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2 Extraordinary Moments

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

I often wonder at the popularity of Kabbala and the attraction to and practice of mystical things... things that make no sense. This is certainly not in the vein of Moses' and the Prophets' teachings, which all ring true with pleasant reason.

A friend of mine is currently working on a new book. In it, he will retell his conversation with a Rabbi who has passed away, but had the opportunity to view works of the Rishonim – the Sages – stored in the Vatican. This Rabbi told my friend that he saw in the Rishonim's writings the rejection of Kabbala (Zohar) as a forgery. I am not surprised, as there has long been a debate concerning Rav Shimom ben Yochai's authorship. But regardless of the authenticity, I continue to hear ideas quoted from Zohar that contradict Torah verses. We must measure all ideas against the barometer of the Torah, whose authority is unchallenged: first from the standpoint of God's undeniable authorship, and second, from the standpoint of reason. We must also realize that what is popularized today in the name of Kabbala and Zohar are ideas opposing Moses and the Prophets.

The Rabbis teach that one must not "walk in the garden" until he has had his main course. This refers to not indulging in metaphysics until one has perfected his Talmudic and Halachik studies. I wish to share with you an example of how much beauty and reason we can find in the Talmud, if we allow our intelligent minds to rule over our mystical fantasies.

Talmud Brachos 4b cites a debate between Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi whether the Shema should be recited before, or after prayer (Shmoneh Esray) at night. Both agree that in the morning Shema is recited first. This is to satisfy the principle of "Aligning Redemption with Prayer" (Somech Geulah l' Tefilah). Why must we make this alignment?

A Rabbi once taught a beautiful idea on this. Once we recite the idea of God's redemption from Egypt highlighted by the Shema's conclusion, we must then demonstrate our conviction in God alone as the One who can answer our needs. So we pray following the Shema. We must not live theoretically, but our actions are the true barometer of our convictions. If we merely state God redeemed us, but we do not pray to Him with our current needs, then we are not truly convinced of His capabilities, of His role as the only Granter of Prayers. Rashi says this would be akin to a subject knocking on the King's door, and the King answers, only to find his subject has already departed. The King too departs. Thus, subsequent to reciting God's redemption of us from

Egypt, we ask God our requests in the Shmoneh Esray to substantiate our convictions in His capabilities.

Redemption was finalized in the morning following the first Passover, so in the morning, no debate exists regarding the recital of Shema first. The debate is concerning the nighttime prayers. Rabbi Yochanan says that although the redemption was not complete until the following morning, nonetheless, redemption had begun the night before. Therefore, we again place the Shema before the Shmoneh Esray at night. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi offers a different position. He states we recite the Shmoneh first at night, and then say the Shema afterwards. His reasoning is this: just as in the morning Shema is "closest to the bed" (recited closer in time to waking from bed) so too at night, Shema is "closest to the bed"; it must be recited closer to sleeping (the bed) than the Shmoneh Esray. On the surface, we wonder what Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi is saying. But here, we have a marvelous opportunity to think, to use reason, and arrive at the ideals our Sages intended... long before the existence or debate of Kabbala. The Rabbis cloaked ideas so we might train our minds to unravel human knowledge, and ultimately, God's deep wisdom. In contrast to Kabbala, which leaves the student bewildered even after the "explanation", Talmud and Halacha reveal sensible ideas once we follow the intelligent path of the author.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said Shema must always be "closer to the bed". Our first step then, is to define the Shema, and then "bed". Well, we understand that Shema contains the Torah's fundamentals, making it so vital that we repeat the Shema daily, as it says, "when you lie down and when you rise up". In the Shema, is the very prescription of this twice-daily repetition. Shema contains the ideas of God's unity, total love of God, teaching Torah, learning Torah, Mezuzah, Tefillin, Tzitzis, Reward and Punishment, idolatry, and recalling the Egyptian Exodus.

