## The Finances of the Forefathers- Part 3

Rav Yaakov Beasley

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

## Introduction to Parashat Hashavua Yeshivat Har Etzion

#### PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

# The Finances of the Forefathers- Part 3 By Rav Yaakov Beasley

Part 3 – Riches and Redemption

#### A. Introduction

We have been analyzing the specific role money performs in the vast panorama of Avraham's narrative. Surprisingly, we discover that what the Torah promisingly introduced as a reward for Avraham's faithfulness, has instead served to complicate his life beyond our expectations. In *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, Avraham's enhanced prosperity came at the cost of Sara's degradation and Lot's abandonment. Ironically, only his fervent renunciation of wealth promised by the King of Sedom redeems his character. *Parashat Vayera* finds Avraham and Sara trapped once again in the clutches of a lustful monarch. This time, however, Avraham, given the chance to speak, forcefully denounces the society that endangers a man's life and causes him to fear for his beautiful spouse. While the effect of Avraham's reproach is lessened by his subsequent rationalization that, technically, he also shares a sibling relationship with Sara, his standing with the king is not. Once again, a king appeases him with financial gifts. This time, however, the king accompanies the gifts with an open declaration of Sara's innocence. These riches serve as her protection. In addition, unlike their hasty expulsion from Egypt, Avraham and Sara receive the privilege of dwelling anywhere in Avimelekh's domain.

## B. Avimelekh's Request

Openly, the narrative continues with the birth of Yitzchak, and the subsequent expulsion of Yishmael from the family. The Torah's brief manner, however, hides Avraham's growing affluence and prestige. Without forewarning, Avimelekh re-appears suddenly in the story, this time accompanied with his military aides. Surprisingly, however, it is peace that he desires, and nor war.

And it happened at that time that Avimelekh, and Pichol his general with him, said to Avraham, "God is with you in whatever you do.

Therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely, neither with my descendants nor with me. According to the kindness that I have done for you, so shall you do for me, (while) you are in the land where you dwell."

And Avraham said, "I will swear." (21:22-24)

Again, Avraham prospers, provoking the concern of the native rulers. The commentators debate precisely where and when this conversation occurred. Radak notes that it does not state that Avimelekh went to Avraham, but simply that he *spoke* to Avraham. This leads to Radak's suggestion that Avraham accepted Avimelekh's invitation to dwell in Gerar (see also Ibn Ezra), and that this encounter took place during the party for Yitzchak's weaning.

Rabbinic thought, however, portrays Avraham as having declined Avimelekh's offer. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 61:1) praises Avraham for his refusal as one who [*Tehillim* 1:1] "Sat not in the session of scorners" [as the Philistines are described in *Avoda Zara* 19a]. If so, the ramifications are that like the incident with the King of Sedom above, Avraham has refused the 'generous' offers of strangers to enrich him, and has chosen to rely instead solely on the providence of God.[1]

As significant as the above is Avraham's immediate response to the offer proffered by Avimelekh. The Torah continues:

Then Avraham rebuked Avimelekh concerning the well of water that Avimelekh's servants had seized.

And Avimelekh said, "I do not know who did such a thing; and also [ve-gam] you did not tell me, and also [ve-gam] I myself never heard of it until this day." (25-26)

The commentators try to explain Avimelekh's disjointed response. Seforno suggests that Avimelekh attempts to claim complete ignorance of the entire incident, as he would not harbor in his court anyone capable of perpetrating such violence. The Ibn Sho'ib suggests that Avimelekh, in fact, accuses Avraham of impropriety, for had Avraham interceded with the king earlier, this incident would have been resolved. A creative explanation of the seemingly repetitive statements is attributed to Ma'aseh Hashem:

First, Avimelekh said, "I do not know who did such a thing," and then turned to his general Pichol and accused him, "And you did not tell me" [for it was Pichol's responsibility to ensure that the king is abreast of everything that occurs in the kingdom]. Pichol responded, in self-defense, "I myself never heard of it until this day."

Careful readers, however, recognize the rhythmic refrain of "and also [ve-gam]" in Avimelekh's rejoinder, and hear the echo of a previous conversation between Avraham and Avimelekh:

For I said, 'there is no fear of God in this place.' And also [ve-gam], she is my sister through my father's side ...' (20:11-13)

Previously, it was Avimelekh who accused Avraham of impropriety, leaving Avraham to stumble through a response. With the tables clearly turned, now Avraham holds the upper moral hand, while Avimelekh is left gasping for excuses.

