**SALT – PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA 5776**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei

Parashat Chayei-Sara tells the well-known story of Avraham’s servant – identified by *Chazal* as Eliezer – who was charged with the responsibility of finding a suitable wife for Yitzchak from Avraham’s hometown, Aram Naharayim. Upon reaching the well outside the city, the servant prayed that God should arrange it that the suitable girl would be the one who responds to his request for water by offering water to both him and his animals. He approached Rivka, the daughter of Yitzchak’s cousin, Betuel, and requested water, and Rivka indeed responded by offering water even to his animals.

A careful reading of the text reveals that Rivka actually exceeded the servant’s expectations. Eliezer envisioned a girl who would respond to his request by saying, “Drink, and I will also give [water] for your camels to drink” (24:14). But when he asked Rivka for water, she responded, “Drink, my master” (24:18) and then gave him the water in her pitcher. After he finished drinking, Rivka drew water for his camels and poured it into the trough for them to drink. Rivka’s response exceeded the servant’s hopes in two respects. First, rather than just say, “Drink,” she said, “*Shetei adoni*” – “Drink, my master.” Rivka addressed Eliezer – a foreigner, and a servant – with respect and dignity. Moreover, rather than immediately express her willingness to provide water for the servant’s camels, she first offered him water and waited for him to finish drinking. Then she proceeded to draw water for camels. This, too, likely reflects a heightened sensitivity and greater degree of refinement. Rivka did not give the servant water together with his animals. She treated him like a distinguished person, giving him water of his own from her very own pitcher, and only then poured water into the trough for the animals.

Rivka’s response reminds us that kindness extends beyond the practical benefit provided to those in need. It requires not only practical assistance, but also affording people the respect and dignity they deserve. People in need of help are emotionally vulnerable and insecure. We must provide them not only the “water” that they lack, but also kind, respectful words – “*Shetei adoni*” – that provide them the emotional support and reassurance that they desperately need.

(Based on [an article by Rav Amnon Bazak](https://he-il.facebook.com/amnon.d.bazak/posts/529165457219981))

Sunday

Toward the end of Parashat Chayei-Sara (25:1), the Torah tells of Avraham’s marriage to a woman named Ketura. Rashi, citing *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (30), comments that Ketura was actually Hagar, but she is referred to as “Ketura” because “her actions were pleasing like the *ketoret*.” *Chazal* here compare Hagar’s “pleasing” conduct to the pleasant fragrance of the *ketoret* – the incense offered in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

This comparison between good deeds and the *ketoret* perhaps comes into sharper focus in light of the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Yoma (44a) that the *ketoret* atoned for the particular sin of *lashon ha-ra* – sharing negative information about others. The basis for this association, the Gemara explains, is that both the *ketoret* and *lashon ha-ra* occur “*ba-chashai*” – “in secret.” As opposed to most other Temple rituals, which took place outdoors in the Temple courtyard, the incense was offered inside the building, in “secret,” out of public view. It is therefore associated with *lashon ha-ra*, which is generally spread in private conversations.

Ironically, the Gemara earlier in Masekhet Yoma (39b) describes in astonishing terms the strength of the *ketoret*’s fragrance. It goes so far as to say that women in Jerusalem and even in distant Jericho did not need perfume, because their skin absorbed the scent of the incense, and the goats in Jericho “sneezed” because of the smell. Although the *ketoret* was offered “in secret,” its effects were anything but “secretive.” They spread far wide and were tangibly sensed well beyond the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. This quality of the *ketoret* sharpens the association drawn by *Chazal* between the *ketoret* and *lashon ha-ra*. Like the incense, *lashon ha-ra* is something which is done privately and secretively, but whose effects spread powerfully far and wide. “Juicy” news spread in the privacy of one’s home can reach ears throughout the world, and can yield devastating consequences for the person about whom it is spoken. Hence, *lashon ha-ra* is associated with the *ketoret*, which is offered privately but has a very public impact.

