**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT CHAYEI-SARA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells of Avraham’s instructions to his servant to journey to Avraham’s homeland and find a spouse for his son, Yitzchak, from among his relatives. Avraham said to his servant that he must go “to my land, to my homeland…and you shall bring a woman for my son, for Yitzchak” (24:4).

The *Midrash Ha-gadol*, commenting on the phrase, “*li-vni le-Yitzchak*” – “for my son, for Yitzchak” – explains that Avraham was emphasizing to his servant, “for my son – and not for me; for Yitzchak – and not for Yishmael.” According to the Midrash’s reading of the verse, Avraham impressed upon his servant that he was assigning him just one mission – to find a wife for Yitzchak. He was not being sent to Avraham’s homeland to find a wife for Avraham – whose wife recently died – or for Avraham’s older son, Yishmael.

What might be the meaning of this Midrashic reading of the verse? Why would the Midrash depict Avraham as clarifying to his servant that he was being sent to find a mate only for Yitzchak, and not for Avraham or Yishmael?

Perhaps, the Midrash seeks to convey a simple lesson about remaining focused and avoiding distraction. Sometimes, when we have a certain task to complete, we are prone to diverting our attention away from that task towards other valuable pursuits. Just as the Midrash describes Avraham’s concern that his servant might look for a wife for Avraham or Yishmael instead of a wife for Yitzchak, we, too, occasionally lose sight of the most pressing or immediate task at hand, and allow our focus to shift onto other matters. The Midrash perhaps urges us to remain focused and determined to complete our primary, basic obligations before seeking to expand and look beyond for other worthwhile challenges to undertake. Just as the servant was reminded to focus his attention on Yitzchak, so are we to try to remain focused on our immediate responsibilities at any given time, before seeking additional endeavors to take upon ourselves.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells of the experiences of Avraham’s servant – commonly identified as Eliezer – when he journeyed to Avraham’s homeland, Aram Naharayim, to find a wife for Avraham’s son, Yitzchak. After he met Rivka – the daughter of Yitzchak’s cousin, Betuel – at the well outside the city, she invited him into her home, where the servant and his men were welcomed and served a meal. Before eating, the servant explained to the family why he had come, told them about his experiences at the well where he met Rivka, and asked them if they would agree to allow Rivka to move to Canaan to marry Yitzchak.

The servant began his address to the family by announcing, “*Eved Avraham anokhi*” – “I am Avraham’s servant” (24:34). Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz commented that this proclamation was intended to dispel their mistaken impression. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 60) comments that Eliezer looked like Avraham, and this is why Lavan, Rivka’s brother, had greeted Eliezer with special enthusiasm, exclaiming, “*Bo berukh Hashem*” – “Come, O blessed one of the Lord” (24:31). Lavan called Eliezer “the blessed one of the Lord” because when he saw him, he mistook him for Avraham, the beneficiary of God’s special blessing. For this reason, Rav Shmuelevitz explained, Eliezer began by affirming, “I am Avraham’s servant.” He wanted to ensure not to enjoy an additional moment of special honor and respect because of the family’s mistaking him for his illustrious master.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz here points to the tendency we sometimes have to base our self-image upon the way others perceive us. We instinctively seek people’s esteem, and enjoy compliments, because these allow us to – deceptively – think highly of ourselves. Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz’s comments remind us of the need to honestly declare, “*Eved Avraham anokhi*” – to clarify to ourselves who we really are, and not to define ourselves based on the exaggerated compliments of others.

Of course, the converse is also true. Just as we are prone to wrongly pride ourselves because of the respect and praise we receive, so are we prone to wrongly feel lowly and inadequate because of the insensitivity and disrespect shown to us. When we hear insults or unnecessarily harsh criticism, we might allow the painful words to shape our self-image, and thus feel insecure and ashamed. Eliezer’s pronouncement, “*Eved Avraham anokhi*” teaches us to always define ourselves honestly and objectively, to make sure we know who we really are, and not to allow our self-image depend on how we think other people view us.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells of Avraham’s instruction to his servant – identified by *Chazal* as Eliezer – to journey to Avraham’s homeland and bring back a woman whom Yitzchak would marry. In giving this instruction, Avraham made the servant promise that he would not bring a wife for Yitzchak from the local population in Canaan. The servant then asked Avraham what he should do if the prospective bride refused to relocate in Canaan, and Avraham replied that if this happened, then he should find a bride from among the Canaanites.

