

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

Parashat Chayei Sara

When Rivka Met Yitzchak By Rav Ezra Bick

After the opening section of the parasha, describing the purchase of the Cave of Machpela by Avraham for the purpose of burying Sara, the rest of the parasha is devoted to the *shiduch* of Yitzchak and Rivka. The majority of this story describes at length and in detail the story of Avraham's servant and his meeting with Rivka and the negotiations with her family, culminating in her traveling to Eretz Yisrael with the servant in order to marry Yitzchak. Despite a perhaps common conception that an arranged marriage between relatives might be the norm in ancient times, in fact this is the only such arrangement described in the Torah. All the other explicit descriptions of how a man met his wife describe him as finding her himself (Yaacov, Yehuda), or of being chosen by the woman's father (Yosef, Moshe). Only Yitzchak has his wife chosen by his father, or rather by his father's emissary.

This fact has sometimes served as the basis for the conclusion that Yitzchak, at least relative to the other patriarchs, has a "passive" personality, especially in relation to practical affairs. In order not to turn this into condemnation, this is usually combined with the explanation that this is due to his total orientation to "other-worldly" matters, which is one possible, and perhaps necessary, element in the complex personality traits which together form the basis of the religious personality; in other words, Yitzchak is one of three founding fathers who together introduce the different paradigms of the whole religious personality.

I think this picture is in need of serious revision, primarily in light of what the Torah tells us about Yitzchak in the next parasha, Toledot. In fact, the only story in the Torah about Yitzchak's "career" as an *av* – not counting the story of how he passes on the mantle of leadership to Yaacov by giving him the *brachot* – is his relationship with Avimelech the king of Gerar. The proponents of the theory proposed above sometimes point to this as support for their theory, as Yitzchak does not contend with the aggression of the shepherds of Gerar who destroy his wells. But in fact, Yitzchak does contend, though not in a direct confrontational manner. It is true that Yitzchak avoids confrontation, but what he does do is to continually dig new wells, until he wears down the local opposition. He is not passive, but quietly persistent and perseverant, and eventually forces the king of Gerar to come to him and basically to sue for peace. This avoidance of confrontation may well be a defining characteristic of Yitzchak, and may well explain his attitude to Eisav, but that is a very different thing from attributing to him the attribute of passivity.

In fact, I think the Torah does not present Yitzchak as passive in the story of his marriage either, and that is the subject of today's study. For this purpose, I wish to examine, not the lengthy story of how Eliezer (the servant of Avraham) met and chose Rivka, but the short (seven verses, 24, 62-67) description of the actual meeting between Yitzchak and Rivka and their marriage.

This story may be divided into two parts – Rivka's seeing Yitzchak coming from the field – her fall from the camel and her veiling herself (verses 63-65, and Yitzchak's reaction – his conversation with the servant and his bringing Rivka into the tent and marrying her (verses 66-67).

A. Rivka and the Camel

Rivka sees Yitzchak walking in the field towards evening, and she falls from the camel on which she is riding. She then asks the servant who this man is, and, when he answers that this is his master, she veils herself.

The Hebrew states that Rivka **falls from off** the camel (*vatipol me-al hagamal*). The simple understanding is that she falls **off** the camel. This is indicated both by the verb *vatipol*, which normally indicates an involuntary act, and by the preposition *me-al*, which would seem to indicate that she falls **off** the camel (*me-al* = from off, rather than if it has said *al*, which could mean that she fell **on** the camel.) Despite this, Rashi, based on the Targum (and supported by the Midrash Rabba), interprets *vatipol* to mean that she **bent over**, meaning she bent over, tilted herself to one side, on the camel. The Ramban agrees with Rashi, and explains that this was an action of modesty, a retreat and withdrawal, when she saw a strange man. The Ibn Ezra, who can normally be expected to prefer the simple explanation of the text, explains *vatipol* in the same manner, as being a voluntary action, a sort of bowing, and adds that the following verse (45), in which Rivka discovers who the man in the field is, actually precedes the "falling." Apparently, he feels that the "falling" is Rivka's response to meeting her intended, exactly as she proceeds to veil herself. The Ramban declines to reverse the order of the verses, and explains the the "falling", actually merely a turning to one side, is the response to her seeing a strange man who she understood to be approaching her, and the veiling a continuation of the same gesture, but a stronger one, when she discovers who it actually was.

