**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells the famous story of Avraham’s servant, who was sent by his master to Aram Naharayim, Avraham’s homeland, to find a young woman from his family to marry his son, Yitzchak. Among the surprising features of this story is the fact that the Torah never identifies the servant by name. While *Chazal* and the commentators assume that the servant is Eliezer, whom Avraham mentions earlier (15:2) as the person entrusted over his home, the text here in Parashat Chayei-Sara refers to him as “Avraham’s servant,” or simply “the servant.” Why would the Torah avoid using the name “Eliezer” throughout this narrative, and insist on referring to him anonymously as “Avraham’s servant”?

[Rav Amnon Bazak](https://www.facebook.com/amnon.d.bazak/posts/692072070929318) suggested that the answer might be found in Avraham’s reference to Eliezer earlier in Sefer Bereishit. In response to God’s promise of reward, Avraham raised the question of what kind of reward he could receive in light of the fact that he had no children, and his estate stood to be inherited by Eliezer. This oft-overlooked fact – that Eliezer was in line to inherit Avraham’s wealth until Yitzchak’s birth – sheds an entirely new light on Eliezer’s character as described here in Parashat Chayei-Sara. Eliezer could have been excused for resenting Yitzchak, the one who came along and dashed his hopes of a future of great wealth. And yet, when the time came for Yitzchak to marry and produce children of his own, Eliezer himself was assigned the task of finding a suitable mate for Yitzchak. As the Torah describes, he not only fulfilled his duty faithfully, but also exuberantly rejoiced and thanked God when he realized that he had found the right spouse for Yitzchak (24:26-27), and again when her parents agreed to the match (24:52). Eliezer showed no signs of envy or jealousy, despite the fact that his stature had been usurped by Yitzchak, whose destiny as Avraham’s heir Eliezer was now working to guarantee.

This might explain why throughout this account the Torah refers to Eliezer not by his name, but as “Avraham’s servant.” He was able to fulfill this mission with devotion and love because he ignored “Eliezer,” his personal aspirations and wishes, and instead saw himself exclusively as “Avraham’s servant.” This entire story is about Eliezer’s absolute subservience to Avraham, and thus he is referred to by his relationship to Avraham, and not by his actual name.

Sunday

Towards the end of Parashat Chayei-Sara, we read of Avraham’s marriage to Ketura, whom *Chazal* famously identify as Hagar. Years earlier, Avraham had sent Hagar away from his home together with her son, Yishmael, who posed a threat to Avraham’s other son, Yitzchak. Now, after Yitzchak was married, Avraham remarried Hagar.

Rashi, citing from Midrashic sources (*Bereishit Rabba* 61:5, *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 30), gives two explanations for why the Torah now calls Hagar by a different name – “Ketura.” The first is that the name “Ketura” is derived from the word “*ketoret*” (“incense”), and thusalludes to Hagar’s noble character, which was, in Rashi’s words, “pleasing as incense.” Secondly, Rashi writes, the root *k.t.r.* means “knot,” and so the name “Ketura” alludes to Hagar’s having “knotted” herself throughout the interim years, not marrying or engaging in intimacy with any other man. Apparently, according to this explanation, Hagar anticipated the time when Avraham would want to remarry her, and so she remained faithful throughout this interim period and avoided intimacy.

It is interesting to note that Rashi does not present these two explanations as two distinct approaches. Ordinarily, when Rashi offers multiple explanations for a difficult word, or multiple answers to a question, he uses the term “*davar acher*” (“Another explanation”) to introduce the second approach. Here, however, he simply writes both reasons for Hagar’s name change without indicating that these are two separate answers to the question.

Rav Yisrael Moshe Dushinsky ([*Torat Ha-Rim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48191&st=&pgnum=130&hilite=)) inferred from Rashi’s presentation that these are not actually two different explanations of the name Ketura, but rather two components of a single approach. Earlier in Sefer Bereishit (21:14), Rashi comments (citing *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*) that after Hagar was sent from Avraham’s home, she returned to the pagan lifestyle with which she had been raised, and which she had led before becoming Sara’s maidservant. And yet, here in Parashat Chayei-Sara, Rashi glowingly describes Hagar as a righteous woman, whose “deeds were as pleasing as incense.” To explain how Hagar could be described in such terms after having fallen back into her pagan lifestyle, Rashi adds that Hagar remained committed to Avraham throughout the interim years, in anticipation of ultimately being reunited with him. The emotional connection she retained with Avraham helped ensure the possibility of her spiritual recovery even after resuming pagan worship and practices. Even as she was mired in idol-worship, her commitment to Avraham preserved the foundation upon which she could rebuild and become once again “pleasing as incense.” Rashi thus informs us that Hagar’s actions were “pleasing as incense,” and this was possible despite her return to pagan worship because of her unwavering commitment to Avraham, a commitment that prevented her from complete spiritual deterioration and enabled her to eventually grow and recover.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells of Yitzchak’s marriage to Rivka. Rashi (24:67), citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 60:16), lists three supernatural phenomena that regularly occurred in the tent of Yitzchak’s mother, Sara, during her lifetime. These no longer occurred after her death, but they returned after Yitzchak’s marriage to Rivka, thus bringing him comfort from his grief over the loss of his mother. One of these three phenomena is a cloud that was attached to the tent. Rashi states simply that the cloud was “attached over the tent,” whereas the Midrash’s formulation is that the cloud clung specifically to the entrance of Sara’s tent.