Rashi (24:39), citing the Midrash, writes that Eliezer had ulterior motives in raising this possibility, that the woman selected from Avraham’s homeland would not agree to move to Canaan. Eliezer had a daughter whom he wished would marry Yitzchak, and so when Avraham strictly instructed him to find a wife for Yitzchak specifically from Avraham’s homeland, Eliezer tried keeping open the possibility of Avraham agreeing to allow Yitzchak marry his daughter. In his heart, he had hoped that the suitable girl would refuse to come to Canaan so that his daughter could marry Yitzchak. The Midrash concludes that Avraham informed Eliezer that Yitzchak could not marry his daughter. Eliezer descended from Canaan, Noach’s grandson, upon whom Noach had placed a curse (Bereishit 9:25), and thus his daughter could not marry Yitzchak, who would inherit God’s special blessing to Avraham.

Rav Moshe Greenwald of Chust, in his *Arugat Ha-bosem*, suggests explaining on this basis Avraham’s prayer which he declared in response to Eliezer’s question: “The Lord, God of the heavens and God of the earth, who took me from my father’s home and from my homeland…He shall send His angel before you, and you shall bring a woman for my son from there” (24:7). Significantly, Rav Greenwald observes, Avraham here refers to God as “God of the heavens and God of the earth.” Rav Greenwald explains by citing the Midrash’s comment (*Bereishit Rabba* 5:8) that at the time of creation, God called the earth by the name “*eretz*” because “***ratzeta*** *la-asot retzon konah*” – “it wanted to fulfill its Maker’s will.” What this might mean, Rav Greenwald writes, is that the earth accepted the less prestigious role it was assigned by the Creator, without protesting the more distinguished position being given to the heavens. The Almighty is “God of the heavens and God of the earth” – equally devoted to both domains of the universe, the heaven and the earth, and there is thus no need for the earth to envy the heavens. Each part of creation was given its unique role to fulfill for the sake of realizing God’s purpose for the universe. Avraham was expressing to Eliezer that he, too, should happily accept his place. Life is not about attaining fame, distinction or prestige. It is about fulfilling the unique purpose which God has assigned to each and every one of us, regardless of whether that purpose earns us recognition and notoriety. Eliezer’s purpose was to be Avraham’s loyal disciple and serve as his trusted assistant; marrying into the family might have brought him more prestige, but this was not the purpose for which he was created. Our aspiration must be “*la-asot retzon konah*” – to fulfill God’s will for us, to achieve our unique mission the best we can, and not to pursue personal honor or fame.

Tuesday

The Torah introduces the story of Avraham’s sending his servant to bring a wife for Yitzchak by stating, “And Avraham was elderly, aged in days, and the Lord blessed Avraham with everything” (24:1). A number of commentators, including the Ramban and the Radak, explain that the Torah mentions Avraham’s having been blessed “with everything” to express that all that was left for Avraham to achieve was to find a spouse for his son. He had already attained wealth, prestige, longevity and offspring. What remained was to ensure the propagation of his line through Yitzchak’s marriage, and this is how the Torah introduces the story of a selection of a wife for Yitzchak.

The Rashbam explains differently, suggesting that this verse seeks to dispel the possible misconception that Avraham feared that no one from the local Canaanite population would want to join his family through marriage. Avraham sent his servant to his homeland, in Mesopotamia, to find a wife for Yitzchak, and we might have assumed that he did so because he feared that no one from the Canaanite tribes would agree to this match. For this reason, the Rashbam explains, the Torah begins by stating that Avraham was blessed “with everything,” such that anybody would have happily joined his family. (We might question this explanation, though, as Avraham made his servant swear that he would not find a wife for Yitzchak from the local population. If the concern was that no local families would want to join Avraham’s family, then there would not have been any need for such an oath.)

Seforno explains that to the contrary, this phrase provides the actual reason why Avraham sent his servant to bring a wife for Yitzchak from a distant land. He feared that because of his great wealth and prestige, locals might bribe the servant to choose their daughter for Yitzchak despite her being unsuitable. Therefore, the Torah introduces this story by informing us of Avraham’s great wealth and stature, because of which he sent his servant to Mesopotamia instead of allowing him to find a Canaanite girl.

Rashi (in some editions of Rashi’s commentary) offers a surprising, Midrashic explanation of this verse, noting that the *gematria* (numerical value) of the word “*ba-kol*” (“with everything”) is 52, the same as that of the word “*bein*” – “son.” Thus, this phrase made be read as stating that God blessed Avraham with a son – and this is thus a fitting introduction to the ensuing story, as Avraham needed to assure a proper match for his son.

How might we explain this Midrashic association between the words “*ba-kol*” and “*bein*”?

