**PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells the famous story of Avraham’s servant – commonly identified as Eliezer (though his name is not mentioned in this section) – who journeyed to Aram Naharayim (in Mesopotamia) at Avraham’s bidding to find a suitable match for Yitzchak. The servant meets Rivka, the daughter of Yitzchak’s cousin, Betuel, at the well outside the city, and she invited him and his men into her family’s home, where the servant requested permission to bring Rivka to Canaan in order to marry Yitzchak.

The servant tells the family about the instructions he received from Avraham and about his experiences after setting out on his mission, including, “*Va-avo hayom el ha-ayin*” – “I arrived today at the well” (24:42). The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (95a), as mentioned by Rashi, interprets this verse to mean that the servant miraculously reached Aram Naharayim on the same day he left Canaan. This incident is listed by the Gemara as one of three instances of people that “*kaftza lahem ha-aretz*” – “the land ‘jumped’ for them,” enabling them to travel a lengthy distance in a short amount of time.

How might we understand this concept of “*kaftza lahem ha-aretz*”?

Rav Chaim Hagar of Kosov, in his *Torat Chaim*, suggests a symbolic explanation for this phenomenon, noting that the root *k.f.tz.* can mean not only “jump,” but also “clasp” or “close.” Thus, for example, the Torah commands in Sefer Devarim (15:7), “*Lo* ***tikpotz*** *et yadekha*” – that we must not “close” our hands when a pauper needs our financial assistance Accordingly, the Rebbe of Kosov understands the expression “*kaftza…ha-aretz*” as referring to the constricting of the “ground” – the symbol of the mundane realm, our physical and material pursuits. The depiction of an expanse of territory shrinking represents the ideal of “*histapkut*” –moderation of physical and material indulgence, accepting and feeling content with a reasonably modest lifestyle, rather than constantly striving for more comforts, luxuries and enjoyment. *Chazal* depict the ground “shrinking” for certain righteous figures to teach us the quality of moderation in our pursuit of physical and enjoyment and material comforts, the willingness to “shrink” and limit our indulgence. While we are certainly permitted and even encouraged to enjoy the delights of the world, we must avoid excessive preoccupation with physical enjoyment and the pursuit of wealth.

We might add that this explanation closely relates to the plain meaning of “*kaftza…ha-aretz*,” as referring to miraculously swift travel. Simply put, the less we insist on high material standards, the more time we will have for meaningful endeavors. So often, our preoccupation with vain pleasures and excessive indulgence distracts our attention and consumes precious time which could be used far more valuably and meaningfully. *Chazal* depict a swift, efficient journey with the image of the ground constructing, perhaps to teach us that our lives will be far more efficient, and we will be far more accomplished, if we learn how to “constrict” our pursuit of vain pleasures, and devote more time and attention to more important and valuable goals.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Chayei-Sara of Avraham’s servant’s experiences in Aram Naharayim, where he was sent for the purpose of finding a wife for Avraham’s son, Yitzchak. Outside the city, the servant met Rivka, Yitzchak’s second cousin, whom the servant determined to be the suitable match for Yitzchak. Rivka warmly invited the servant and his men to her home, assuring them that there was room for them and their animals to spend the night.  Rivka then ran home to tell her family about the servant’s arrival, whereupon her brother, Lavan, effusively greeted the servant, asking, “Why are you standing outside?  I have cleared out the house, and there is room for the camels!” (24:31).

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 60:7), cited by Rashi, presents a surprising explanation of the phrase, “I have cleared out the house,” stating that the family removed the idols from their home in the servant’s honor.  The Yefei Toar commentary to the Midrash explains that the Midrash made this remark because Lavan’s statement would otherwise be redundant, given that Rivka had already informed the servant that there was room for him in their home.  The Midrash therefore understood that Lavan assumed the servant was standing outside because he wanted to avoid the sight of idols, and so Lavan assured him that all articles of pagan worship had been removed.

Rav Shlomo of Bobov, in Kerem Shelomo, adds that the Midrash here seeks to draw a connection between generosity – “making room” in one’s home and in one’s life for other people – and the elimination of idol worship.  Selfishness, the Rebbe of Bobov explained, often reflects a lack of faith.  One who believes that he has acquired everything in his possession solely through his efforts, skills and ingenuity, without recognizing God as the source of all his blessings, might be resistant to share his material blessings with other people.  In order to “make room” for other people in our lives, we need to eliminate the “idols,” the “worship” of our own handiwork, the tendency to overlook the role of divine providence in our successes.  We are to live with a humble sense of appreciation for God’s kindness in enabling us to earn what we have, and this appreciation will then naturally lead us to follow His example and dispense kindness to others.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells of Avraham’s servant’s experiences when he journeyed to Aram-Naharayim to find a suitable match for Yitzchak. After determining that Rivka, the daughter of Yitzchak’s cousin, was the destined match, the servant asked Rivka if he could lodge in her home. The family welcomed the servant, and when they sat down to eat, the servant began telling his story, starting with the announcement, “*Eved Avraham anokhi*” – “I am Avraham’s servant” (24:34).

