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Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

"Not to Take a Wife... from the Daughters of the Canaanites"
By Rav Tamir Granot

INTRODUCTION

Our *Parasha* opens with Sara's death. The ensuing story – Avraham's quest to find a wife for Yitzchak – flows naturally from this starting point, and becomes the main focus of the *Parasha*. The concluding verse of the story brings together the two themes – the death of Sara and the search for a suitable match for Yitzchak: "Yitzchak brought her [Rivka] to the tent of Sara, his mother... and Yitzchak was comforted for [the death of] his mother" (*Bereishit* 24:67)

The "matchmaking" story is one of the longest narratives in the entire Torah, and its length is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the crux of the plot is very simple, and could be summarized in a few brief sentences:

- Avraham instructs his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak from Avraham's homeland
- His servant swears to obey, and sets off bearing gifts
- The servant chooses a sign and prays to God to find the right woman
- Rivka, daughter of Betuel, is revealed to him in all her kindness at the well
- The servant goes to Rivka's home and the match is finalized
- Rivka returns with the servant to Be'er Sheva, where Yitzchak marries her.

This is a simple, straightforward story on which the Torah elaborates at extraordinary length – both in the details of its descriptions and in its drawn-out monologues. The protracted nature of this narrative is epitomized in the repetition of all of its main substance when the servant tells Lavan and Betuel all that has happened to him, such that the story is actually told twice in the text. First it is told objectively by the Torah, from Avraham's command up until the events at the well; then it is told by the servant, once again from Avraham's command up until Rivka's actions at the well - and from a subjective point of view.

The two versions are very similar in their general features, as we may expect, and hence our question as to why the Torah chooses to elaborate at such length is particularly pertinent in relation to this section, where the Torah records the servant's conversation with the members of Avraham's extended family, instead of sufficing with a general summary: "The servant told them all that had happened to him."

To highlight the question, let us consider the following statistics. The entire story occupies no less than 67 verses (and fairly long ones); the objective story (as told by the Torah) is 27 verses long, while the subjective version (as told by the servant) adds another 15 verses!

We know that the Torah does not always present such a full-length story: in fact, the opposite is often the case. Thus, for example, just last week we read the story of the *Akeida* (the binding of Yitzchak) – a most dramatic episode, conveyed by the Torah in very brief and condensed form. The story of the Tower of Babel and the episode concerning Kayin and Hevel are similarly presented without any superfluous details or lengthy conversations. However, there are other stories whose form resembles the one under discussion; they are crammed with detail, and in some cases – as in ours – the Torah takes the trouble first to present the facts in an objective light, and then repeats them (sometimes more than once) in the words of the characters of the story. How are we to understand this phenomenon?

A. APPRECIATING THE PRAYERS OF THE SERVANTS OF THE FOREFATHERS

In a classic article with this title, later published as part of her classic work, "Studies in *Sefer Bereishit*," Nechama Leibowitz proposes an approach for interpreting this and other similar episodes. She insists that the Torah's repetition must be addressed seriously, rather than as a purely literary adornment. The significance of the repetition is to be sought not in the similarity between the repetition of the story and its original version, but rather in the discrepancies between them. In other words, if we superimpose the servant's story over the Torah's objective narrative, we find that they are similar in many details, but also different in others. If they were identical there would be no point in the repetition. Thus, the purpose of the repetition is to highlight that which is new in the second version; hence the discrepancy between the original and the repetition demands explanation. Leibowitz understands the principal significance of the story as coming to demonstrate the wisdom of the servant, his cunning and sensitivity, expressing his loyal service to Avraham. In this *shiur* we propose to adopt her exegetical approach, but to highlight another difference which, to our view, is of great significance [1].

B. MARRIAGE WITHIN THE FAMILY OR WITHIN THE CULTURE

One of the prominent differences between the servant's version of the story and that Torah's narration concerns the way in which the former explains why the servant came specifically to the home of Betuel and Lavan. Let us compare the two versions:

Torah narrative (*Bereishit* 24):

(3) I shall cause you to swear by the Lord God of the heavens and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites amongst whom I dwell.

(4) RATHER, YOU SHALL GO TO MY COUNTRY AND MY BIRTHPLACE, and take a wife for my son Yitzchak.

Servant's version (*Bereishit* 24):

- (37) My master caused me to swear, saying, "You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell.
(38) BUT YOU SHALL GO TO MY FATHER'S HOUSE, AND TO MY FAMILY, and take a wife for my son."

In the second excerpt there is a clear emphasis on Avraham's request that Yitzchak's future wife be chosen from Avraham's own family. As Nechama Leibowitz explains, this manner of presenting his mission would certainly sound convincing and appealing to Betuel and Lavan.

But this is not what Avraham asked. He only said, "Go to my country and to my birthplace – not to the Canaanites." In other words, Avraham is expressing a national or cultural preference, rather than a desire that Yitzchak necessarily marry someone from his own extended family.

