

PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

Rivka

By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. "The matter has Come from God"

Rivka, alone among the patriarchs and matriarchs, has the honor of a lengthy explanation in the Torah as to why and how she came to be among the founding pillars of the Israelite nation. The main narrative of our *parasha* (chapter 24) presents a merging of two levels of her selection. On the one hand, it is Avraham's servant who defines the special qualities required of a woman in order to be worthy of becoming Yitzchak's wife; on the other hand, it is clear that these qualities are simply the sign that God has selected her.

This assumption is shared by all the parties involved. From the outset, Avraham tells his servant that he will receive Divine assistance:

"The Lord God of the heavens, Who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and Who spoke to me and Who swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I shall give this land' – He will send His angel before you, so you can bring a wife for my son from there."
(*Bereishit* 24:7)¹[1]

The servant himself also emphasizes more than once that the choice is in God's hands. For example:

(14) "And it shall be that the girl to whom I say, 'Let down your pitcher, I pray, that I may drink,' and she says, 'Drink – and I shall also water your camels' – it will be she whom You have shown for Your servant, for Yitzchak."

(48) "So I bowed my head and prostrated myself before the Lord, and I

1 [1] All verses cited are from *Bereishit* 24, unless noted otherwise.

blessed the Lord God of my master, Avraham, Who led me on the right path to take the daughter of my master's brother, for his son."

Ultimately, Rivka's family expresses the same feeling:

(50) Lavan and Betuel answered and said, "The matter has come from God; we cannot speak to you either bad or good.

(51) Behold, Rivka is before you – take her and go, and let her be a wife for your master's son, as God has spoken."

The *parasha* explains clearly why God chose Rivka. The quality of kindness that characterizes her is manifest in the criterion which the servant sets forth in his request, and it is clearly expressed in the selflessness and generosity with which she acts. At the same time, a review of the *parasha* reveals further qualities in Rivka that likewise explain her selection.

B. Avraham vs. Rivka

At the beginning of the *parasha*, Avraham sends his servant to seek a wife for Yitzchak. He does not specify which qualities he seeks in a daughter-in-law, but from his request, "You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites" (v.3) it seems that his wise servant² understands that she must have sterling moral traits, which are not to be found among the local women. With this in mind, the servant carries out his

2 [2] Surprisingly, throughout the entire narrative, the servant – who is, after all, one of the main characters – remains anonymous. How is it that *Sefer Bereishit* mentions by name dozens of individuals about whom we are told little or nothing else (some members of God's covenant as well as some who are not – Enosh, Keinan, Yered, Zimran, Yakshan, Yemuel, Yamin, Ohad), while such a central figure in such a long and detailed story remains nameless? Moreover, as we know, *Chazal* (*Yoma* 28b and elsewhere) identify the servant as Eliezer, as would also seem to be borne out by the literal text; Avraham himself testifies, "And the steward of my house is Eliezer of Damascus" (15:2), and in our *parasha* he appeals to "the eldest servant of his house, who ruled over all that he had" (24:2). Why, then, does the Torah deliberately erase Eliezer's name?

The reason seems to be hinted at in the text itself. When the servant reaches Rivka's home, he refuses to eat until he carries out his mission, and presents himself with the words, "I am Avraham's servant" (v.34). Throughout the story, the servant's complete devotion to his master is apparent, with no personal interest involved. This devotion is expressed, inter alia, in the sign that the servant chooses for the woman who is worthy of marrying Yitzchak, without Avraham having given any such instruction. The omission of the servant's name is therefore a sort of "confirmation" by the Torah that he fulfilled his mission perfectly.

“experiment,” aimed at identifying a woman who is especially kindhearted.^{3[3]}

It is interesting to note that Rivka's trait of kindness parallels the description of Avraham's own trait of kindness. The servant asks of her, "Let me drink a little water, I pray you, from your pitcher" (24:17), while Avraham had told his guests, "Let a little water be taken, I pray you, that you may wash your feet".^{4[4]} Avraham speaks little but acts quickly to carry out much more than he promised:

Avraham hurried to the tent, to Sara, and said, “Prepare quickly three measures of fine flour”... and Avraham ran to the herd and took a calf that was tender and good, and gave it to the young man, and he hurried to prepare it. (18:6-7)

Similarly, we read concerning Rivka:

She hurried to lower her pitcher... and she hurried to empty her pitcher into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water. (24:18-20)^{5[5]}