All of these commentators then understand the entire episode to be describing Rivka's *tzniut*, modesty. The only reason I can think of why the Torah would take the trouble to describe this is simply to inform us of Rivka's exceptionally good character. This would complement the preceding story of Rivka's encounter with Eliezer at the well, which explicitly informed us that she was characterized by generosity and helpfulness (*chesed*), which appear to be in fact the attributes which lead Eliezer to ask for her hand in marriage for Yitzchak.

Why did all these commentators not explain that Rivka fell off the camel? Presumably, the reason is that they cannot think of any reason why

she should fall off the camel. Was it just a coincidence that she happened to lose her balance at the exact moment she saw Yitzchak? And even if that is what happened, why is the Torah telling us about it? Her falling has no repercussions in the story itself, as far as we can tell. The alternative explanation, that she was being modest, is supported by her subsequent veiling herself, and hence all these commentators accept the midrash that *vatipol* here means **bent over** rather than **falling**.

The opposite explanation, interpreting *vatipol* as involuntary falling off of the camel, and explaining it as an example, in effect, of being "swept off of one's feet," is defended by the Netziv. As a result, Rivka's falling and her veiling herself are two different reactions, and this explains why they are separated by the exchange between Rivka and the servant concerning the identity of the man walking in the field. The first was a reaction of Rivka to the (overwhelming) sight of Yitzchak, identity unknown but apparently very impressive, and the second is her conscious decision to veil herself from the man who she now knows is her intended husband. This interpretation was developed and explained in a VBM shiur some years ago (<http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.61/05chayei.htm>). It is clearly closer to the simple interpretation of the words, and I would like to, at this point, only add a few points to the explanations advanced in that shiur.

Throughout the previous narrative of the servant's visit to the house of Betuel, Rivka's father, he is described by the Torah as "the servant" (*eved*). When he is described by the family of Betuel, he is called "the man" (*ish*). This indicated, I think, that although he is merely the slave of Avraham, in the eyes of the people of Aram, he is an impressive personality. Since Chazal identify "the servant" as Eliezer, and describe him as a great and righteous man in his own right, this is understandable. They know he is a slave, but his figure strikes them as dignified and striking, and so they automatically refer to him as "the man", meaning the individual, in contradistinction to the Torah's calling him "the servant", since the Torah is comparing him to Avraham Avinu, the true measure of an extraordinarily impressive personality.

When Rivka sets out on her journey, the Torah writes that she "travels **after** the *ish*." Rivka is able and willing to set off on the journey into the unknown precisely because she is following a man who appears to her as an ***ish***, one who inspires in her a feeling of confidence, one whom she is willing to **follow**. The Torah writes that Rivka "arose and mounted the camel and went after **the *ish***, and the ***eved*** took Rivka and departed" (verse 61). In Rivka's eyes she is following an *ish*, while in the Torah's eyes, in the very same verse, he is only a slave. A little bit later, Rivka **raises her eyes** and sees Yitzchak, walking in the field (Chazal say he was praying *mincha*). She falls off the camel and "says to the ***eved***, who is this ***ish*** who is walking in the field toward us." Once having seen Yitzchak, a truly impressive sight, a real *ish*, she now addresses the *eved*, who has shrunk back to his genuine stature in the house of Avraham and Yitzchak. The purpose of the Torah's narrative is to tell us how Rivka immediately and instinctively recognized Yitzchak's greatness, far beyond even the impressive personalities she had met in the past, one which dwarfed other men in her eyes, and this in fact was what had