Different explanations have been offered for the symbolic meaning of this Midrashic description, one of which is that the cloud signifies humility and privacy. The presence of a cloud by the entrance to a home indicates that the home is out of public view. Although Avraham was a public figure, a leader with a large following who regularly convened with kings, the home was kept private, and Sara herself did not seek fame or recognition. Indeed, when Avraham hosted guests, they ate outside the entrance of the tent, and Sara was inside (18:10). And the only significant actions that the Torah describes Sara undertaking related to family affairs – having Avraham marry her maidservant to produce children, and later, persuading Avraham to drive Hagar and Yishmael from the home. The Midrash thus perhaps points to Sara’s strictly private persona, how she insisted on keeping herself and her family affairs private, despite Avraham’s very public persona.

On this basis, we might suggest to an explanation to another Midrashic passage (*Bereishit Rabba* 58:3) which draws an association between Sara and Queen Ester. The Midrash tells that Rabbi Akiva once noticed that his audience was dozing, and in an effort to arouse their interest, he noted that the number 127 is both the number of years that Sara lived, as well as the number of provinces in Achashverosh’s empire. Rabbi Akiva said, “Let Ester, who was a descendant of Sara, who lived for 127 years, come and rule over 127 provinces.” We might suggest that Rabbi Akiva draws our attention here to the stark contrast between Sara, a private person who kept her affairs out of the public view, and her descendant Ester, who became the queen of a vast kingdom. Rabbi Akiva’s message is that the power to impact the world comes from the “cloud attached to the entrance of the tent,” from our private conduct, from the good deeds we perform without fanfare and publicity. Ester earned the privilege of “governing,” of wielding widespread influence, because of the quality of Sara – because of her private nature.

At times we find ourselves “falling asleep” as we try to learn Torah and perform *mitzvot*. We feel uninspired, unmotivated, and discouraged because we do not see our actions as having any significant effect upon the world. As we do our work in our “tent,” behind a “cloud,” tending to our private pursuit of Torah knowledge and our meticulous observance of *mitzvot*, we occasionally experience some degree of lethargy and lack of fulfillment. Rabbi Akiva seeks to reenergize us and kindle our religious passion by reminding us that Ester’s ability to impact the world is rooted in Sara’s “tent,” that our effort to influence society begins with our work inside our “tents,” with our quiet, private actions performed without publicity or recognition.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Chayei-Sara that after Avraham’s death, “God blessed his son, Yitzchak” (25:11). Rashi, citing the Midrash, comments:

Although the Almighty handed over to Avraham the [power of] blessings, he was afraid to bless Yitzchak because he foresaw Esav emerging from him. He said, “Let the Master of blessings come and bless whoever he decides to,” and the Almighty thus came and blessed him.

According to the Midrash, Avraham was deterred from blessing Yitzchak because he prophetically foresaw that Yitzchak would beget not only a righteous son, Yaakov, but also the wicked Esav. He therefore declined to bless his son, waiting instead for God, “the Master of blessings,” to confer His blessing upon Yitzchak at the time He deemed fit, and God conferred this blessing after Avraham’s passing.

We human beings find it difficult to “bless” those whom we associate with both “Yaakov” and “Esav.” When we discern people’s negative qualities, we are reluctant to “bless” them – to genuinely and wholeheartedly wish them well, and to treat then with sincere kindness and affection. Ever mindful of their faults, of the “Esav” dimension of their character, we feel emotionally conflicted, and are unable to relate to them with complete, full-fledged love and concern. In our legitimate desire to distance ourselves from people’s negative qualities, we are limited in our ability to respect and cherish their positive qualities. God, however, experiences no such conflict. He is the “Master” of blessings, who lovingly and compassionately cares and provides for all humankind even though we do not deserve His kindness and grace. He can bless “wholeheartedly,” so-to-speak, with absolute love, without any hesitation, even as He sees both “Yaakov” and “Esav,” despite being far more aware than we are of our faults and shortcomings. Even Avraham Avinu, the man of endless compassion and kindness, who prayed even for the survival of the sinful city of Sedom, acknowledged the limits of his ability to bless. He recognized that his blessings were less than wholehearted, as only the Almighty Himself is capable of overlooking the “Esav” and giving a blessing focusing, as it were, exclusively on the “Yaakov.”