Now, what is lying down to, and rising from "bed"? These are not simple events. These two acts are fundamental. When we lie down, we are about to relinquish self-control, our souls are handed over to God, and perhaps we will not rise the next morning. And when we awake, we recite "Modeh Ani", "I thank you", which states, "that You returned my soul to me..." We acknowledge the truth that we have no certainty that each day we will receive back our souls.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches that at these two extraordinary moments – lying down and waking up – we have an opportunity to reflect on our mortality, our temporal existence, and remind ourselves through Shema for what exactly God created us. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi saw sleep and waking as the single events each day through which we might filter out all the clutter, all the noise of daily requirements and distractions, and reflect at these two

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moments upon our very existence. It is temporary. God gave it to us for the purposes outlined in the Shema. Therefore says Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, just before you sleep, and as soon as you rise, recite the Shema. Let the experience of sleeping and waking that echo the detachment of your soul, be aligned with the purposes of our lives. Realize that your soul is in God's hand, as He created it, and controls it. We must allow these two moments to penetrate us with these realizations. We will then loosen our grip on temporal, Earthly life, and pursue with greater passion the life of the soul...which ultimately will leave our bodies not for a night, but forever in our ultimate state of existence. ■

Chayey Sarah

Rabbi Bernie Fox

The Significance of Ma'arat HaMachpaylah

"And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hevron, in the land of Canaan. And Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and weep for her." (Beresheit 23:2)

Sarah died in Hevron. Avraham was confronted with the need to provide a burial place for Sarah. The location chosen would also serve as the site of burial of Avraham and his children. This pasuk introduces the discussion of Avraham's efforts to purchase Ma'arat HaMachpaylah – the Cave of Machpaylah.

Why was Avraham determined that this cave should be the burial place for Sarah, himself, and his children? The Midrash Rabbah explains that this cave was special. Adam and Chavah were buried there.[1] Avraham knew that the cave was the burial site of the progenitors of humanity. Rabbaynu Nissim explains that it was for this reason that Avraham chose this cave.

Rabbaynu Nissim further explains that the historical background of the cave did not motivate Avraham. He selected the location in order to teach an important lesson. Adam and Chavah represented the beginnings of humanity. Humanity was created with a purpose, or mission. This purpose can be easily discovered through consideration of the unique design of the human. The human is the only creation with true intelligence. Obviously, Hashem intended humanity to use this gift. Application of reason was to lead Adam, Chavah and their descendants to the truth. Specifically, humankind was to discover and serve Hashem.

Adam and Chavah's descendants were not faithful to this mission. They adopted idolatrous practices. Avraham's life work was to correct this shortcoming. With Sarah, he reintroduced worship of Hashem and taught humanity the truth of monotheism. In the spiritual sense, he and Sarah continued the mission initiated with the creation of Adam and Chavah. Biologically, Adam and Chavah were separated from Avraham and Sarah by many generations. However, spiritually, Avraham and Sarah were Adam and Chavah's direct descendants.[2]

In purchasing the Cave of Machpaylah, Avraham wished to demonstrate this lesson. The truth he and Sarah taught was not merely a subjective religious faith. It was a reality-based approach to understanding G-d and the universe. This recognition and service of Hashem is the realization of humanity's purpose.

Did Avraham Have a Daughter?

"And Avraham was old, well advanced in age, and Hashem had blessed Avraham in everything." (Beresheit 24:1)

The Torah tells us that Hashem blessed Avraham in all ways. Nachmanides explains that Avraham had a son. He had wealth and honor. He had achieved old age. There seems to be one blessing omitted from this list. This enumeration of blessings does not include a daughter. Did Avraham have a daughter?

Nachmanides responds to this question. He bases his comments on a discussion in the Talmud.[3] He explains that this issue is disputed by the Sages. According to Rebbe Meir, Avraham did not have a daughter. Rebbe Yehudah argues that Avraham did have a daughter. A third opinion in the Talmud even provides us with the daughter's name.

What is the basis of this dispute between Rebbe Meir and Rebbe Yehudah? Rebbe Yehudah's reasoning seems obvious. The pasuk states that Avraham was blessed in all ways. Rebbe Yehudah concludes that this implies that Avraham had a daughter. Rebbe Meir's opinion is more difficult to understand. If Avraham did not have a daughter, he was not blessed in every way.

How can Rebbe Meir's position be explained? Nachmanides responds to this question. He explains that typically a daughter is a blessing. However, Avraham's situation was not typical. He was the founder of a new, radical philosophy and religion. Very few people fully accepted Avraham's views. He lived in a world dominated by backward heathen beliefs, superstitions, and practices. He confronted this issue in searching for a wife for Yitzchak. He commanded his servant to travel to Aram Naharayim to seek a wife for Yitzchak. The people of Aram Naharayim were idolaters. Yet, Avraham felt that these people were not as primitive as the nations of Canaan. He decided that Yitzchak could find a suitable wife among the citizens of Aram Naharayim. Yitzchak would be able to teach this woman and, with her establish a family committed to serving Hashem.