The absolute rejection of any possibility of intermarriage with the Canaanites resurfaces in the Torah's description of the anguish experienced by Yitzchak and Rivka over Eisav's marriage to Canaanite women, and Yitzchak's dispatch of Yaakov "back to his roots" – like Avraham.

However, this presentation of the situation is problematic. If the mission were directed specifically at finding a future wife among the members of the extended family, we could perhaps understand the forefathers' motives. Perhaps there was indeed something inherently special about their family: after all, Terach himself embarked on a journey to Canaan. But on what basis does Avraham prefer the culture of Aram-Naharayim, or – later - the culture of Charan, over the culture of Canaan? Is there really any substantial difference?

C. "THE LAND OF CANAAN"

As an introduction to our grappling with this question, we present here two questions that have troubled us for some time – and which some readers may perhaps have considered:

- a. The foundation for the land of Canaan being handed over specifically to Avraham and to his descendants: why is it specifically this land that was chosen to be our inheritance? The physical advantages of the country cannot be sufficient reason, for there are many other countries that would appear far more conducive for dwelling in.
- b. Why does the Torah take pains throughout extensive tracts of text to refer to the land by the name of this detestable nation – "Canaan"? Why is the land given this dubious privilege, and why does this remain its name for eternal ignominy?

In order to answer the second question, we must investigate the essential quality of the Canaanite nation and its status in the world. The Torah is unsparing in its view of the culture and morality of the Canaanite nation:

"You shall not act in the manner of the land of Canaan to which I bring you, nor shall you follow their statutes...."

Here we find the list of forbidden sexual relations, and then the Torah declares:

"For all of these abominations were committed by the people of the land that awaits you, and the land was defiled...."

In other words, Canaanite behavior is an abomination from which Israel is obliged to distance itself in order to merit inheriting the land, and the essence of that abomination is those sins related to sexual relations.

The halakhic expression of the moral turpitude of the Canaanites is embodied in the license – according to one opinion, the obligation – to subjugate them:

"Also, of the children of the (foreign) inhabitants that dwell with you – you shall buy, and of their families that are with you – whom they bore in your land; they shall be a possession for you.

And you shall bequeath them to your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall serve you forever." (Vayikra 25:45-46)

The Torah's clear opposition to slavery in the adjacent verses, and the contrast of the license to subjugate the Canaanites, demonstrates that the Torah is opposed to maintaining the freedom of the Canaanites [2].

The root of this perception of the status and essence of the Canaanites is to be found – as the Maharal teaches, on the methodological level – in the very first story about them in the Torah: the story of sexual impropriety that takes place between Noah and his son Cham.

D. NOACH'S "SIN OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN"

The Torah tells us about the renewed beginnings of human life immediately after the Flood. The commentaries note the linguistic and thematic links between this revival and the story of the Creation, showing that the Flood should be regarded as a new beginning – a new "Creation." If we examine the story of Noah planting the vineyard, we find that it contains many similarities to the story of the Garden of Eden in Chapters 2-3 of *Bereishit*. After the world is "created" anew and God blesses man with the command to "be fruitful and multiply," the Torah recounts the beginnings of man, and his sin. Let consider the text of this episode, with the corresponding elements from the story of the Garden of Eden inserted at the appropriate places in parentheses:

Story of Noah and the Vineyard (*Bereishit* 9):

(18) "Noach's sons, who came out of the Ark, were Shem and Cham and Yefet, and Cham is the father of Canaan.

(19) These three were Noach's sons, and it was from them that the whole earth was repopulated.

(20) Noach began to be a man of the soil, and he PLANTED a vineyard. ("The Lord God PLANTED a garden in Eden")

(21) And he DRANK of the wine (Adam and Chava EAT of the forbidden fruit), and became drunk, and WAS UNCOVERED inside his tent. ("And both of them were naked... and they knew that they were naked")

(22) And Cham, father of Canaan, SAW HIS FATHER'S NAKEDNESS, and he told his two brothers outside. (Here the parallel is not explicit in the text, but only hinted at. *Chazal* describe a scene of sexual immorality between the snake and the woman or Adam)

(23) Shem and Yefet TOOK THE GARMENT and placed it upon both of their shoulders, and they walked backwards and COVERED THEIR FATHER'S NAKEDNESS ("They SEWED THEMSELVES FIG LEAVES... and the Lord God made Adam and his wife COATS OF SKINS, and HE CLOTHED THEM") but they faced backwards and did not see their father's nakedness.

(24) Noach awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done to him.

(25) And he said, "CURSED IS CANAAN; a SERVANT OF SERVANTS shall he be to his brothers" ("CURSED IS THE LAND because of you... and HE SHALL RULE OVER YOU")

(26) And he said, "Blessed is the Lord God of Shem, and Canaan shall be a servant to him.