Although our capacity to “bless” will always be limited by our natural and acceptable biases, the Midrash here teaches us to aspire to reach as close as we can to the divine standard of “blessing.” We should try to be gracious and kind to people despite the “Esav” within them, even as we cannot completely ignore their faults. The continuous and unconditional blessings which God bestows upon us and the world sets an example that we are to follow, an example of love and kindness showered upon people despite their negative characteristics.

Wednesday

As we noted earlier this week, Rashi (25:1) cites the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 61:5) which identifies Ketura, the woman whom Avraham married in the latter part of his life, after Sara’s death, as Hagar, Sara’s maidservant whom Avraham had already married many years earlier. Sara, who was childless for many decades, had Avraham marry Hagar to produce children, but she later had Avraham send Hagar and her child away, as she perceived them as a threat to her own son, Yitzchak. Now, after Sara’s passing, Avraham remarried Hagar, who was named “Ketura.” Rashi cites *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (30) as explaining the Hagar was given the name “Ketura” to allude to the fact that “her deeds were as pleasing as the *ketoret*” – the incense that would be brought each day in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

As we saw, this description of Hagar must be considered in light of Rashi’s earlier remark (21:12) – again citing *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* – that Hagar reverted back to pagan worship after being driven from Avraham’s home. The Torah tells that Hagar “wandered about” in the wilderness after Avraham sent her away, and Rashi explains that she “wandered about” and was lost in a spiritual sense, as well, returning to her previous life of idolatry. The question thus arises as to how she became worthy of being compared to the *ketoret* after having lived as a pagan during the interim years.

The simplest answer, perhaps, is that her resumption of her pagan practices did not last long. Immediately after telling us of Hagar “wandering about” in the desert, the Torah tells that her son, Yishmael, nearly died of dehydration, but just as Hagar despaired, and angel appeared to her, reassured her, and showed her an oasis. She brought her son water, and he survived. It stands to reason that when the Midrash speaks of Hagar resorting to idolatry after her banishment from Avraham’s home, it refers to a brief period, as after the miracle of her son’s salvation and having been shown God’s angel, she regained her faith in the one, true Creator.

On a deeper level, Hagar reverted back to idol worship because she felt betrayed by the God of Avraham whom she had embraced. As other Midrashic sources describe, Hagar eagerly left Egypt to join Avraham’s household, adopting his beliefs and lifestyle, but when tragedy struck, as her life suddenly turned upside-down, she abandoned those beliefs and that lifestyle. The miracle of her son’s survival, however, showed her that faith can and must be maintained even in times of distress and upheaval. Just as the crisis of Yishmael’s thirst could be instantly resolved, similarly, her condition of loneliness was not necessarily permanent. Hagar was taught that problems can eventually be solved, that faith means believing in the possibility of change, and that one must not despair in trying situations. This incident thus turned her back away from her pagan past and inspired her to retain her faith until, many years later, Avraham brought her back.

For this reason, perhaps, the Midrash associates Hagar specifically with the *ketoret*. The Gemara (Keritut 6b) comments that one of the spices of the *ketoret*, the *chelbena*, independently has a foul odor, but when it mixes with the other, fragrant spices, it actually has an enhancing effect on their fragrance. Hagar was “pleasing as the *ketoret*” in the sense that she learned this lesson of the *chelbena*, that adversity can transform into something positive and have an enhancing effect. Just as a foul-smelling spice can change and actually improve the scent of other spices, similarly, adversity and hardship can gradually transform into sources of joy that enhance, rather than darken, a person’s life.

Thursday

After Avraham instructs his trusted servant to travel to Aram Naharayim and select a mate for Yitzchak, the servant poses the question of how he should proceed if the prospective wife refuses to leave and relocate Canaan. The servant wanted to know whether he should bring Yitzchak to Aram Naharayim to marry the young woman, or if he should refuse the match and find another woman for Yitzchak. Avraham emphatically responds that Yitzchak should not be brought there under any circumstances. If the family refuses, Avraham said, then the servant should find a girl from among the local Canaanite population (24:5-8).

Avraham concludes his instructions by reiterating, “*rak et beni lo tasheiv shama*” – “but do not bring my son back there” (24:8). Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 59), comments that the word “*rak*” is often used as a *mi’ut* – a qualifying term, limiting the scope of that which is being said. In this instance, the Midrash writes, the word “*rak*” implies that “my son should not return, but Yaakov, my grandson, will ultimately return.” As Avraham expressed his emphatic, unequivocal refusal to allow Yitzchak to leave Canaan, he prophetically alluded to the fact that Yitzchak’s son, Yaakov, will, indeed, have to leave Canaan to find a mate. Indeed, we read later in Sefer Bereishit of how Yaakov was forced to leave Canaan and settle in Charan, where he married his two cousins, Rachel and Leah. Avraham alluded to this eventuality in his response to his servant’s question instructing him never to bring Yitzchak out of Canaan.