3 [3] On the simplest level, the servant acts admirably in establishing this criterion: it reflects the importance which he attaches to this special quality in Yitzchak's future wife. However, *Chazal* are divided in their opinions. In the *gemara* (*Chullin* 95b) we find: "Any divination which is not like that of Eliezer, servant of Avraham, or like that of Yonatan, son of Shaul, is not [true] divination." (For the narrative involving Yonatan, see *Shmuel I* 14). What does this mean? According to the Rambam (Laws of Idolatry 11:4), it seems that Eliezer acted improperly: "We do not engage in divination as the idolaters do, as it is written, 'You shall not divine' (*Vayikra* 19:26). What is divination?... And also, one who establishes signs for himself: 'If such-and-such happens to me, I shall do X; if it does not happen, I shall not do it' – like Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, and likewise any other such things – they are all prohibited. And anyone who performs any action because of any such sign is punished." However, the Ra'avad disagrees vehemently, insisting that the *gemara* means that this sort of sign is permitted. The *Kessef Mishneh* writes (ad loc.): "Eliezer knew that Yitzchak would be married only to a woman who was worthy of him; therefore he made this sign for himself – that if a potential bride would be so pleasant in her actions and perfect in her traits that if he told her, 'Let me sip a little water, I pray you,' she would generously answer, 'I shall also water your camels' – she would be the one Divinely appointed for Yitzchak." (See Rashi and Tosfot on this matter, ad loc.)

4 [4] This verse also has a parallel in v.32 in our chapter: "The man came to the house, and he ungirded the camels, and gave straw and provender to the camels and water to wash his feet, and the feet of the men who were with him."

5 [5] Attention should be paid to the fact that Rivka needed to run from place to place, because the spring did not supply sufficient water for the servant and his ten camels – she had to bring water from the well, a more substantial reservoir of water, which was somewhat removed from the spring. This impression arises from the succession of places mentioned in the narrative. First, the servant stopped with his camels alongside the well: "He made the camels kneel outside the city by a well of water" (verse 11); from there, he views Rivka going down to the stream: "She went down to the stream and filled her pitcher and came up" (verse 16). From his position next to the well, the servant must run to her, at the spring, in order to

In other words, the text is indicating that in the realm of kindness, Rivka resembles the patriarch of the family – Avraham.^{6[6]}

However, the similarity between Rivka and Avraham is visible in other areas, too, which also contribute to the molding of her character. At the beginning of the *parasha*, Avraham asks of his servant, "Rather, go to my country and my birthplace" (24:4). When the servant recounts this to his hosts he adds,

"And my master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell. But you shall go to my father's house...'" (vv. 37-38)

These words, of course, hint to Avraham's first test:

"Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house." (12:1)

Thus, we attain a better understanding of the difficult test facing Rivka, who is required to leave her family and go alone to a man she has never seen, and of the inner strength that is concealed behind her simple and courageous expression of agreement: "I shall go" (24:58).

Rivka's separation from her family is also somewhat reminiscent of the binding of Yitzchak. In both narratives, a complete severance is required between the father and his son or daughter. Avraham, who is commanded concerning a most extreme severance – to offer his son as a sacrifice –

speaks with her: "The servant ran towards her and said, 'Let me sip a little of the water in your pitcher, I pray you' (v.17). After giving him water to drink from the pitcher that she filled at the stream, Rivka offers to water his camels, too. She pours the remaining water into the trough and then runs – several times, apparently – to fill up with water from the well: "And she hurried to empty her pitcher into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water, and she drew for all of his camels" (v.20). In addition to her generous offer to water the camels, then, we must also take note of her readiness to exert herself and run backwards and forwards between the well and the trough. My thanks to R. Neria Klein for pointing out the distinction here between the "well" (*be'er*) and the "stream" (*ein*).

^{6 [6]} Rivka's generosity is noticeable elsewhere, too. When the servant asks her, "Whose daughter are you? Tell me, I pray you, is there room in your father's house for us to lodge?" (v.23), Rivka promises much more than just a place to lodge: "She said to him, 'I am the daughter of Betuel, son of Milka whom she bore to Nachor.' And she said to him, 'We have much of both straw and provender, as well as place to lodge'" (vv. 24-25).

hurries to fulfill God's command: "Avraham arose early in the morning" (22:3). Lavan and Betuel are likewise required to sever themselves from Rivka. The text hints that the gold and silver that the servant had brought succeeded in drawing their hearts in the direction of his request ("And it was, when he saw the nose-ring and the bracelets upon his sister's hands" – 24:30);^{7[7]} nevertheless, they seek to delay the plan:

They arose in the morning and he said, "Send me away to my master." But her brother and her mother said, "Let the girl remain with us for some days, or for ten; afterwards she shall go." (vv. 54-55)

But Rivka is ready to set off right away. She is therefore blessed by her family: "Your descendants shall inherit the gate of those who hate them" (v. 60) – recalling the blessing given to Avraham following the *akeda*: "And your descendants shall inherit the gate of those who hate them" (22:17).