The association between the “pleasing deeds” of Ketura and Ketoret underscores the fact that this is true of positive actions, as well. Simple *mitzva* acts performed quietly, privately and without fanfare have a profound and far-reaching effect. We are not told much of Hagar’s piety, but *Chazal* assert that her fine conduct was like the *ketoret* – occurring in private, but yielding a significant impact. We should not seek recognition or fame for our good deeds, or make our involvement in *mitzvot* contingent upon publicity. Instead, we should trust that our *mitzvot* have a widespread impact just like the *ketoret*, even if we are unable to “smell” their beautiful “fragrance.”

Monday

We read in Parashat Chayei-Sara the well-known story of Avraham’s servant – identified by *Chazal* as Eliezer – whom Avraham charged with the task of finding a mate for Yitzchak from his relatives in Aram Naharayim. The servant asked Avraham what would happen if the girl’s family refused to allow her to relocate in Canaan to marry Yitzchak, and Avraham replied that if this happens, the servant would be allowed to find a girl from the local Canaanite population. The Midrash proceeds to tell that Avraham told Eliezer that his daughter could not marry Yitzchak because of his status of servitude.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 59:9) famously comments that Eliezer’s intention in posing this question was for Avraham to approve of Yitzchak’s marriage to Eliezer’s daughter. Eliezer very much wanted his daughter to marry into Avraham’s family, and was disappointed to hear that Avraham wanted his son to marry a girl from Aram Naharayim. Eliezer therefore pinned his hopes on the possibility that the suitable girl would not be permitted to come to marry Yitzchak, and this was his intention when he asked Avraham what he should do in such a situation. The Midrash sharply criticizes Eliezer for this sly – albeit unsuccessful – strategy, applying to him the verse in Hoshea (12:5), “*Kena’an be-yado mozenei mirma la-ashok aheiv*” – “The merchant has deceptive weights in his possession; he loves to cheat.”

This Midrash passage is often understood as noting the dangers of “*negiut*” – vested interests that motivate our decisions and conduct, which outwardly appear sincere and altruistic. Like Eliezer, we often say and do things which appear perfectly innocent, or even virtuous, but our true intentions are self-serving and far from innocent. The Midrash thus reminds us of the need to carefully examine the true motives behind everything we do, including our outwardly altruistic activities.

However, a look at the verse cited here by the Midrash seems to suggest a slightly different reading. In this verse, the prophet condemns the unscrupulous merchants who deceive their customers by using dishonest weights and measures, claiming to be giving more than they actually are. It would appear, then, that the message being conveyed is not the general phenomenon of “*negiut*,” but rather the particular issue of deception. Eliezer “deceived” Avraham by asking a question which seemed to express genuine concern for Yitzchak and a sincere desire to complete his mission satisfactorily, but was in truth asked for the purpose of furthering his personal ambitions. The Midrash compares Eliezer’s maneuver to a merchant’s use of dishonest weights and measures, because Eliezer, too, appeared to “give” more than he actually did. He gave the impression of being loyal and faithful to his master, when in truth he was looking out for his own vested interests. This is a very common type of deception, which many people do not regard as evil – appearing genuinely concerned about somebody else in the process of furthering one’s own interests. When we appear sincerely concerned about somebody, we earn that person’s trust. And if we are insincere, then we are acquiring the other person’s trust deceitfully, like a storekeeper receiving money for a higher quantity than that which he is charging for. It is dishonest, and even cruel, to give somebody the impression that we are looking out for his best interests when our true intention is to pursue our own best interests. If we want somebody’s trust, then we should earn it, through complete honesty and sincerity.

Tuesday

Parashat Chayei-Sara begins with the death of Sara, and Avraham’s efforts to purchase a plot of land in which to bury her. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 58), in reference to this account, applies to Avraham the verse in Mishlei (21:21), “*Rodeif tzedaka va-chesed yimtza chayim tzedaka ve-khavod*” – “One who pursues justice and kindness will find life, justice and honor.” Surprisingly, the Midrash cites this description of pursuing kindness in particular reference to the kindness Avraham performed for his wife, Sara, after her death, eulogizing her and tending to her burial.