We might ask, why does the Midrash introduce this “*mi’ut*” in this context? Why must we be informed already now, as Avaham’s servant prepares to find a mate for Yitzchak, that the policy strictly implemented with regard to Yitzchak would not be applied to Yaakov?

One answer, perhaps, is that *Chazal* wanted to emphasize to us that all people do not have to follow the precise same course of action, and what is appropriate and suitable for one person is not necessarily expected of another. The simple reading of the text is that “*rak*” is an expression of emphasis, through which Avraham communicates to his servant the dire importance of disallowing Yitzchak to leave Canaan for marriage. The Midrash insightfully observes that while this was a matter of grave importance with regard to Yitzchak, it was no concern at all with regard to Yaakov. As strictly as Avraham forbade his servant from bringing Yitzchak out of his homeland, there was no such barrier imposed upon Yaakov. Different theories have been offered for why Yitzchak was forbidden to leave and Yaakov was not, but regardless, the message being conveyed is that what was strictly prohibited for one patriarch was perfectly acceptable for the other. Yitzchak and Yaakov were both great in different ways, and they led very different lives. They did not have to be precise replicas of one another to be equally accomplished. And thus *Chazal* drew our attention to the fact that while leaving Canaan was emphatically forbidden for Yitzchak, this was precisely what was expected of his son and successor.

Although we all share the same basic code of *Halakha* and religious values to which we are all equally and unconditionally bound, there is plenty of room beyond these parameters for individualization. Different people will naturally seek to excel and “specialize” in different areas, and to focus their attention on different aspects of Torah life. The Midrash here reminds us that the special rules that apply to one person do not necessarily have to be applied to another, as we must all strive and work to both fulfill our shared responsibilities as well as pursue our own individual paths towards spiritual excellence, each according to our own unique capabilities, talents and orientations.

Friday

We read in Parashat Chayei-Sara of the prayer recited by Avraham’s servant upon arriving at the well outside Aram Naharayim, in which he begged for God’s assistance in choosing a wife for Yitzchak. The servant beseeches, “*Asei chesed im adoni Avraham*” – “Perform kindness for my master, Avraham” (24:12). This “kindness” would come in the form of God’s assistance as the servant sets out to select the proper match for Yitzchak.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 60:2) notes the irony in the fact that Avraham here is described as requiring kindness. We normally think of Avraham as the benefactor, not the beneficiary; as the one who showers others with kindness, rather than receiving or depending upon their kindness. Here, however, the servant prays to God to shower Avraham with kindness. The Midrash comments: “Everyone needs kindness. Even Avraham, because of whom kindness abounds in the world, required kindness.” What message is the Midrash seeking to convey through this observation?

One might have assumed that only those who do not depend upon or need the help of others are capable of bestowing kindness. As long as a person himself has needs which he relies on other people to fill, one might think, he does not have the capacity to help others. And for this reason, one might have argued, the quality of kindness is embodied specifically by Avraham Avinu, who is described as having been blessed “with everything” (24:1). Only somebody whose life is perfect, it might seem, has the privilege of performing kindness.

The Midrash teaches us that this is incorrect. Even Avraham Avinu, the bastion and embodiment of kindness, required kindness. He, too, was dependent on God’s grace and benevolence. Even after he was blessed “with everything,” his servant prayed to God to shower him with kindness. Nobody enjoys a perfect life; we all have needs that we cannot fill on our own. The message that is being taught, then, is that we must dispense kindness even as we rely on and must ask for the kindness of others. Even as we look to others to fill needs which we cannot fill on our own, we must try to fill their needs which they cannot fill on their own.

This is very likely the Midrash’s intent in describing Avraham here as the person “*she-ha’chesed mitgalgel ba-olam bishvilo*” – “because of whom kindness abounds in the world.” The world “*mitgalgel*” literally means “roll.” Avraham’s life of selfless giving had a ripple effect throughout the world, such that it “rolled” about from one person to another. He introduced the concept of *chesed* whereby people help one another and are helped by one another. His *chesed* is not a system whereby the “haves” assist the “have nots,” but rather a recognition that all people are both “haves” and “have nots,” that we all have the ability to help and give, and also have the need to receive assistance. And this is perhaps the meaning of the image of kindness “rolling” throughout the world, referring to the message that we must all be givers even though we are also, by necessity, takers, that we must try to help others as much as we can even as we accept their help whenever we need it.

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