The Gemara in Masekhet Bava Kama (92b) cites this verse as the source of the adage, “Something unflattering about you – say it first.” Rather than wait for Rivka’s family to inquire about him and discover a “*milta gena’a*” – “embarrassing thing” – about him,that he was a servant, the servant instead offered this information right from the outset, when he first introduced himself. The Gemara here teaches that rather than risk embarrassment by concealing unflattering information about oneself which is likely to eventually be discovered, one should instead offer this information himself, which is less embarrassing than leaving it to be discovered by the other party.

This adage can be applied not only to the image we project to other people, but also to the image we project to ourselves. Our “*milta gena’a*” – the less impressive aspects of our characters – will come to our attention eventually. At some point, we will have no choice but to acknowledge our faults, and then do what we can to address them and improve ourselves. Unfortunately, we tend to stubbornly deny our shortcomings, preferring instead to feel perfectly comfortable with who we are and avoid the unsettling thought that we have serious flaws. And so when we are finally forced to acknowledge them, we feel ashamed of the mistakes we’ve made, and of the denial and self-delusion with which we’ve lived. The Gemara here urges us not to wait to make an honest assessment ourselves, and to humbly acknowledge our weaknesses (of course, while also noting our strengths), so that we spare ourselves the shame and angst of mistakes and failure that could have been avoided had we began working to improve earlier.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the Talmudic proverb, “Something unflattering about you – say it first” (Bava Kama 92b). The Gemara cites as the source of this teaching the story of Avraham’s servant – commonly identified as Eliezer – who, as he began to explain to Rivka’s family his wish to bring Rivka to Canaan to marry Yitzchak, announced, “*Eved Avraham anokhi*” – “I am Avraham’s servant” (Bereishit 24:34). Eliezer offered this unflattering information about himself – that he was a just a servant – right from the outset, and thus serves an example of humbly acknowledging one’s less impressive qualities rather than trying to conceal or deny them.

We might gain further insight into the Gemara’s remark in light of the comments of [*Sefat Emet* (Parashat Chayei-Sara, 5639)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14524&st=&pgnum=86&hilite=) extolling Eliezer’s greatness in accepting his role as servant. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 60:2) applies to Eliezer the description in Sefer Mishlei (17:2) of an “*eved maskil*” – “intelligent servant,” explaining that Eliezer said, “It is preferable for me to be subservient in this home than in someone else’s home.” Eliezer accepted his condition of servitude, and in fact celebrated the privilege he was given to serve a great man like Avraham. *Sefat Emet* adds: “It never occurred to him to find a way to leave his state of servitude, but rather to find his perfection in the state of servitude itself.” Eliezer realized that his status of servant could not be changed, but instead of resenting and feeling embittered by his inalterable condition, he decided to seek self-actualization within this role, to utilize the circumstances in the best possible manner. *Sefat Emet* cites in this context the adage, “Who is wise? He who recognizes his place” – meaning, the wise person accepts life circumstances which cannot be changed, and seeks to achieve the most he can under those conditions. And for this reason, *Sefat Emet* suggests, Eliezer began his presentation to Rivka’s family with the announcement, “*Eved Avraham anokhi*.” He made this announcement with pride, proclaiming that he wholeheartedly accepted and embraced his role as Avraham’s servant, and was committed to fulfilling his duties in this capacity to the very best of his ability.

If so, then we might revisit the Talmudic saying, “Something unflattering about you – say it first” which has its roots in Eliezer’s introductory pronouncement. The Gemara might be urging us to take pride even in our “unflattering” conditions, the unalterable aspects of our beings and our lives that limit us. We are told to proudly and unhesitatingly announce, “*Eved anokhi*,” that we are who we are, that we happily embrace our unique mission in the world, without resenting the limits imposed upon us by our inescapable realities. We are to recognize our “place,” the conditions and circumstances within which we live, and commit ourselves to doing the best we can with all that we’ve been given.

Wednesday

Earlier this week, we noted Rashi’s surprising comment, based on the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 60:7), in explaining Lavan’s effusive invitation to Avraham’s servant. Lavan said to the servant, “Why should you stand outside, when I cleared out the house, and there is room for the camels!” (24:31). The Midrash explains that when Lavan told the servant that he “cleared out the house,” this means not that he made room for the servant and his men, but rather that he removed from the home all articles of idol worship. Knowing that Avraham’s servant rejected idol-worship, Lavan took away the idols so that the servant would feel comfortable and at home.

We might approach the Midrash’s comments in light of Rashi’s remarks earlier (24:29), explaining that Lavan’s enthusiastic response to the news of the servant’s arrival was a reflection of his selfishness and greed. After seeing the jewelry that the servant gave to Lavan’s sister, Rivka (24:30), Lavan excitedly anticipated the wealth he would likely receive by building a close relationship with Avraham’s servant. This is why he ran quickly to greet the servant, and why he extended his invitation with such warmth and excitement.

