

PARASHAT HASHAVUA
PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

This is Hashem's Doing
By Rav Yair Kahn

1. The Discourse of our Forefather's Servant

Upon glancing at *Parashat Chayei Sara*, one notices that the account of Avraham's servant (identified by *Chazal* as Eliezer) and his quest for a bride for Yitzchak spans the majority of the *parasha*. One is immediately struck by the length and seemingly unnecessary repetition, so uncharacteristic of biblical narrative. The Torah, which at times seems so stingy and grudging regarding important details, is overly generous with respect to this particular story. This feature is even more pronounced when contrasted with the halakhic sections of the Torah, which are extremely terse. This peculiarity was noticed by our Sages. In fact, Rashi quotes the famous *midrash* in his commentary: "R. Acha said: The conversations of the servants of our forefathers are dearer to the Omnipresent than the Torah of their children. After all, the *parasha* of Eliezer is repeated in the Torah, while many laws can only be derived through subtle hints." In order to attain a greater appreciation of this statement, we must first analyze our *parasha*, specifically with respect to its verbosity.

Let us begin with the repetition of the story. Why does the Torah relate both the actual encounter between Eliezer and Rivka as well as Eliezer's retelling of this meeting? It is worth noting that the reference of the *midrash* to "conversations of the servants" may primarily refer to the transcription of Eliezer's account. Therefore, we will briefly focus on Eliezer's rendition, and pay specific attention to discrepancies between it and the account of the actual events.

Professor Nechama Leibovitz *a"h*, working off the commentary or the Akeidat Yitzchak, did a marvelous job of both pointing out the differences between the two accounts as well as analyzing the reasons for these discrepancies. I cannot cover all the points noted by her; I will therefore focus on what I consider the ones that are critical for our purposes.

Eliezer is charged by Avraham to return to his homeland and birthplace ("*moladet*") in order to choose a bride for Yitzchak (*pasuk* 4). Eliezer, on the other hand, relates that he was sent specifically to Avraham's family ("*beit avi*") to choose a bride (*pesukim* 38, 40). In order to solve this contradiction, the Rashbam interprets "*moladet*" as referring to family, and not to birthplace. However, a quick glance at the first *pasuk* in *Parashat Lekh Lekha* (12:1) reveals the difficulty of this interpretation.

Furthermore, in the original account, Eliezer hands the jewelry to Rivka prior to determining her lineage (*pesukim* 22-23), while in Eliezer's account, this order is reversed (*pasuk* 47). The Ramban suggests that Eliezer lifted the jewelry

before questioning Rivka, but gave it to her only after receiving her answer. After all, it would be absurd to transfer the jewels to this girl before determining that she is a viable candidate, from the family of Avraham. (See Rashi's commentary for an alternate solution.)

However, if Eliezer was charged with going specifically to the family of Avraham, it is very difficult to understand why he didn't immediately limit his interview to family members. Why not simply ask the townspeople where Betuel lived, similar to Yaakov, who questioned the shepherds about Lavan? Why did Eliezer originally intend on randomly approaching any of the girls in the village? Perhaps most troublesome, why did Eliezer turn to Hashem for guidance? After all, the "test" he proposed was not only to evaluate character, but a divine sign as well. Do we plead for Hashem's intervention when unnecessary? If a foreigner arrived in New York to meet an acquaintance, should he turn to Hashem for a sign and then go to Time Square to wait for that sign? Wouldn't simply opening up the phone book be a more appropriate option, even for a man of faith?

The commentators mentioned above based their interpretations on the assumption that Eliezer retold the events with accuracy. It is therefore crucial to explain the discrepancies between the two accounts. However, an unbiased reading of the original account of the Torah clearly indicates that Eliezer was not sent to Avraham's family, but rather to his homeland. This is in sharp contrast to Yitzchak, who sent Yaakov directly to Lavan. Of course, this raises the question of the relationship between Avraham and his brother, which we will *b"n* discuss in a future *shiur*.

In any case, Eliezer planted himself near the well and prepared to interview any of the girls of the village. When the first girl successfully passed her interview, he immediately showered her with gifts, even before questioning her lineage. He was subsequently overwhelmed by the surprisingly fortuitous discovery that this girl was in fact Rivka, a descendant of Nachor.

Eliezer diplomatically altered the story in order to convince Lavan and Betuel to permit the marriage. He therefore claimed that he was sent specifically to Avraham's family. Consequently, he was forced to switch the order of events and claim that the jewels were only given after determining Rivka's family connections. Avraham spoke of Hashem, the God of heaven, who took him from my father's house (*pasuk* 7). Eliezer doctored this potentially insulting phrase (*pasuk* 40). Avraham insisted that whether Eliezer was successful or not, he was never to return Yitzchak to Aram. Eliezer conveniently left that detail out.

According to the Akeidat Yitzchak, the necessity for repetition is clear. In order for us to appreciate Eliezer's contribution to the story, the Torah must transcribe both the actual events as well as Eliezer's dialogue with Lavan. By contrasting the two accounts, we are able to discover how wisely and faithfully Eliezer carried out his mission.

2. Hashem Has Granted Success to my Journey

However, I believe that the Torah's lengthy rendition of this story comes to stress a different point. Although impressive, I find it hard to accept that the Torah was so verbose only in order to eternalize Eliezer's sharpness and smoothness as a diplomat. Instead, I will try to show how a careful reading of the *parasha* along the lines of the Akedat Yitzchak's commentary reveals an engaging tale of religious commitment, faith, and divine providence.

