfill His promise to them). If our forefather never owned the land, how could Avraham have said (to the Hittites) that he did, to the extent that they must give him land to bury Sara?

Although B'er BaSadeh references Nachalas Yaakov's discussion of the issue before providing his own answer, their approaches are quite similar. Without getting into the technical details, they both say that Avraham never had full rights to the land, so couldn't benefit from its produce (or grazing land) without paying for it, but his stake in the land, either because his descendants would eventually own it (Nachalas Yaakov) or because he did own it but it was "on loan" to the Canaanites until his descendants came out of Egypt and reclaimed it (B'er BaSadeh) gave him the right to bury his dead on land that was not useful agriculturally. (This was true before Yitzchok was born too; the shepherds were fighting over the ability to graze in the land, which Avraham did not have the rights to.) [This would explain why Avraham only asked for the cave, but never mentioned buying the field attached to it; Avraham knew he had no right to the field itself. Efrone may have insisted that the field be part of the sale precisely because giving/selling him only the cave meant tacitly accepting Avraham's true or eventual ownership of the land.]

Nevertheless, how could Avraham have "taken [the land] by law" just because G-d had told him that He had given it to him? Did Avraham plan to take Efrone to a Hittite court (or tribunal) and expect it to rule in his favor, that the land really belongs to him, not Efrone (and by extension that he owns all of Canaan)? Did he think



he could take it by force, and was threatening to do so if Efrone didn't sell it to him? What did Avraham really mean when he said that if they won't sell it to him as a stranger he'll "take it by law"? Whose law?

Last year (<https://tinyurl.com/y273ngra>) I quoted Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom, who referenced the law in the Ancient Near East that a foreigner was not allowed to buy land. Rabbi Etshalom suggested that Avraham had a plan to circumvent that law, by being officially "adopted" into a local family. Rabbi Moshe Shamah ("Recalling the Covenant") references the same law, but rather than suggesting an "adoption-sale" to work around the law, writes that "exceptions were generally only possible with the broad consent of the townspeople or the leaders." Either way, Avraham had to convince the local Hittites to allow him to buy a plot of land despite the fact that he was not a native. Whether he had to get around the law by using a legal-loophole or the law provided for exceptions if the local population was willing to make one, Avraham had to speak to the entire local population (23:3) before approaching Efrone, and convince them that the law not to sell land to non-natives shouldn't apply to him. His opening words, "I am a stranger and a dweller with you," were therefore meant to address this issue.

It should be noted that the Midrash Rashi is based on does not use the words "I will take it by law," only "if you want, [I will be considered a] stranger, if not, [I am, or should be considered] the owner of the house, for so did G-d say to me: 'to your descendants I have given this land.'" [Another not-so-insignificant difference is that the verbiage Rashi quotes G-d as saying is in the future tense ("to your descendants I will give this land") as opposed to past tense ("I have given").] The suggestion I am about to make can fit into Rashi's wording as well as with the way the Midrash puts it.

Avraham was willing to buy the land from Efrone, as evidenced by the exorbitant price he paid for it. And if the locals were willing to sell it to him despite his not being from the area, he was fine with that. "If you are willing" to sell me the land despite my being a stranger, "then you can still consider me a stranger." But "if not," if an exception cannot be made, then I still have a way for the sale to go through, since I could/should really be considered a local (a "dweller"), since "G-d promised to give this land to my descendants." It wasn't a threat to "take it by force," either physically or through the courts, but an explanation as to why Avraham should be considered a local rather than a stranger, and therefore allowed, by Hittite law, to own land.

The locals responded by saying "you are a prince of G-d among us," which can be understood as not only an acceptance of G-d's promise as being relevant to them, but as an acceptance of Avraham as being "among them," i.e. a local and therefore allowed to own land there. ©2013 Rabbi D. Kramer