## C. Wealth and Finding Rivka

After the death and burial of Sara, Avraham faces one more task – to find a worthy wife for Yitzchak to maintain his legacy and vision. The Torah introduces Avraham at the beginning of this task as follows:

And Avraham was old, advanced in years, and Hashem had blessed Avraham with everything. (24:1)

Radak explains simply that Avraham lacked nothing, and his only remaining concern was providing his son with a suitable spouse. Rashbam suggests that the mention of Avraham's abundant wealth was a necessary preface to the ensuing narrative. If anyone would suggest that Avraham sent his servant to Aram Naharayim to find a bride for Yitzchak because the people of Canaan refused to marry off their daughters to him, the Torah emphatically refutes the notion. As a wealthy man, a match with Avraham's son was much sought after by the community. Only Avraham's insistence that a bride come from his family prevented a match. His servant made this clear as well when he stated (21:35), "Hashem has greatly blessed my master and he has prospered."

That wealth played a large factor in convincing Rivka's family in allowing her to join the servant, the Rabbis already see in the first description of Lavan in the Torah:

Rivka had a brother whose name was Lavan. Lavan ran outside to the man by the spring. And upon seeing the rings and bracelets on his sister's arm, and upon hearing Rivka his sister's words, "So spoke the man to me", he approached the man still standing by the camels and said, "Come, Blessed One of Hashem! Why should you stand outside when I have cleared the house and made space for the camels?" (29-30)

Rashi, commenting on the juxtaposition that Lavan "saw" the jewelry, and only afterwards "heard" his sister's words, comments that Lavan's generous behavior was motivated by greed and avarice. In

contrast to Avraham earlier, and Rivka at the well, only once Lavan realized the wealthy nature of his guest did he exert himself to be hospitable.

## D. Gifts for the Children

Avraham's life concludes quietly. After Yitzchak and Rivka's marriage, the Torah briefly mentions that Avraham remarries, this time to a woman named Ketura. In his lifetime, he bequeathed his possessions to Yitzchak, but provided his children with gifts before sending them away. Rashi however, based on rabbinic tradition, identifies Ketura with Hagar. He then suggests that the gifts Avraham distributed to his children were the money and flocks received from Pharaoh and Avimelekh when they took Sara. If so, then we are witness to a fascinating literary and theological pattern. The narratives in *Parashat Chayei Sara*, form a chiasmic closing of the circles opened in *Lekh Lekha*, as follows:

- A. Avraham receives gifts for Sara (Ch. 12).
  - B. Avraham's wealth drives Lot away from the family (Ch. 13).
    - C. Avraham refuses to accept gifts from the King of Sedom (Ch. 14).
- D. Avraham accepts gifts after rationalizing ("and also") his deception of Avimelekh (Ch. 20).
- D1. Avimelekh acknowledges Avraham's integrity and independence after rationalizing ("and also") his servants behavior (Ch. 21).
- C1. Avraham refuses to accept gifts from the children of Chet, and pays full money for a burial place for Sara (Ch. 23)
  - B1. Avraham's wealth draws Rivka into the family (Ch. 24).
- A1. Avraham divests himself of the gifts he received for Sara (Ch. 25).

Finally, money has not only become a source of blessing to Avraham, but he is finally able to divest himself of the gifts he unwillingly received at the expense of Sara. Fittingly, he is able give over these presents to Hagar's (Ketura) children[2]; as descendants of one of the people Avraham first received in the compensation from Pharaoh, they were the most worthy recipients of these gifts.

## E. Conclusion

On the verse mentioned above, that "Hashem blessed Avraham with everything," Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch suggests a philosophical understanding of Avraham's affluence in the narrative:

If Avraham had been poor, or even if he had possessed merely modest means, he himself would surely have been no less happy and contented – but he would have gone unnoticed by the world in general. And if people had believed that he extraordinary good fortune was the result of his high standards of morality, the would have gaped in admiration at him, but would have let him go forward in his isolated way, for people do not exert themselves to become moral. But his contemporaries believed that Avraham owed his success to some secret knowledge and magic, and that drew great ones from all corners of the world to come to him and consult with him.

Without wealth, Avraham's mission to spread his unique moral brand of monotheism in the world would have gone unnoticed. Ultimately, through his wealth and prestige, Avraham is able to not only attract the world's attention, but also ensure the survival and continuity of his own unique mission.

[1] Ramban (21:32) tries to find a middle ground between the two opinions mentioned above. He suggests that while declining Avimelekh's offer to dwell near the capital city of Gerar, Avraham did decide to dwell near what would late be called Be'er Sheva, which the Ramban suggests was then under the domain of the Philistines.

[2] Assuming that Hagar was most likely included in the original gift of maidservants that Pharaoh gave over to Avraham (12:21).

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