(27) May God enlarge Yefet, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem, and Canaan shall be a servant to him."

(28) Then Noach lived – after the Flood – three hundred years and fifty years." (In both *parashot* a genealogical list follows.)

The reappearance of sin related to eating, temptation, sexual immorality, and punishment involving subjugation, all serve to connect the story of Adam and the story of Noach. What is Cham's role in the story?

The fact that his sin involves sexual immorality, and the curse that is emphasized at its conclusion, show that the story is aimed, to a considerable extent, at explaining his status. It seems that Cham's role in this story parallels the woman's role in the story of the sin in the Garden of Eden, at the conclusion of which it is decreed that her husband will "rule over" her. Desire that is not controlled is dangerous and leads to sin.

The obvious difference between the two episodes is that the story of the Garden of Eden is a personal one, with no political or historical ramifications, while the story of Noach is meant principally to present the basis for the division of cultures and nations which remains with us to this day. Another difference is God's absence from the story of Noach – which may hint at God's distance from this cultural development, despite its great significance.

We posit that it is clear from the *parasha* that its main intention is to explain the status of Canaan:

- There is the opening comment, "Cham is the father of Canaan"
- The curse is upon Canaan, rather than upon Cham
- Noach utters his three-fold decree of servitude

All of the above serve to show that the main purpose of the story is to convey the substance of the essence and culture of Canaan. The description here clearly

matches the Torah's accusation, in *Vayikra* 18 (quoted above), that Canaan is a culture of unrestrained sexuality. A culture of sexual immorality.

The inescapable conclusion is only the subjugation of the "sexual-bestial" culture to the culture of Shem and Yefet, with its modesty ("they did not see the nakedness of their father"), can rectify it and prevent the spread of its negative influence.

A broader view reveals that in fact there are three prototypes of human culture in general:

- * Cham: slavery – primitive human existence – survival instinct – animal sexuality

- * Shem: "Blessed is the Lord God of Shem" – Shem appears to represent the human morality that rests upon "fear of God" in its moral teachings – ethics.

- * Yefet – "May God enlarge Yefet and let him dwell in the tents of Shem." Yefet represents what his name implies – "*yoffi*": esthetic beauty.

Cham is the father of the cultures that settled in Africa.

Shem is the father of near-eastern culture.

Yefet is the father of the European cultures – later on, Greece and Rome.

Canaanite culture can progress only if it is subjugated to other cultures. Sexuality has its place only if it is restrained and limited by morality, or softened by art. The esthetics of western culture should not be subjugated. Art that is subjugated is no longer craving; but neither is it an end in its own right. It must "dwell in the tents of Shem." In other words, it must have a moral orientation and limits, in order to be worthy of itself.

We, the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, belong to Shem. *Chazal* teach that our forefathers studied in the academies of "Shem and Ever." In other words, the culture of Shem and Ever should be regarded as the foundation upon which ours is built. Faith, sanctity, mission, and other values are a uniquely Israelite contribution – an additional level. But humanness – or universal fear of God – is the common "Semite" ("from Shem") foundation. Avraham's return to his Semite roots, when seeking a wife for Yitzchak, is an expression of his return to the basis from which he himself emerged, and a declaration concerning the connection between the different levels: the generosity and kindness that are manifest in Rivka, which are a lofty expression of voluntary morality, and the faith and sanctity of Avraham's home. The prohibition against intermarriage with the Canaanites is the other side – the negative corollary – of this spiritual-cultural awareness.

The land of Canaan is situated at the geographical crossroads of the cultures. It borders on the sea, thereby expressing a call for dialogue with the culture on the other side. At the same time, it is located on the border between the region of Cham and that of Shem. The rule of Canaan over the land expresses a situation of Cham ruling over Shem; Canaan sets the tone. The land is therefore named after Canaan – because that is its present identity. And that is precisely the challenge that Avraham faces: can a nation arise, armed with morality and faith, and subjugate the primal, primitive human foundations? Can Canaan be subjugated by Shem? The story of the conquest of the land is therefore a cultural mission and a human experiment. If a nation is able

to convert "the land of Canaan," as an example, into "the Land of Israel," then there is hope for the victory of morality and faith over the sexual, lustful aspects of culture. It is this precise mission that represents Israel's mission and destiny throughout the generations:

"That the land may not reject you when you defile it, as it rejected the nation that preceded you" (*Vayikra* 18).

Notes:

[1] Readers are encouraged to read Nechama Leibowitz's *shiur* from her own book, as cited above.

[2] Rav Kook adopts a similar direction in his interpretation, in Letter no. 89.

[3] See Rav Yaakov Medan's *shiur* from 5764, and Rav Yoel bin-Nun's article in *Megadim* 17.

Translated by Kaeren Fish