According to the accepted interpretation that Avraham sent Eliezer to his family, Eliezer's mission was more or less straightforward. All he had to do was find Betuel and choose an appropriate bride from among his daughters. Instead, Eliezer complicated a simple mission. According to the Akedat Yitzchak, on the other hand, Eliezer was faced with a monumental challenge. Indeed, he had many more girls to choose from and enough wealth to attract greedy candidates. But how was he to single out an appropriate bride for Yitzchak from among the thousands of girls in Aram?

When initially charged by Avraham with the task of finding a bride for Yitzchak, Eliezer was skeptical regarding the success of this mission (*pasuk* 5). Avraham assured him that with the help of God (literally), he would successfully complete his mission (*pasuk* 7). With this assurance, armed with the promise of divine assistance, Eliezer faithfully embarked on his journey, with no idea whatsoever of how he would proceed. Even upon reaching his destination, he did not know to whom to turn. How was he to choose the "right girl" out of the thousands of potential candidates? In his desperation, he lifted his arms in passionate prayer (the force of his supplication is indicated by the "*shalshela*" in *pasuk* 12, one of the most unique *ta'amei ha-mikra*). He devised a test that he would use in his interviews that would help him make the right choice. It would test the character traits of the girl, but more importantly, serve as an omen. For instance, the *gemara* in *Chullin* (95b) states: "Any soothsaying that is not similar to that of Eliezer the servant of Avraham... is not soothsaying." The *gemara* relates to Eliezer's "test" as an omen, not a job interview.

As Eliezer completed his prayer, a beautiful girl appeared with a pitcher on her shoulder (*pasuk* 15). Eliezer ran towards her. Why did he run? What did Eliezer notice that singled out this particular girl as a potential bride for Yitzchak? Rashi was troubled by this and presents a supernatural explanation: "For he saw that the waters [miraculously] rose to greet her." However, Rashi's explanation does not fit with *peshuto shel mikra*, the literal reading of the Torah, and our Sages said that "Scripture can not be totally removed from its literal meaning." Therefore, we will suggest an interpretation that is rooted in *peshat*, which does not introduce supernatural phenomena.

Rivka's arrival is prefaced by the Biblical term "*ve-hineh*," which is usually translated as, "and behold." As a rule, "*ve-hineh*" indicates something sudden and unexpected. The sudden appearance of a beautiful girl, before Eliezer had completed his speech, took Eliezer by surprise. The *pasuk* emphasizes the immediacy of Rivka's appearance: "And it came to pass, he had not yet completed his speech and **behold** Rivka went out" (*pasuk* 15). We can imagine that Eliezer assumed that he would spend the next few days in the village until he found a girl who passed the test and was willing

to leave everything, move to Canaan, and marry some unknown person. If unsuccessful in this village, there was always the next village. Instead, Rivka suddenly appeared. Was it a random occurrence, or was the Almighty answering his prayer in a more explicit way than Eliezer dared to imagine? Startled by this "coincidence," Eliezer immediately rushed towards the girl and asks for some water (*pasuk* 17). To his amazement, the girl passed the test with flying colors (*pasuk* 19). Stunned by the rapid unfolding of events, Eliezer must ascertain one additional point: will the girl and her father agree to the marriage? Everything hangs in the balance. Was everything that transpired mere coincidence, or has the Almighty responded to his prayer? Impatient to find out, Eliezer asked for the girl's father's name (*pasuk* 23). Upon hearing the astonishing news that the girl was from Avraham's family, Eliezer, overwhelmed with gratitude and awe, prostrated himself before the Almighty (*pasuk* 26), an act that reflects his awareness of his encounter with Providence ("*hashgacha*").

Trembling with excitement, Eliezer followed Rivka to her home. Spurred by a sense of urgency, he insisted on telling his story immediately (*pasuk* 33), stressing the divine nature of his mission. Lavan and Betuel, infected by Eliezer's passion, realized that Rivka is divinely ordained to be the bride of Yitzchak, and they have no choice but to comply (*pasuk* 50). At this point, Eliezer knew that his mission had been crowned with success, his gratitude to Hashem knew no bounds, and once again he prostrated himself before Hashem (*pasuk* 52).

Summary

The covenant between Hashem and the Jewish People is a dual one. It consists of the covenant forged with our forefathers, as well as the Sinaitic covenant. The former is a covenant between Hashem and individuals. The latter was forged with the entire Jewish People. The terms of the covenant of Sinai are the 613 *mitzvot*. Values and ideals must be formalized and formulated as objective commandments in order to obligate the entire nation. The terms of the "*berit avot*" are the values and ideas themselves, the lives and experiences of the *avot* that express deep religious commitment as well as moral awareness and sensitivity.

The "Torah of the children" can be derived from subtle hints. Through painstaking and committed study of the word of Hashem, we use nuances to ascertain the *halakha*. In fact, human involvement and intelligence, as opposed to divine signals, are preferred regarding halakhic decisions: "*Chakham adif mi-navi*" (the sage is superior to the prophet).

In contrast, "the conversations of the servants of our forefathers" relates a tale dealing with real people in real life situations, fraught with challenges and dangers. The "irrelevant" detail is an experience which reflects a human reaction to actual events. One should accompany Eliezer as he travels the road from skepticism to faith; one should actually feel the pounding of his heart.

The singular fondness for "the conversations of the servant" is a result of it being a simple human story. It lacks great nature confounding miracles. However, it contains a breathtaking human and religious drama, a drama in which man encounters Hashem within the natural order.

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