swept her off her camel in the first place. Afterwards, when she finds out that this is her husband, she veils her face, which is not, I believe, a normal way for one to meet one's mate, but indicates her feeling of awe before him. The first reaction, falling off the camel, is a direct reaction to his overwhelming presence; the second, the veiling, is a conscious decision about how she will relate to him in the future, given his overwhelming presence, a relationship that will include a certain measure of self-protection and reserve. (The Netziv explains at length why this "veiling" is important and serves as the basis for understanding the relationship of Yitzchak in parashat Toledot. See the VBM shiur cited above).

B. Yitzchak and his Mother's Tent

Two verses describe how Yitzchak acts upon meeting Rivka. The first concerns the *eved* and Yitzchak; the second Yitzchak and Rivka.

"The *eved* told Yitzchak all the things he had done" (v. 66). The verse is totally unnecessary, especially since no details are given. The simple explanation, given the context and the lack of details, is that he told Yitzchak that he had brought him a bride from Aram. But this is so obvious that there is no need to write it, unless the next verse is in direct response to it. The next verse tells us that Yitzchak marries Rivka, and this does not appear to be a direct response to the story of the *eved*, but rather to the fact that Rivka had come. Of course, without some explanation by the *eved*, Yitzchak would not have the faintest idea who Rivka was, but unless there is more in this conversation than meets the eye, there does not appear to be a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the two verses, and the story reads perfectly well without the first verse at all.

This is, I think, the reason that Rashi fills in the contents of what the *eved* told Yitzchak. Although the verse states that he told Yitzchak "everything that **he did**," Rashi says he told him "the miracles that **performed for him**, that the earth was miraculously folded up for him (*kfitzat haderech*), and that Rivka appeared in response to his prayer." Rashi is aware that placing the emphasis on the miracles that accompany the main story requires changing the *pshat*, as the *eved* didn't **do** the miracles, but rather they were **done for him**. Nonetheless, Rashi prefers the midrashic explanation. The reason is that he feels it necessary to explain why the *eved's* narrative **results** in Yitzchak reacting as he did. Rashi is explaining that the miracles convince Yitzchak to "bring her into the tent of his mother Sara, and he took Rivka and she became his wife, and he loved her." The miracles prove that Rivka is divinely ordained as his wife, and that is the reason why he reacts as he does. In other words, Yitzchak is reacting directly to the *eved's* report.

I think the emphasis should be placed on Yitzchak's immediate action, before marrying her – his bringing her in to the tent of his mother. We shall soon describe what this actually means, but it clearly means something more than just marrying her. The implication of Rashi's interpretation is that Yitzchak is impressed by the miraculous Divine providence accompanying Rivka, and **therefore** he sees her as continuing his mother, who was

someone blessed by Divine miraculous presence. In fact, Rashi continues by stating that Rivka's entering the tent results in a resumption of the miracles which had marked Sara's presence in the tent – a candle burning for seven days, the dough rising miraculously, and a cloud attached to the tent (obviously a sign of Divine presence). The *eved's* miracles then lead directly to Yitzchak arranging for more miracles, since Rivka, aside from being a wonderful prospective bride, is apparently someone who can continue Sara's role as the resting place of the *Schechina*.

But clearly this is not *pshat* in this verse. I think that a simple reading of the verse would be that the *eved* told Yitzchak what he, the *eved*, had done – namely, the test he had arranged, with God's help, at the well. The test proves, not so much Divine providence, as it proves that Rivka is a personality of *chesed*. That in fact is the trait which recommends Rivka as a suitable wife for Yitzchak (as Rashi himself points out – 24,14). However, I think that Rashi is still correct in tying the *eved's* story to the bringing Rivka into the tent, and not to the marriage, and this for two reasons. First, it is the **immediate** reaction of Yitzchak, and secondly, it is the action which requires explanation. Yitzchak could well have married Rivka because the *eved* had brought her – and that is in fact the conclusion that the proponents of the passivity theory of Yitzchak's personality maintain, but we are perplexed what is the background and the explanation of why Yitzchak **first** brings her into the tent. According to Rashi, the miracles in Aram lead Yitzchak to place Rivka in a miracle-continuing situation as the successor to Sara. For my alternative explanation, we have to understand why Rivka's *chesed* by the well results in her being brought into the tent. For that, we have to understand just what this action represents, which brings us to the last verse of our story.