This plan would be far more difficult to execute on behalf of a daughter. Would Avraham be able to find a suitable husband? Would she be able to influence this man to abandon his culture? This would be unlikely in a male-dominated society. How could a daughter of Avraham have a happy family life, free of idolatry? Rebbe Meir concludes that Avraham was spared these problems. He did not have a daughter. In his situation, this was a blessing.[4]

Now that we understand Rebbe Meir's reasoning, Rebbe Yehudah's argument is not so convincing. How can Rebbe Yehudah insist that a comprehensive blessing must include a daughter? Rebbe Meir has demonstrated that a daughter would have created a dilemma for Avraham.

In order to understand this dispute, we must return to an earlier incident. Hashem commanded Avraham to leave his homeland and travel to a new land. Hashem promised Avraham that He would bless him. What was the purpose of this blessing? The most obvious possibility is that the blessing was Avraham's personal reward for obeying Hashem. However, there is another possible explanation of this blessing. The blessing was not a personal reward for Avraham. It was designed to demonstrate to the world Hashem's providence over His servants.

It seems that Rebbe Meir and Rebbe Yehudah are debating this very issue. According to Rebbe Meir, the blessing was Avraham's personal reward. Therefore, the specific manifestations of the blessing were based upon Avraham's specific needs. Avraham needed a son. However, a daughter would have created a dilemma. The blessing conformed to Avraham's specific situation. He was granted a son and not a daughter.

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Rebbe Yehudah agrees that a daughter would have presented tremendous problems for Avraham. However, he argues that this is irrelevant. The blessing was not designed as a reward for Avraham. It was a demonstration to the world. Through the blessing, Hashem displayed the extent of His providence. This required that Avraham have a daughter. It must appear to the world that Avraham's life was perfect and that he possessed every blessing. This could only be accomplished through granting Avraham a daughter.

Eliezer's Test and His Definition of Chesed

"And the young woman to whom I will say, 'Tip you jug so that I may drink,' and she will say, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels,' she is the one you have indicated for your servant Yitzchak. And through her I will know that you have acted kindly with my master." (Beresheit 24:14)

Avraham sends his servant Eliezer to Aram Naharayim to seek a wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer arrives at Aram Naharayim. He develops a plan to find a proper wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer devises a test. He will wait at the well for the young women to come draw water for their families. He will approach various young women. He will ask each to share some water with him. He will look for a specific response. The woman who will agree to share her water with him and will also his camels is worthy of consideration for marriage to Yitzchak.

As soon as Eliezer completes the formulation of his plan, Rivkah approaches. Eliezer asks her for water. She readily agrees and, without solicitation, offers to water his camels. Eliezer knows that this woman deserves consideration. She may be the appropriate wife for Yitzchak.

Rashi explains that Eliezer was seeking a woman who possessed the characteristic of kindness – chesed.[5] Eliezer's test was designed to identify this characteristic. It follows that from his test we can extract Eliezer's definition of kindness.

Let us analyze the test devised by Eliezer. The test required that the woman perform two acts. First, she must respond positively to Eliezer's request for water. Second, she must make an unsolicited offer to provide water for his camels. Clearly, this unsolicited offer is also essential to identifying the characteristic of chesed. What does this behavior reveal to us about chesed?

Chesed is not merely responding to the requests of another. Chesed requires that we look beyond the individual's requests. We must evaluate the actual needs of the person. Rivkah demonstrated this behavior. Eliezer asked for water for himself. Many people would respond positively to such a request. However, this response, by itself, does not exemplify chesed. Chesed requires taking the next step. Rivkah asked herself, "What else does this traveler need?" She realized that he also needed water for his camels. She immediately offered to provide this water.

