**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**Parashat Chayyei Sara**

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**In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim
 Dov) Broyde ztz"l**

**הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ​**

**By Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise**

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of

Alexander Sender Dishkin z"l

whose yahrzeit falls on the twenty-third of Cheshvan,

by his great-granddaughter, Vivian Singer.

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**The Oath Taken by Avraham's Servant**

**Rav Yaakov Medan**

### I. The Oath

And Avraham was old, advanced in age; and the Lord had blessed Avraham in all things. And Avraham said unto his servant, the elder of his house, that ruled over all that he had: “Put, I pray you, your hand under my thigh. And I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell. But you shall go unto my country, and to my native land, and take a wife for my son, even for Yitzchak.”

And the servant said unto him: “Perhaps the woman will not be willing to follow me unto this land; must I bring your son back unto the land from where you came?”

And Avraham said unto him: “Beware you that you bring not my son back there. The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house, and from the land of my nativity, and who spoke unto me, and who swore unto me, saying: Unto your seed will I give this land; He will send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. And if the woman be not willing to follow you, then you shall be clear from this my oath; only you shall not bring my son back there”

.

And the servant put his hand under the thigh of Avraham his master, and he swore to him concerning this matter. (*Bereishit* 24:1-9)

Halakha states that a severe oath involves "taking an object," that is, grasping a mitzva object*.* The oath taken by the servant of Avraham (henceforth, Eliezer, in accordance with the Midrash) involved placing his hand under Avraham's thigh, holding it close to the site of his circumcision.[[1]](#footnote-1) The site of circumcision is not just an ordinary mitzva object, for the fundamental content of the covenant of circumcision relates to the sanctity of Avraham's seed and the obligation to take wives only from his family.

Following Eliezer's question about returning Yitzchak to Aram Naharayim, the oath is expanded. Eliezer is required to swear that he will not take Yitzchak back to his father's native land. The oath at the site of Avraham's circumcision is expanded to include fidelity to the sanctity of the land of Canaan which has been promised to him in connection with circumcision.

The connection between the sanctity of the seed and the sanctity of the land is also found in the book of *Vayikra*, in the section dealing with forbidden sexual relations:

Defile not you yourselves in any of these things; for in all these, the nations have been defiled, which I cast out from before you. And the land was defiled, therefore I did visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land vomited out her inhabitants. (*Vayikra* 18:24-25)

The defilement of forbidden marriages leads ultimately to exile from the land.

An oath "under the thigh" is found in the book of *Bereishit* in another context:

And the time drew near that Yisrael must die; and he called his son Yosef, and said unto him: “If now I have found favor in your sight, put, I pray you, your hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me; bury me not, I pray you, in Egypt. But when I sleep with my fathers, you shall carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burying-place.” (*Bereishit* 47:29-30)

Yaakov makes Yosef take an oath that he will bury him in the burial-place of his fathers. This request is in essence related to the sanctity of the seed and to circumcision, for a person who is buried in the burial-place of his fathers declares thereby that he belongs to them and that he is their continuation. A man who fathers a child of his people, that is, not from a woman coming from a foreign nation, continues thereby the lineage of his ancestors.

### II. Temporary Departure

An obvious question relating to the grave oath not to return Yitzchak to Aram Naharayim arises when we turn to *Parashat Vayetze*, and find Yaakov, Yitzchak's son, leaving the Land of Israel on his father's instructions to marry awoman in Aram Naharayim:

And Yitzchak called Yaakov, and blessed him, and charged him, and said unto him: “You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Paddan Aram, to the house of Betuel your mother's father; and take you a wife from there of the daughters of Lavan your mother's brother.” (*Bereishit* 28:1-2)

Let us suggest an answer: even Avraham only forbids leaving the Land of Israel on a permanent basis, not temporary departure. It is true that Yaakov's residence in Paddan Aram drags on for twenty years and more, but he goes there involuntarily, and it is clearly his intention to return to his country. Yaakov is a third-generation resident of the Land of Israel, after his grandfather Avraham has already been buried in the Makhpela Cave; and at the time of his death, he wills the cave to his sons. As for Yitzchak, the fear of settling outside the Land of Israel and assimilating into the large family still remaining in Paddan Aram is more real and more dangerous.