Rav Nissan Alpert, in his *Limudei Nissan*, suggests that Rashi here alludes to the fact that Avraham excelled both at home and outside the home; that he devoted himself to both his son and to “*kol*” – the world at large. Often, Rav Alpert observed, people who commit themselves to public service, and are accomplished and influential, fail to pay sufficient attention to their families. Conversely, there are people who devote themselves exclusively to their families, without applying their talents and strengths also outside the home, for the sake of their nation or the world generally. Rashi thus comments that Avraham was blessed with both “*kol*” and a son; he achieved greatness both as a public figure, and as a father. He succeeded in exerting a profound influence upon countless people throughout the world, but also upon his beloved son, ensuring the successful transmission of his legacy and his historic mission to future generations.

Wednesday

Parashat Chayei-Sara begins with the death of Sara, and it tells that after her passing, “Avraham came to eulogize Sara and to cry for her” (23:2). The seeming implication of this verse is that Avraham was not present at the time of his wife’s death, and when he heard that she had passed, he came to eulogize and mourn.

Rashi explains this verse in accordance with his view (based on the Midrash) that Sara died at the time of *akeidat Yitzchak* – when God commanded Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak on Mount Moriah (and then at the last moment instructed him to withdraw his knife). The story of *akeidat Yitzchak* ends by saying that Avraham went to Be’er Sheva (22:19), whereas Sara died in Chevron (23:2). According to Rashi, the couple lived in Chevron, but Avraham for some unknown reason went to Be’er Sheva, and when he heard that Sara had passed away, he came home from Be’er Sheva to eulogize and mourn.

The Ramban explains differently, suggesting the Sara had a tent of her own, and when she died, Avraham came into the tent to eulogize and weep. Alternatively, the Ramban writes, the word “*va-yavo*” (“came”) does not necessarily mean to “come,” and can also sometimes refer to being moved or driven to act. Thus, the verse simply tells that Avraham, overcome by grief, was moved to eulogize and weep. (This might be the Rashbam’s intent, as well, in stating that the word “*va-yavo*” in this verse should not be understood to mean “came.”)

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, commenting on this verse, cites a number of verses suggesting that the verb *b.a.* can have the specific denotation of entering a private place. For example, the setting of the sun is referred to with this verb, as in the verse later in Sefer Bereishit (28:11), “*ki* ***va*** *ha-shemesh*.” Sunset is when the sun dips below the horizon, out of view, such that it is depicted as moving into its private domain. Likewise, the prophet Yeshayahu (26:20) urges the people of his time, “*Leikh ami* ***bo*** *ba-chadarekha*” – “Go, my nation, **enter** your rooms.” Accordingly, Rav Hirsch explains, “*va-yavo Avraham*” here in Parashat Chayei-Sara means that Avraham went into a private place to weep. Rav Hirsch writes:

Abraham withdrew, shut himself in to mourn for his Sarah and to weep for her. He does not wear his heart upon his sleeve, makes no parade of his grief… We know what his Sarah had been to Abraham, how infinitely deep his grief must have been. He mourns, he weeps but he bears the pain in his heart, in the privacy of his home.

The Torah emphasizes that Avraham’s grief was expressed privately, and not put on public display. Avraham felt it appropriate to keep his deepest emotions private, rather than turning them into a public spectacle. Although he was very much a public figure, he insisted on separating his private life from his public persona, and thus wept and mourned in the privacy of his home.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells of Avraham’s strict instructions to his Servant – commonly identified as Eliezer – to find a wife for Avraham’s son, Yitzchak, from Avraham’s homeland, and not from among the Canaanites. The servant then asked Avraham what he should do if the prospective match refuses to relocate in Canaan. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 59:9) famously comments that Eliezer had a vested interest in hoping that this would happen – as he had a daughter whom he very much wished would be chosen as Yitzchak’s wife. When Avraham instructed him to journey to *Aram Naharayim* to find a wife for Yitzchak, Eliezer tried to keep the possibility open that this plan would not succeed and then his daughter could marry Yitzchak. The Midrash concludes that Avraham informed Eliezer that as a descendant of Cham, Noach’s son whom Noach had cursed, Eliezer could not join Avraham’s family.

In discussing Eliezer’s ulterior motives, the Midrash is critical of the servant, applying to him the verse in Hoshea (12:5), “*Kena’an be-yado mozenei mirma*” – “The merchant has deceptive weights in his possession.” According to the Midrash, Eliezer’s attempt to keep open the possibility of his daughter’s marriage to Yitzchak amounted to “deception,” and was inappropriate.