This same attribute of chesed is again demonstrated by Rivkah later in her encounter with Eliezer. Eliezer asks Rivkah if there is any space in her father's home for him to lodge. Rivkah answers that there is room. However, she does not stop with this positive response to Eliezer's question. She realizes that Eliezer has other needs that he has not mentioned. She immediately adds that these needs will also be met. Eliezer will be provided with straw and fodder. Eliezer had not asked for straw and fodder. However, this is the very essence of chesed. Rivkah identified the needs of Eliezer and addressed not merely Eliezer's stated requests, but the needs he had left unmentioned.

The Proper Pace for Reciting Prayers

"And Yitzchak went to meditate in the field towards evening. He raised his eyes and he saw the camels approaching." (Beresheit 24:63)

Our Sages explain, based on this pasuk, that Yitzchak established minchah – the afternoon prayer.[6]

A behavior very commonly associated with piety is slow, deliberate prayer. However, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik Zt"l was accustomed to praying rather rapidly. A student once approached Rav Chaim. The student challenged him to reconcile his practice with the adage that "one should pray as one counts money." The student understood this adage to mean that just as one regards coins as precious, and counts each carefully and slowly, so too one should pray at a leisurely pace. Rav Chaim responded that, on the contrary, his practice was quite consistent with the injunction. He explained that he generally counted his money quickly. Consequently, it was only appropriate to pray at the same pace.[7]

Rav Chaim seems to have maintained that the intention of the adage was not to prescribe a pace at which one should pray. Instead, our Sages meant to teach us that, just as one carefully counts each individual coin, each word of our prayers should be pronounced properly and with due attention. Our Sages are not discussing the pace of our prayers. It is precision that our Sages require.

The Chumash describes Yitzchak's prayer with the word la'suach. This word is a form of the noun sichah, which means "discussion" or "conversation." The use of the term "discussion" in describing prayer supports Rav Chaim's thesis. Our prayers must take the form of a conversation between Hashem and us. In a conversation, it is not appropriate to express one's self at an abnormally slow pace. The speaker should choose his or her words carefully, maintaining a normal rhythm and tempo.

The Meaning of Bitachon

"Hashem, the G-d of the heavens that took me from the house of my father and from the land of my birth, that spoke to me and that promised me saying, 'to your descendants I will give this land' He will send His messenger before you and you will take a wife for my son from there." (Beresheit 24:7)

What is bitachon? Literally, the term means "security." It is used to refer to a sense of confidence or security in the conviction that Hashem will provide and care for us. But when is it appropriate to have bitachon? A common response is that we can always rely on Hashem. In practice, some individuals believe that they do not need to take the usual measures to assure one's own well-being. For example, according to this interpretation, we do not have to provide our children with the tools they will need to make a reasonable living. Instead, we should focus solely on the Torah and religious education of our children. We should have bitachon that if they are truly devoted to the Torah, Hashem will provide. This interpretation of bitachon has even become somewhat popular. However, is this interpretation derived from the Torah or is it alien to the Torah? This week's parasha deals extensively with this issue. What does the Torah have to say?

Avraham assigns a mission to his servant, Eliezer. He directs Eliezer to select a wife for Avraham's son, Yitzchak. However, Avraham instructs Eliezer that he must not select a wife from among the people Canaan. Instead, he is to travel to Avraham's homeland – Aram Naharayim – and find a wife there. There is one complication. Eliezer's mission involves a unique restriction. Avraham tells Eliezer that he may not take Yitzchak with him. He must convince the girl and her family to agree to a marriage with a stranger in a far-off land. Eliezer is concerned with this restriction. He cautions Avraham that it may be impossible to fulfill the mission under this restriction. But Avraham

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assures Eliezer that Hashem will aid him and he will be successful. Avraham had bitachon!

However, it is important to consider Avraham's words carefully. He prefaced his assurance to Eliezer by reminding him that Hashem had taken him from the land of his birth and had promised to give the land of Canaan to his descendants. What was the purpose of this preface? Rashbam and many others discuss this issue and come to a similar conclusion. They explain that Avraham was revealing to Eliezer the basis for his certainty that Hashem will help Eliezer succeed in this mission. Hashem had told Avraham to settle in the land of Canaan and He had promised the land to his descendants. Hashem certainly did not want Yitzchak – Avraham's son – to abandon the land of Canaan. And surely, for Avraham to have descendants, Yitzchak must marry. Therefore, in order to fulfill His promise to Avraham, Hashem will aid Eliezer in his mission.[8]

So, Avraham's bitachon was based upon Hashem's specific promise. Because Hashem had promised Avraham that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan, Avraham had bitachon that He would aid Eliezer; as Eliezer's success in this mission was essential to the fulfillment of Hashem's promise.