The question naturally arises as to why this act of kindness is deemed especially worthy of mention, beyond the extraordinary acts of kindness that Avraham performed throughout his life. Earlier in Sefer Bereishit, we read of Avraham going out to war against an alliance of powerful empires in order to rescue his nephew, and inviting travelers into his home and serving them a large feast. Aren’t these extraordinary acts more characteristic of Avraham’s lifelong pursuit of kindness than tending to his wife’s remains – something that we would expect any husband to do after his wife’s death?

It appears that *Chazal* here specifically seek to draw our attention to the importance of ordinary, expected acts of kindness. Too often, people are willing to extend beyond the call of duty, but fail to respond to the call of duty. They are prepared to go to great lengths in their involvement in communal work or *chesed*, but these efforts come at the expense of their most basic responsibilities, such as their responsibilities to their family. The Midrash here does not overlook or discount the importance of Avraham’s extraordinary acts of kindness; rather, it applauds him for ensuring that these acts did not cause him to neglect his primary duties. If one truly “pursues justice and kindness,” then his pursuit of greatness does not come at the expense of goodness; he pursues opportunities for *chesed* first within his home and immediate surroundings, before extending beyond his basic duties to reach even greater accomplishments.

Wednesday

The opening section of Parashat Chayei-Sara tells of Avraham’s purchase of *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila* in Chevron, the cave in which he buried Sara, and in which he would later be buried, as would Yitzchak, Rivka, Yaakov and Leah. The site of *Me’arat Ha-makhpela*, which has been preserved by tradition, was a site of prayer for Kaleiv when he and the other spies came to *Eretz Yisrael* to scout the land (Sota 34), and is now once again a popular site of prayer.

The popularity of prayer at *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila* gives rise to the interesting halakhic question as to whether *kohanim* may visit the site. *Kohanim*, of course, are forbidden to come in contact with a human corpse, and are thus forbidden from walking over a grave. According to tradition, our patriarchs and matriarchs are buried beneath the contemporary site of *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*, and the question thus arises as to whether *kohanim* are permitted to visit the site.

This question hinges on several different issues, including the halakhic status of our patriarchs and matriarchs. Much has been written on the topic of whether they were halakhically regarded as Jews, or if this status took effect only at *Ma’amad Har Sinai*. Rashi, in Masekhet Avoda Zara (3a), writes that the patriarchs and matriarchs were formally considered gentiles, as they lived before the covenant of Sinai was established. The Ramban, by contrast, in his commentary to Sefer Vayikra (24:10), writes that they were halakhically regarded as Jews.

This issue is likely relevant to our question as to the permissibility of kohanim visiting Me’arat Ha-makhpeila. According to many halakhic authorities, the laws governing the transmission of tum’a are not the same for the remains of gentiles and those of Jews. A Jewish corpse is subject to the law of tum’at ohel, whereby one contracts tum’a by passing over the corpse or being under the same roof as the corpse. When it comes to the remains of a gentile, however, while it is clear that one becomes tamei by directly touching the corpse, there is a debate among the Tanna’im (Yevamot 61) as to whether tum’at ohel is effective in transmitting tum’a from a gentile corpse. Tosefot (Bava Metzia 114b) followed the majority opinion among the Tanna’im, that there is no distinction between Jewish and gentile remains in this regard. Most other Rishonim, however, most notably the Rambam (Hilkhot Tum’at Meit 1:13), accepted Rabbi Shimon’s view, that tum’a from a gentile corpse is transmitted only through direct contact, and not through the process of tum’at ohel. The Shulchan Arukh (Y.D. 372:2) rules that it is proper for kohanim to avoid walking over the graves of non-Jews, in deference to the stringent ruling of Tosefot. It appears that strictly speaking, Halakha accepts the lenient ruling of the Rambam, though it is advisable to abide by Tosefot’s opinion. Several later Acharonim, including Rabbi Akiva Eiger (Responsa,Mahadura Tanina, 18), write that one may be lenient in this regard if there is some other matter of uncertainty involved.