The simple meaning of this remark, seemingly, is that Eliezer outwardly appeared genuine, when in truth he was speaking for the sake of his own vested interests. When Eliezer posed the question of what he should do if the girl refused to move to Canaan, he gave the impression that he sincerely wished to clarify Avraham’s wishes so he could devotedly fulfill them. But in truth, he had his own wishes in mind, and this constituted a form of deception – appearing to show genuine concern when he in fact was looking after his own wishes.

Rav Henoch Leibowitz (*Chiddushei Ha-leiv*), however, explains the Midrash differently, suggesting that the Midrash here finds fault in Eliezer for deceiving not Avraham, but himself. If he had assessed the situation with perfect honesty and objectivity, he would have realized on his own that his daughter was not suitable as a match for Yitzchak. The fact that he seriously considered this option revealed a tinge of self-delusion on his part, and the Midrash regards self-delusion as a form of deceit. Honesty requires not only refraining from deceiving others, but also refraining from deceiving ourselves. It means acknowledging hard truths, even when they are uncomfortable and inconvenient.

Rav Leibowitz cites in this context a passage from Rabbeinu Yona’s commentary to Mishlei (3:3) explaining that honesty requires pure, pristine objectivity. Rabbeinu Yona gives several examples of situations where our integrity is tested – such as when we argue with our fellow and realize that we are wrong, but stubbornly refuse to concede, or when we hear unsubstantiated rumors and rush to believe them because we lack the patience to wait until they are confirmed. Another example noted by Rabbeinu Yona is intellectual laziness, accepting matters as true without going through the trouble of thoroughly studying them to ensure we understand properly. In Eliezer’s case, he “deceived” himself by maintaining false hopes, by refusing to acknowledge the obvious. This, too, is a form of deception – fooling ourselves into believing what we want to believe, instead of viewing the situation objectively. The Midrash here teaches us the importance of honesty not only in our dealings with other people, but also in our dealings with ourselves, to acknowledge the truth even when the truth is inconvenient or not what we want it to be.

Friday

Parashat Chayei-Sara begins with the death of Sara, and Avraham’s acquisition of the Makhpeila Cave as a burial site. Avraham approached the local Chittites and asked for a piece of land for Sara’s burial, and they responded by inviting him to bury his wife anywhere he wished. But Avraham sought to acquire a plot, and he summoned one member of the Chittite tribe, Efron, and asked to purchase from him the territory of *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila* which he owned. Efron announced his willingness to simply give Avraham the land in question, without pay, but Avraham insisted that he wished to pay the fair price. Efron then replied, “A land worth 400 silver *shekel* – what is it for you and me?” (23:15). The Torah relates that Avraham then paid this exact price – 400 silver *shekel* – for the area of *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*.

Several sources in the Midrash (e.g. *Bereishit Rabba* 58) express a critical view of Efron, commenting that although he spoke generously, his intent all along was to demand this exorbitant price of 400 silver pieces. Textual support for this perspective may be drawn from the verse, “Avraham listened to Efron, and Avraham paid Efron the [sum of] money which he had stated…” (23:16). The Torah tells that Avraham “listened” – or obeyed – Efron and thus proceeded to pay him the specified sum, indicating that Efron requested payment, or at least subtly expressed his desire to be paid, despite having originally offered to give it for free.

Some have suggested explaining on this basis an earlier verse, in which the Torah introduces Efron’s initial response to Avraham’s request to purchase *Me’arat Ha-makhpeila*: “Efron the Chittite replied to Avraham **in the hearing of the Chittites**…” (23:10). The Torah emphasizes that when Efron responded to Avraham’s request by offering him the land for free, he spoke to Avraham “*be-oznei benei Cheit*” – with the rest of the Chittites listening. Apparently, the Torah deemed it significant that Efron articulated his response in public, ensuring that he was heard by all who had assembled. It has been suggested that Efron sought to build a reputation for magnanimity, and so he loudly and publicly declared his willingness to let Avraham have the land he wanted free of charge. Efron’s true desire, though, which he subtly indicated to Avraham, was to receive an exorbitant price, and Avraham agreed. Thus, according to this understanding, Efron was the kind of a person who worked and strove to be respected and well-liked, but without actually investing work or making the sacrifices necessary to legitimately deserve admiration. We all have an instinctive desire to be held in high esteem by our peers, but we sometimes tend to focus more attention on building our image than on building our true selves. We earn admiration by being truly worthy of admiration, and this requires work and sacrifice. Efron tried to project an impressive image that falsely represented who he really was. *Chazal*’s criticism of Efron teaches us that we should focus far more on truly being worthy of respect than on appearing as such.

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