This is the first insight that our parasha provides on the nature of bitachon. Bitachon is not based on a vague speculation regarding Hashem's plan for us. It is founded upon specific knowledge of this plan. Avraham was not just saying to Eliezer, "Be faithful to Hashem and He will help." He was telling Eliezer that Hashem had revealed His plan and that He is trustworthy and will help fulfill it. But the parasha has an even more important insight regarding bitachon.

"And now, if you intend to act with kindness and truth towards my master Avraham, then tell me. And if not, tell me and I will turn to the right or left." (Beresheit 24:49)

Eliezer arrives at Aram Naharayim and devises a plan to find the proper wife for Yitzchak. The plan works so quickly and completely that Eliezer recognizes that Hashem's providence is at work. Rivkah is the divinely chosen wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer meets with Rivkah's family. He explains his mission to them. He describes the test he devised and its wondrous success. He asks the family to allow Rivkah to leave them and enter into marriage with Yitzchak. He tells them that if they refuse, he will turn to the right or left. What does this phrase mean? Rashi explains that Eliezer was telling Rivkah's family that if they refused him, he would seek a wife from among the children of Yishmael, Avraham's son, or Lote, Avraham's nephew.[9]

According to Rashi's interpretation, Eliezer was being less than truthful. Avraham had specifically told Eliezer to seek a wife from Aram Naharayim. He had not told him that, if unsuccessful, he should then attempt to find a wife from among the children of Yishmael or Lote. In fact, he told Eliezer that if he did not succeed in his mission, then Avraham would settle for a wife from Canaan. Why did Eliezer misrepresent Avraham's directions?

This is not the only misrepresentation that Eliezer made. In recounting Avraham's charge to him, Eliezer made a key change. Avraham had commanded Eliezer to seek a wife in Aram Naharayim. Avraham did not specify that the wife should be from his own family. Apparently, Avraham felt that the people of Aram Naharayim were superior to those who lived in Canaan. But he did not insist on a family member. However, when Eliezer spoke with Rivkah's family, he told them that Avraham had charged him with finding a wife for Yitzchak from Avraham's family. Eliezer made no mention

of Avraham's insistence that Eliezer seek a wife in Aram Naharayim. Avraham stressed the geographical origins of Yitzchak's future wife, and Eliezer represented Avraham as being concerned with family origins.

Now, it is clear that Eliezer's two deviations are at least consistent. First, he altered Avraham's directive and represented Avraham's primary concern to be the family origin of the prospective wife. Next, he said that if Rivkah's family would not allow her to marry Yitzchak, there were other options within the family: the children of Yishmael or Lote. Of course, had Eliezer represented Avraham accurately – as wanting a wife for Yitzchak from Aram Naharayim – it would have made no sense to contend that he had the option of seeking a wife among the children of Yishmael or Lote. But why did Eliezer misrepresent his master's wishes?

Both Eliezer and Avraham understood that Eliezer's mission would be difficult. He was to ask a girl and her family to agree to a wedding with a man they did not know and could not meet. Instead, the suitor was represented by his father's servant. Inevitably, this arrangement would arouse suspicion. Why was the potential groom not doing his own bidding? Why was he sending a representative in his place? The obvious suspicion would be that the groom was flawed in some serious and conspicuous way. In order to conceal this critical flaw, the suitor was sending a representative. How could this probable suspicion be overcome?

Our Sages explain that before sending Eliezer on his mission, Avraham turned over all of his wealth to Yitzchak. Then, he gave Eliezer the document that recorded the transaction.[10] They add that when Eliezer spoke with Rivkah's family, he showed them this document.[11] What was the purpose of this transaction? It is obvious from the Sages' comments that Avraham felt that the transference of his wealth to Yitzchak would facilitate Yitzchak's marriage. Avraham wanted Eliezer to provide evidence of this transfer to the chosen girl's family. But why was this necessary? If the objective was to impress the girl and her family with Yitzchak's wealth, it should have been adequate to point out that Yitzchak was Avraham's heir. He would inherit all of Avraham's wealth. Why did Avraham feel it was necessary to transfer his wealth before Eliezer set out on his mission?