Yitzchak brought her into the tent Sara his mother, and he took Rivka and she became his wife, and he loved her, and Yitzchak was consoled over his mother. (v. 67)

The normal reading of the phrase *ha-ohela Sara imo* is "into the tent of Sara his mother." In recent years, this reading has led to a sort of Freudian psychological understanding, whereby the Torah is telling us that Yitzchak, at age 43, has some sort of a fixation on his mother, and expects his wife to replace her. Since most moderns would view this as a basically unhealthy basis for a marriage, this reading can only be understood as somewhat critical of Yitzchak, or at least as pointing out a problem with his marriage.

I doubt this understanding is correct. Firstly, there is no reason for the Torah to be psychoanalyzing Yitzchak in this way, since it does not explain anything about the rest of Yitzchak's life. It is unconnected to the story. Secondly, although I of course believe that the Torah is eternal and written with infinite meaning, I find it hard to believe that the Torah explicitly is making a point which no one understood until Freud enlightened us. I have nothing against using psychological insights to illuminate the Torah narrative, but in this case we are trying to understand the explicit purpose in writing the verse, and I think the Torah's basic *pshat* should have been clear to ancients as well as to us.

In fact, it is worth noting that Rashi and the Targum interpret the verse differently. *Ha-ohela Sara imo* means, according to the Targum, "into the tent, and there was Sara". The tent is the tent of Yitzchak, and the entire psychological undertone disappears. Why, you will ask, does Rashi interpret the verse this way, since it clearly involves a very clumsy reading of the phrase "*Sara imo*?" The answer is hinted at by the Ramban, who actually disagrees and does think it was "the tent of his mother Sara." Nonetheless, there is a grammatical problem with this reading, since the word "of" is missing. Normally, there is no need for the word "of" in Hebrew. "*Ohel Sara*" means "the tent of Sara." However, when there is a direct object, as in this case where it says "*ha-ohela*", you normally must add a preposition – "*ha-ohel shel Sara*." The Ramban explains this away by admitting the preposition is missing, but this is an acceptable exception to the rule. Rashi, apparently, felt the missing preposition precludes the explanation of the Ramban, and, following the Targum, explains that Yitzchak brought Rivka into his tent (as a prelude to marriage, presumably), and behold, it was as though Sara was there, because the miracles which had been present during Sara's lifetime returned.

I think there is another reason to doubt the explanation that it was actually Sara's tent. As far as we know, Sara didn't have a tent. There surely is no well-known tent called Sara's tent. The only place where Sara is previously mentioned as being in a tent – when the angels came to Avraham at the beginning of *Va-eira*, it appears that she is in the same tent that Avraham was sitting before when God appeared to him. In other words, as far as we know, Avraham and Sara shared a tent. (The fact that Yaacov's wives each had her own tent – 31,33 – is no proof that women had separate tents from their husbands. If you have **four** wives, you have to give each a separate tent, but it is quite possible that if you have only one, as Avraham had, that you share a tent with her.)

On the other hand, the reading of the Targum and Rashi is surely not any more grammatically correct than that of the Ramban (and the Ibn Ezra). I think the explanation here is actually a combination.