Accordingly, the question of allowing *kohanim* to visit *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila* would seem to hinge on the question of the status of the *avot* and *imahot*. If they are halakhically regarded as Jews, then, presumably, *kohanim* should be forbidden from visiting the site, as they would contract *tum’a* by stepping above our ancestors’ remains. If, however, the *avot* and *imahot* are regarded as gentiles, then it suffices to introduce some other mitigating factor to permit such visits by relying on the view that their graves transmit *tum’a* only through direct contact. One mitigating factor is the fact that when one walks on one story of a building and a corpse is situated on a lower floor, he becomes *tamei* only if there is some space in between that allows the *tum’a* to rise to the higher floor. In the case of *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*, there are two doors which are traditionally presumed to lead down to the area where the *avot* and *imahot* are buried, and both doors are situated in the section of *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila* that is under the control of the Arab authorities. As such, there is no possibility of determining at any moment whether these doors are open or closed. In light of this uncertainty – including others, perhaps – one might argue that at least according to Rashi’s view, that the patriarchs and matriarchs are halakhically regarded as gentiles, *kohanim* are allowed to tread on the floor over their graves at the site of *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*.

In truth, however, it is possible that even Rashi would forbid *kohanim* from visiting *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*, as we will *iy”H* discuss tomorrow.

(Based on [a *shiur* by Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%97%D7%99%D7%99-%D7%A9%D7%A8%D7%94-%D7%9B%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%A1%D7%AA-%D7%9B%D7%94%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%9B%D7%A4%D7%9C%D7%94/))

Thursday

Yesterday, we posed the question as to the permissibility of *kohanim*’s visiting *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*, the burial site of Avraham, Sara, Yitzchak, Rivka, Yaakov and Leah. We explored one of several issues upon which the question hinges, namely, the halakhic status of our patriarchs and matriarchs. The general consensus among the halakhic authorities follows the view of the Rambam (Hilkhot Tum’at Meit 1:13), who codifies Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai’s ruling (Yevamot 61a) that one contracts *tum’a* by directly touching the corpse of a deceased gentile, but not by going over his grave. As we saw, the *Shulchan Arukh* (Y.D. 372:2) rules that *kohanim* should preferably avoid going over graves of non-Jews, but later authorities note that when any other point of uncertainty is involved, *kohanim* may be lenient in this regard. Seemingly, then, if we follow the view that the *avot* and *imahot* were technically considered gentiles, as the formal status of a “Jew” took effect only at the time of *Matan Torah*, we should allow *kohanim* to visit *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*, given the questions that exist surrounding the actual presence of *tum’a* at the site.

[Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/פרשת-חיי-שרה-כניסת-כהנים-למערת-המכפלה/), however, refutes this argument, in light of Tosefot’s discussion in Masekhet Nazir (54a). Tosefot cite the account in Maseches Bava Batra of Rabbi Bena’a, who placed markers on gravesites so people knew to keep away from *tum’a*, and the Gemara tells that he placed a marker at the site of *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*. If we assume that the *avot* and *imahot*, who lived before *Matan Torah*, had the halakhic status of gentiles, then there seems to have been no reason for Rabbi Bena’a to mark their graves, according to the view the gentile remains transmit *tum’a* only through direct contact. Tosefot thus raise the question of how to explain Rabbi Bena’a’s insistence on marking *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila* according to the view of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, that one does not become *tamei* by passing over a gentile’s grave.

To answer this question, Tosefot assert that the graves in *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila* transmit *tum’a* regardless of whether or not we classify our *avot* and *imahot* as halakhic “Jews,” even according to Rabbi Shimon. The basis for Rabbi Shimon’s distinction between Jews and gentiles in the context of *tum’a* is the verse in which the Torah introduces the concept of *tum’at ohel*: “…*adam ki yamut be-ohel, kol ha-ba el ha-ohel…yitma*” – “…when a person dies in a tent, anyone who comes into the tent…is impure” (Bamidbar 19:14). The Torah here establishes that one can become *tamei* not only through physical contact with a corpse, but also by simply being together with a corpse under the same roof, and in this context the Torah speaks of an “*adam*” (commonly translated as “person”). Rabbi Shimon maintained that halakhically speaking, the term “*adam*” refers specifically to Jews, and therefore the concept of *tum’at ohel*, whereby one becomes *tamei* without direct contact with a corpse, by simply being together under the same roof, applies only to Jews.