Still, there is room to ask: if temporary departure for the purpose of finding a wife is not forbidden, why does Avraham send Eliezer to look for a wife for Yitzchak? Why doesn’t Yitzchak go himself? A hint to the answer is found in the verses themselves. When Yitzchak wishes to go down to Egypt, he is told:

And the Lord appeared unto him, and said: “Go not down unto Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell you of. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you…” (*Bereishit* 26:2-3)

Yitzchak's body is sanctified on the altar on Mount Moriya, and therefore he is forbidden to leave the land, even for a short time. *Chazal* emphasize this point in many places:

"A servant that deals wisely shall have rule over a son that deals shamefully, and he shall have part of the inheritance among the brethren" (*Proverbs* 17:2). "A servant that deals wisely" — this is Eliezer… "shall have rule over a son that deals shamefully" — this is Yitzchak who put all the idolaters to shame when he was bound on the altar. (*Bereishit Rabba* 60:2)

What the verse in *Mishlei* means is that a wisely-acting servant is preferred in the home of his master to the son who shames his father through his wicked deeds or his laziness, and the servant's good deeds overcome his lowly status in determining his standing in the house of his master in relation to the son. If we wish to apply this simple interpretation to what happened in the house of Avraham, we must understand that the wise and God-fearing servant rules over the pale and passive Yitzchak. The servant dictates Yitzchak's life and chooses a wife for him. The servant's selection is based on the bride's appropriateness for the house of Avraham in that she performs acts of kindness and opens her home to guests, and it ignores her personal suitability for Yitzchak.

All this, as stated, accords with the plain sense of the verse in *Mishlei. Chazal*, however, correctly expound the verse in the opposite way. According to their exposition, Yitzchak is indeed a "son that deals shamefully," but he does not shame his father with his laziness, but rather he puts all the idolaters to shame with his devotion to God!

As stated, the outstanding nature of Yitzchak's dedication to God at the *Akeida* is what prohibits him from leaving the country. It seems that from a certain perspective Yitzchak remains bound upon the altar as a whole offering.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the end of the *Akeida* story, it says:

So Avraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Be'er Sheva…. (*Bereishit* 22:19)

Yitzchak is not included among those who return to Be'er Sheva, and one of *Chazal's* solutions to this puzzling omission is as follows:

The Rabbis said: We look upon it as if Yitzchak's ashes are heaped upon the altar. (*Bereishit Rabba* 94:5)

In another *midrash*, we find:

Rabbi Yehuda says: When the sword reached his neck, Yitzchak's soul took flight and left. When God sounded His voice from between the two *keruvim*, saying: "Lay not your hand upon the lad," his soul returned to his body… Yitzchak saw the resurrection of the dead.... At that very time, he said: “Blessed are You, O Lord, who resurrects the dead.” (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, 31)

According to the *midrash*, Yitzchak's soul takes flight. When it returns to his body, he is already in a conceptual world different from the one that is familiar to us, and his soul, which has been resurrected, roams the upper worlds, and its contact with our world is henceforth weak. This idea is expanded upon in the *Zohar:*

But every righteous man in the world has two spirits, one spirit in this world and one spirit in the World to Come. And so you find that the names of all the righteous men are doubled, with the exception of Yitzchak, whose name is not doubled in Scripture, because when Yitzchak is offered on the altar, his soul in this world takes flight, and when he says, "Blessed is He who resurrects the dead," his soul from the World to Come returns to him. For this reason we do not find that the Holy One, blessed be He, assigns His name to a living person — with the exception of Yitzchak, who is considered as having died. (*Zohar*, *Tosefta*, *Parashat Noach*, 60a)

So too the rest of Yitzchak's life expresses in great measure a person who is bound on the altar, his eyes facing upward toward the open sky and his soul carved out not from our world but from the World to Come, because of that time that he was on the altar. This is the meaning of the *midrash* brought by Rashi:

"His eyes were dim." …Another explanation is: When Yitzchak was bound upon the altar and his father was about to slay him, at that very moment the heavens opened, the ministering angels saw it and wept, and their tears flowed upon Yitzchak's eyes which thus became dim. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 27:1)

So too in the story of the blessings, Yitzchak is led by his wife Rivka and by his sons and in accordance with their initiatives. Similarly, in the land of the Philistines, it seems that he is merely repeating the events that happened to his father in the land of the Philistines:

And Yitzchak dug again the wells of water, which they had dug in the days of Avraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Avraham; and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them. (*Bereishit* 26:18)

Thus, Yitzchak also acts with his wife Rivka before Avimelekh, king of Gerar, just like his father. This is true as well in the covenant that he makes with Avimelekh in Be'er Sheva and in his naming the city after that covenant, parallel to the name given to it by his father.