It is with this background, perhaps, that we might approach the Midrash’s remark that Lavan spoke of his having cleared his home of idols. The Midrash might be indicating that just as people sometimes feign admiration and affection for the sake of flattery, to earn the favor of others, people are also prone to project a phony appearance of religious piety for the sake of winning respect and social approval. Lavan’s insincere graciousness, which was driven purely by his lust for money, is compared by the Midrash to insincere expressions of religious devotion, to the tendency people sometimes have to rid their “homes” of “idols” – to project an image of piousness – in order to make a positive impression on others. The Midrash thus teaches us that just as we are to treat people kindly and warmly with sincerity, out of a genuine desire to dispense goodness, so must we ensure that our religious observance is sincere and true, and not merely a cheap device that we employ in the vain pursuit of respect and admiration.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Chayei-Sara of Avraham’s servant’s journey to Aram-Naharayim in fulfillment of Avraham’s command that he find a mate for Yitzchak from his homeland. The servant – commonly identified as Eliezer – met Rivka, the daughter of Yitzchak’s cousin, outside the city, and she invited him to her home, where he spoke to the family and requested permission to bring her to marry Yitzchak in Canaan. The Torah relates that when Eliezer arrived, he was invited to join the family for a meal, and he was served food. He insisted, however, that he would not eat before first explaining to them why he had come and presenting his request – “I will not eat until I have spoken my words” (24:33).

*Targum Yonatan* *ben Uziel*, as well as other Midrashic sources, relate that Rivka’s family resented and felt hostility towards Eliezer, and they sought to kill him by secretly poisoning his food. Eliezer sensed that his food might have been poisoned, and for this reason he did not wish to eat until after he spoke to the family.

Rav Shlomo of Radomosk, in his *Tiferet Shelomo*, offers an allegorical reading of this seemingly peculiar incident. The experience of eating, he writes, can be either lofty and sacred, or spiritually “toxic.” If done properly, in the right manner, in the right atmosphere, and with the right intentions, tending to our basic physical needs can be a holy act, but if not, then we essentially lower ourselves to the stature of animals. The *Tiferet Shelomo* thus suggests that when the Midrash speaks of Eliezer being nearly poisoned to death by the food served to him at Rivka’s home, this means that he faced the threat of spiritual decline by eating together with corrupt idol-worshippers. The evil characters with whom Eliezer dined that day threatened to “poison” him – somebody who was accustomed to eating together with his saintly master, Avraham. And for this reason, the *Tiferet Shelomo* writes, Eliezer insisted on first speaking to the family about his experiences upon arriving at the well outside their city, recalling his prayers to God and his expressions of gratitude when his prayers were fulfilled through his meeting Rivka. The way to protect oneself from the “toxic” effects of improper eating is by elevating it and infusing it with religious meaning.

While the Torah does not encourage asceticism or discourage enjoying worldly pleasure, excessive indulgence and inordinate focus on physical enjoyment can be spiritual “poison.” It diverts our attention from our unique, sacred soul, from the distinct being that we are capable of becoming, and from the singular mission that we are each brought into the world to achieve. Overindulgence is “poison” in the sense that it involves squandering our special spiritual potential, as we utilize our time in this world for physical enjoyment, rather than for meaningful accomplishments. The *Tiferet Shelomo*’s insight teaches us of the importance of moderation in our pursuit of physical gratification, to ensure that our spiritual pursuits are always given highest priority even as we enjoy the physical and material delights that the world offers us.

Friday

We read in Parashat Chayei-Sara of Avraham’s instruction to his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak from Avraham’s homeland, and not from among the women in Canaan (24:3-4). Later (24:8), Avraham qualifies this command, telling his servant that if the suitable match does not wish to leave her homeland and relocate in Canaan to marry Yitzchak, then he is free to find a match from the local Canaanite population.

The Ralbag, in listing the different lessons (“*toaliyot*”)to be learned from this section, finds it significant that Avraham recognized the possibility that his preferred match – a girl from his homeland – would not be found, and was prepared to accept the less ideal situation. The Ralbag writes:

When a person is not able to achieve the perfect good, it is not proper for him to be lax in striving to achieve the next best thing. It is instead proper for him to try to acquire the good that is possible for him. And therefore, Avraham allowed Eliezer to take a woman for Yitzchak from among the Canaanite women if it turned out that he could not find a woman from Avraham’s homeland who wanted to follow him.

In the very next passage, the Ralbag writes that we also learn from this story the importance of devising strategies and utilizing every resource when we seek to achieve something. The servant brought with him an enormous amount of Avraham’s riches (24:10) in an effort to attract the suitable match, showing the importance of strategizing in striving for our goals. At the same time, however, the Ralbag learns from this story that we must also be willing to accept the next best thing when our ideal plans do not materialize – just as Avraham accepted the possibility that a wife for Yitzchak might have to be found from among the local tribes. As important as it is to passionately and diligently work to fulfill our dreams and realize our aspirations, we must be satisfied with the realistically best outcome. If we stubbornly insist on nothing other than perfection, we are setting ourselves up for a life of disappointment and frustration. In every area of life, we should strive for the ideal but be prepared to accept and be satisfied with less, humbly acknowledging that life is not meant to be, and will never be, perfect, and we can live happily and contentedly even if not all our ideal preferences are met.

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