If so, Tosefot argue, then it stands to reason that Rabbi Shimon would apply *tum’at ohel* to some of those buried in *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*. Tradition teaches that Adam is buried there (though this is not mentioned anywhere in the Chumash), and we might certainly assume that Adam would be included in the verse, “*…adam ki yamut be-ohel*.” Moreover, *Chazal* (*Shemot Rabba* 28:1, *Vayikra Rabba* 29:8, and elsewhere) explain the verse in Yehoshua that speaks of “*ha-adam ha-gadol ba-anakim*” as referring to Avraham. Conceivably, then, even if Avraham cannot be halakhically regarded as a “Jew” to due to the fact that he lived before *Matan Torah*, nevertheless, he would be included in the law of *tum’at ohel* by virtue of his having earned the title “*ha-****adam***.”

Hence, at least according to Tosefot, *kohanim* would be forbidden from visiting *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila* regardless of whether *Halakha* treats our patriarchs and matriarchs as Jews or as non-Jews.

Friday

In our last two editions of S.A.L.T., we noted the contemporary halakhic question of whether *kohanim* may visit *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*, the site traditionally considered the burial place of Avraham, Sara, Yitzchak, Rivka, Yaakov and Leah. It is believed that the patriarchs and matriarchs are buried beneath the structure which stands today, and it is questionable if, or when, there is an opening from the presumed site of the graves to the contemporary structure through which the *tum’a* could rise. The question thus becomes whether *kohanim*, who are forbidden from exposing themselves to *tum’at meit* (the status of impurity transmitted from a human corpse), may visit this site.

One might, at first glance, apply here the well-established halakhic principle of “*safeik tum’a bi-rshut ha-rabim tahor*” – if somebody may have come in contact with *tum’a*, but is uncertain whether this indeed occurred, then he may assume he is *tahor* if this took place in a public area. There is a unique *halakha* (derived from a Biblical verse) which requires certainty when it comes to the transmission of *tum’a* in public areas. Therefore, a public place which might possibly have *tum’a* may be presumed *tahor*. Seemingly, then, we should perhaps permit *kohanim* to visit the site of *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*, as it is a public area whose status of impurity is uncertain.

Rav Asher Weiss, in an [essay on this subject](http://www.torahbase.org/פרשת-חיי-שרה-כניסת-כהנים-למערת-המכפלה/), notes that this argument is flawed. The *Minchat Chinukh* (263) raises the question of whether *kohanim* are permitted to go to a public place of *safeik tum’a* – where *tum’a* may be present. The fact that one who goes to such a place is presumed *tahor* does not necessarily mean that *kohanim* are permitted to go there. The rule of “*safeik tum’a bi-rshut ha-rabim tahor*” might apply only after the fact, to a person who went to such a place, and does not necessarily dictate that such a place is considered *tahor* such that *kohanim* are permitted there. Indeed, Rav Weiss cites several *Acharonim* who ruled that *kohanim* may not go to a place of *safeik tum’a*. These include Rav Chanoch Eigis (*Marcheshet* 1:2), Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzynsky (*Achiezer* 3:65), and, more recently, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Minchat Shelomo* 2:96:21) and Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (*Kovetz Teshuvot*, 1:100).

In fact, Rav Weiss adds, the Rambam, in Hilkhot She’ar Avot Ha-tum’a (15:9) and his commentary to the Mishna (Eiduyot 8:4), writes that one who passes through a place of *safeik tum’a* should nevertheless immerse to ensure his state of purity. Although he is considered *tahor* even without immersion, it is nevertheless preferable for him to immerse given the possibility that he contracted *tum’a*. It certainly stands to reason that if a person must immerse after being present in a place of *safeik tum’a*, then a *kohen* should not go to such a place. Even though being present at such a site does not render one *tamei* after the fact, we would not permit a *kohen* from the outset to go there. As such, the factor of “*safeik tum’a bi-rshut ha-rabim*” is not relevant to our discussion.