In light of these examples, we can understand the passivity that Yitzchak manifests in the initiative to find him a wife from Paddan Aram and in his readiness to accept the woman that Eliezer brings to him at the initiative of his father. This lack of initiative might be interpreted as laziness or idleness, God forbid, but this is incorrect! Because Yitzchak is a whole offering on the altar of God, his eyes are in the highest heavens. He is like the blind man in Rav Nachman's tale of the seven beggars, a blind man who does not see the small details before him, because he looks out upon the world, from one end to the other.

### III. Avraham's Family

As was noted earlier, the oath taken by Avraham's servant relates to the site of circumcision and to the obligation to maintain marriage ties within the family. Here there is not yet the seed of Israel, namely, the children of Yaakov, for he has not yet been born. There is, however, the family of Shem the son of Noach, who receives the blessing: "…and He shall dwell in the tents of Shem" (*Bereishit* 9:27) — that is to say, the blessing of the resting of the *Shekhina.* Moreover, the family of "the children of Ever" (*Bereishit* 10:21) is an even smaller and more select family, and it is after them that Avraham is called "Avram the Hebrew (*ha-Ivri*)" (*Bereishit* 14:13).

Shem merits being chosen from among Noach's sons for rescuing his father's honor when his nakedness becomes uncovered in his tent. The Torah is vague about the details of what happens and why Shem is chosen there and not Yefet. In addition, the Torah does not explain the term, "the children of Ever," but *Chazal* expound that Ever was a prophet, who, already at the time of the birth of his son Peleg, knew that the earth would one day be divided (see Rashi, *Bereishit* 10:25). *Ch*a*zal* also speak about the *beit midrash* for prophets, at the head of which stands Shem, together with his great-grandson Ever (see Rashi, *Bereishit* 28:9).

Avraham sends his servant Eliezer to select a woman from his extended family, the family of the children of Ever. Nevertheless, God's providence arranges for Eliezer a woman from his closer family, the family of Terach. It is possible that in addition to the general selection of the children of Ever, the family of Terach is chosen to give rise to the seed of Israel: on the one side, Avraham, and on the other side, the four matriarchs, who are all descendants of Terach as well.

Terach's special status finds expression in the fact that the Torah dedicates to him a "book of generations." In the book of *Bereishit*, we find ten genealogicalbooks that open with the words: "These are the generations (*toledot*) of…” As stated, one of them is Terach:

And Terach lived seventy years, and begot Avram, Nachor, and Haran. Now these are the generations of Terach. Terach begot Avram, Nachor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. (*Bereishit* 11:26-27).

Terach and his sons are mentioned twice. They close the book of the generations of Shem, and open the book of the generations of Terach.

### IV. "To My Country and to My Native Land"

As stated, Avraham does not insist upon Eliezer's taking a wife for Yitzchak from the family of Terach, but he states that she must be a member of his family remaining in his native land:

But you shall go unto my country, and to my native land, and take a wife for my son, even for Yitzchak. (*Bereishit* 24:4)

What is Avraham's native land? At the end of *Parashat Noach,* it is stated:

And Haran died in the presence of his father Terach **in the land of his nativity, in Ur Kasdim**… And Terach took Avram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Avram's wife; **and they went forth with them from Ur Kasdim,** to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Charan, and dwelt there. (*Bereishit* 11:28-31)

According to the simple understanding, Avraham was born in Ur Kasdim,[[3]](#footnote-3) and it is there, apparently, that his servant Eliezer is supposed to go. In fact, however, Eliezer goes to another place:

… and he went to **Aram Naharayim,** unto the city of Nachor. (*Bereishit* 24:10)

And Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivka, the daughter of Betuel the Aramean, **of Paddan Aram,** the sister of Lavan the Aramean, to be his wife. (*Bereishit* 25:20)

Later, in *Parashat Toledot*, we encounter a third name:

And the words of Esav her elder son were told to Rivka; and she sent and called Yaakov her younger son, and said unto him: “Behold, your brother Esav, as touching you, does comfort himself, purposing to kill you. Now therefore, my son, hearken to my voice; and arise, flee you to Lavan my brother, **to Charan.”** (*Bereishit* 27:42-43)

In continuation of the words of Rivka, Yitzchak commands Yaakov to go to Paddan Aram (*Bereishit* 28:1-2), whereas Yaakov sets out to go to Charan (*Bereishit* 28:10).

From all this, it appears that Paddan Aram is identical or close to Charan. In fact, Tel Fidan, which is probably Paddan Aram, is located only nine kilometers from Tel Charan, which has been identified to a high degree of certainty with the ancient city of Charan.

Avraham's servant and later Yaakov are sent to Charan, because that is the home of the extended family, from which wives are to be taken. We are left with the difficulty of how it is that Avraham defines Paddan Aram or Charan as "my country and my native land." After all, Avraham was born in Ur Kasdim, and Charan is a transit station along the way. Moreover, Terach, Avraham and Lot migrate to this transit station, but we do not hear that Nachor, brother of Avraham and Haran, also moved to Charan. It can therefore be assumed that Nachor remained in Ur Kasdim; what then is he doing now in Paddan Aram or Charan?

These questions assume that Ur Kasdim, the native land of Avraham and home of Nachor, the brother of Avraham and husband of Milka, mother of Betuel, is very far from Charan and Paddan Aram, and may be identified with the Ur located near the mouth of the Euphrates River in the Persian Gulf. Charan is located hundreds of kilometers northwest of this city. If Ur Kasdim is indeed located there,[[4]](#footnote-4) our questions remain in place, along with the answers proposed by ibn Ezra and the Ramban.

There may be room for another proposal: there is a difference between Ur and Ur Kasdim.[[5]](#footnote-5) The Urfalim, a Jewish community in modern Turkey, have an ancient tradition that their city, Urfa, is Ur Kasdim. Urfa is located only forty kilometers away from Charan and Paddan, and we may say that Eliezer heads to the entire district. The city of Nachor, where he arrives, might be the city of Nechar located in that area until this very day.[[6]](#footnote-6) Mention should also be made of the ancient city of Suruc, a relatively large city in this region, along the Turkish-Syrian border (on the Turkish side). Serug was the grandfather of Terach, and he certainly did not join him on his distant journey from Ur Kasdim on the Persian Gulf to Turkey.

These (and other) proofs are not conclusive, but I think that the prevailing opinion in the scientific community today (and in my opinion correctly) is that Ur Kasdim is Urfa in Turkey. There are several difficulties with this position, which may be overcome, but this is not the forum for a more extensive discussion.

Translated by David Strauss

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1. So writes Rashi, *Bereishit* 24:2, based on *BT Shevuot* 38b. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I first heard this idea many years ago from Rav Yoel Bin-Nun. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Ramban (*Bereishit* 11:28) argues that Avraham was born in Charan, and from there his father Terach emigrated to Ur Kasdim. We, however, follow the majority of commentators, who understand that Avraham was born in Ur Kasdim and moved from there to Charan. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This was the accepted identification until recently. See *Hebrew Encyclopedia*, s.v. Ur Kasdim; *Biblical Encyclopedia*, s.v. Ur Kasdim. This is also the accepted identification among tour guides. An archaeological expedition from Pennsylvania has gone to Ur in the Persian Gulf in an attempt to find artifacts of Ur Kasdim. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The name Ur Kasdim combines two names, and it may be connected to the name Arpakhshad, son of Shem, grandson of Noach. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The name Nechar is mentioned in the Mari tablets from the seventeenth century BCE. The names Terach and Tel Terach (located there until today) and Suruc are mentioned in the annals of Shalmanesser III, from the period of Achav, king of Israel. What I have written here is based on what I have learned from Prof. Y. M. Grintz in his book, *Motzaei Ha-dorot,* and from excursions to these places in which I participated. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)