The *eved* had told Yitzchak why Rivka was the perfect wife for him, as she had passed the test of *chesed*. In this manner, the *eved* was fulfilling the instructions of Avraham, who had sent him to find a wife for Yitzchak (24,1-4). Avraham is only concerned with finding a wife for Yitzchak, as any father would be. If that is the only role that Rivka has to fill, then the *eved* has already shown that she is eminently suitable, since she is a *tzaddeket* who manifests the primary ideal of Avraham Avinu himself, *chesed*.

Yitzchak, however, is painfully aware that the woman who will be his wife and mate must also be a matriarch, must not only be a daughter of Israel, but has a role in the unfinished founding of Israel, a process which we summarize in the phrase three fathers and four mothers. She has a particular role in creating the basis for the resting of the *Shechina* in the world. For this, individual righteousness is not enough. The previous three years had been a

time – the only time in the history of the *avot* – where there was no living mother. Yitzchak's marriage is also the beginning of Yitzchak's career as an *av*, and he needs, or rather the divine plan for *am yisrael* needs, an *eim*. Hence, impressed with the *eved's* proof of Rivka's personal credentials, Yitzchak brings her into the tent. I do not think this is a particular tent which had belonged to Sara and had been waiting empty for the last three years. The grammatical reading of the text leads you stop after the word "tent", it is the tent where the family-people of Israel is found, where the foundations for *am yisrael* are being laid. It is the tent of Sara in the sense that Yitzchak is bringing in Rivka to replace – or rather to continue the work of – Sara, not because he needs a wife to replace Sara, but because he knows that his wife has an additional role to continue the unfinished work. That role is not one that Rivka has shown an aptitude before, unlike the *chesed*, personal role, because it is completely outside her previous frame of reference, and therefore Yitzchak has to "bring her into the tent, Sara his mother." The midrash cites that there was an immediate fulfillment of that role, in the miraculous signs, which I think should be understood to mean that Rivka was in fact immediately able to enter into the new role.

(Avraham is strangely absent from this part of the story. Although he is the one who sent the *eved*, without even apparently consulting with Yitzchak, the *eved* returns to Yitzchak, tells him what he has done, and Yitzchak marries Rivka without any mention of Avraham, who returns to the story one verse too late. I think the explanation is that this section is primarily telling us of the introduction of Rivka into the role of matriarch and not that of wife, and that had not been the preoccupation of Avraham, but was Yitzchak's initiative and concern.)

Only after Yitzchak introduces Rivka to this new and additional role, one for which the *eved* had not prepared her or even mentioned, did he marry her. I think the Torah adds the uncharacteristic comment that he loved her in order to prevent a possible misconception that their marriage was only political, that he married her only because she filled the role of his mother vis a vis Jewish history, so the Torah emphasizes that he loved her personally, and then returns to second level – he was comforted after his mother, he had found not only a loving mate for himself but **also** someone who would fulfill the role of matriarch for *am yisrael*.

C. Passivity and Activity

In what might appear on first glance to be a reversal of the expected, in this encounter between Rivka and Yitzchak, it is Rivka who is "passive," falling off her camel, retiring behind the veil, and then being married (Yitzchak brings her into the tent, Yitzchak takes her, marries her, and loves her). Yitzchak is active, both in terms of the actions and in terms of the plan, not accepting his father's and the *eved's* plan on its own. This does not mean that Rivka is not a strong character (see Toledot), nor that Yitzchak is one who fights against his foes and climbs new mountains. Unlike his father, Yitzchak is not an initiator, but rather one who through strong perseverance gives his father's accomplishments the roots of permanence ("Yitzchak returned and

dug all the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Avraham, and the Plishtim had sealed them after Avraham's death, and he called them by the names which his father had called them" – 26,19). Rivka is in awe of her powerful husband, but this does not prevent her from correcting, somewhat behind his back, what she thinks are his mistakes in choosing Eisav over Yaacov. Both of those complex personalities and the relationship between them are crucial for the continuing saga of the founding of *am yisrael*, leading up to the career of Yaacov and his wives – but that begins only in next week's reading.