Avraham lives in a pagan environment, and from within it he is chosen:

"Your fathers once dwelled on the other side of the river – Terach, the father of Avraham and the father of Nachor – and they served other gods. And I took your father, Avraham, from the other side of the river." (*Yehoshua* 24:2-3)

Rivka has grown up in exactly the same environment, with all its ills. Like Avraham, she too has succeeded in maintaining a path of righteousness and kindness, and when the appointed time comes, she too is ready to answer the call to go to God's land. The parallel with Avraham therefore also emphasizes the ability to develop a unique personality, separated from the pagan environment that is such a negative influence.^{8[8]}

This connection would seem to explain Rivka's behavior when she eventually meets Yitzchak:

7 [7] The same impression arises from the notable elaboration by the servant in v. 35: "And God has blessed my master exceedingly, and he has become great, and he has given him flocks and herds and silver and gold and manservants and maidservants and camels and donkeys." The servant apparently understands whom he is dealing with, and formulates his proposition in a manner which is calculated to appeal to them.

8 [8] Avraham's name appears in the story 14 times, while Rivka's name appears 13 times. Since the Torah omits the name of the servant, Avraham and Rivka are left as the central characters, even though no encounter occurs between them.

(64) Rivka lifted her eyes and she saw Yitzchak, and she fell from the camel.

(65) And she said to the servant, "Who is this man walking in the field towards us?" And the servant said, "He is my master." And she took her veil and covered herself."

What is the meaning of her "falling" from the camel? Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra all suggest that this was a voluntary act, expressing her modesty in the face of Yitzchak. However, it would appear that the stage of deliberate action comes only afterwards, when Rivka takes the veil and covers herself. The fall would seem to be a spontaneous reaction to the very sight of Yitzchak. Throughout her life, the orientation of Rivka's spirit and her inner morality have been foreign to her surroundings. Now, as she suddenly spies Yitzchak – someone who has grown up in Avraham's home, a home to which she truly belongs, at the root of her soul – she is seized by great emotion, and it is this which causes her to fall from the camel.

C. "Drink, My Lord"

One further point arises from a close reading of the text. Upon reaching Aram Naharayim, Avraham's servant establishes the sign that he is waiting for as follows:

"And it shall be that the girl to whom I say, 'Let down your pitcher, I pray, that I may drink', and she says, 'Drink – and I shall also water your camels' – it will be she whom You have shown for Your servant, for Yitzchak." (v. 14)

He uses similar language to describe the sign to Rivka's family, when he tells them what transpired:

"When I came today to the stream I said... 'Let [it be that] the girl who comes out to draw water, and I say to her, 'Let me drink a little water from your pitcher, I pray you', and she says to me, 'You drink, and I shall draw also for your camels' – let her be the woman whom God has shown for the son of my master.'" (vv. 42-44)

And indeed, he testifies, this is what happened:

"And behold, Rivka came out with her pitcher upon her shoulder, and

she went down to the stream to draw water. And I said to her, 'Let me drink, I pray you.' And she hurried to lower her pitcher from upon her and she said, 'Drink, and I shall water your camels, too.' So I drank, and she also watered the camels.'" (vv. 45-46)

However, in reality, what happened was slightly different:

The servant ran towards her and he said, "Let me taste a little water from your pitcher, I pray you." And she said, "Drink, my lord" – and she hurried to lower her pitcher into her hand, and gave him to drink. And when she finished giving him to drink she said, "I shall draw water also for your camels, until they have finished drinking." And she hurried to empty her pitcher into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water, and she drew for all of the camels. (vv. 17-20)

According to the servant, Rivka responded exactly as he expected her to: "Drink, and I shall water your camels also." However, as attested to in the text, Rivka divided her answer into two parts: first she told the servant to drink, and only when she had finished giving him to drink did she propose watering the camels. What is the significance of this?

This would seem to testify to yet another special quality in Rivka. Had she answered the servant as he expected her to – "Drink, and I shall also water your camels" – it would have been an implicit insult to the servant, being mentioned in the same breath as the beasts. Instead, Rivka showed him respect. Twenty-three times in the story, the devoted servant uses the word "master" (*adon*) in various forms in reference to Avraham. Only once in the story is it used to refer to anyone else, and that is here, where Rivka uses it to refer to the servant himself: "Drink, my lord (*adoni*)." The respect and delicacy with which she treats the servant leads her to first deal with his needs, and only afterwards to deal with his camels.^{9[9]}

In any event, the servant appears not to have noticed any of this, and when he describes Rivka's actions, he repeats what he had anticipated in advance, failing to note the small but significant change in the way Rivka treats him.

9 [9] However, despite the distinction that she draws between the servant and his camels, when the time comes to water them, she shows no less devotion, and her action is described using the same terms that we see when she gives the servant to drink: "She hurried to lower her pitcher into her hand... and she hurried to empty her pitcher into the trough..."

Translated by Kaeren Fish