Apparently, Avraham was well aware of the suspicions that would be aroused by Yitzchak's absence. Hence, he would need to provide an explanation for his son's neglect in representing himself to the girl's family. The purpose of Avraham's transference of his wealth to Yitzchak was manifold. It would lead the family to assume that Yitzchak was a capable person; Avraham would not give total control of his wealth to a fool! By transferring his property to Yitzchak, Avraham provided evidence of Yitzchak's competence. It could then be concluded that, as a consequence of his inheritance, Yitzchak would have taken on the considerable charge of managing a great estate and tremendous wealth. A wise landowner would not leave his duties and responsibilities. So, instead, Yitzchak sent his father's faithful and wise servant to do his bidding for him.

But Eliezer knew that although Avraham's plan was brilliant, it was not complete. Avraham's plan provided a compelling explanation for Yitzchak's absence. But it did not completely remove suspicion. Why was Yitzchak seeking a wife in a distant land? What was wrong with the women of Canaan? Could it be that the women of Canaan – who could observe Yitzchak first-hand – would not marry him? How would Eliezer account for traveling to Aram Naharayim?

Eliezer decided that his best option was to appeal to the conceit of the girl's family. Eliezer would make it clear that although Rivkah's family was special,

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he had many other attractive and suitable alternatives if they were resistant. Eliezer's remark that he could simply turn "right or left" in the event of their refusal would lead them to regret their decision. Yitzchak had numerous alternatives and could easily find a wife among the women of Canaan. These women, who had most likely seen Yitzchak and knew of his wealth, would be desperate for the opportunity to marry such a man. However, Eliezer's arrival in Aram Naharayim was represented by Eliezer as proof that Avraham wanted someone better for his son – someone from his own family. He chose Rivkah. But the honor of this consideration, if rejected, would gladly be accepted by Yishmael or Lote – or any number of other families from Canaan. Eliezer's plan worked!

Now, what is the point of this account? Avraham and Eliezer had bitachon. The Torah tells us that, nonetheless, they devised an intricate and brilliant plan to find a wife for Yitzchak. They did not assume that they could merely expect Hashem to provide. They accepted upon themselves the obligation to do everything in their power to find a wife. They assumed that if they made every possible effort, Hashem would then bring them success. But they had to do everything in their power!

What is the Torah's concept of bitachon? It is Hashem will fulfill His promises. However, we must first do everything in our power to bring about the fulfillment of these promises. Only after we have fulfilled our obligation are we entitled to rely on Hashem. ■

[1] Midrash Rabbah, Sefer Beresheit 58:4.

[2] Rabbaynu Nissim ben Reuven Gerondi (Ran), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 23:2.

[3] Mesechet Baba Batra 141a.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 24:1.

[5] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 24:14.

[6] Mesechet Berachot 26b.

[7] Rav Hershel Schachter, Nefesh HaRav (Reishit Yerushalayim, 5755), pp. 120-121.

[8] Rabbaynu Shemuel ben Meir (Rashbam) Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 24:7.

[9] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 24:49.

[10] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 24:10.

[11] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 24:36.

Patriarchs vs. Their Children

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Rashi's commentary on Gen, 24:42. "Rabbi Acha said, 'More pleasant is the speech of the servants of the Patriarchs before God, than the Torah (commands) of their children, as we find Eliezer's account (describing his encounter with Rebecca) doubled in the Torah, while many of the central commands of the Torah are only given by way of hints.'"

This is a truly perplexing statement, as we are all of the opinion that that which is most central in the Torah are God's words. How then can a servant's words, even a servant of Abraham, be more precious to God? Was not the Torah given for the sake of the commands?

How do we approach such a question?

The first step is to note what is being compared, as the quote of Rabbi Acha is one of comparison. We find that "speech" is compared to "Torah", and "servant" is compared to "Patriarchs' offspring". In both comparisons, what generates our questions is that the latter appears obviously more important: Speech does not outweigh Torah, and servants do not outweigh Israelites, (in the capacity that Israelites must keep the Torah as the world's teachers.)

Rabbi Acha is teaching a central lesson. He intends to draw our attention to God's estimation of personal character. He first teaches, that which the Torah repeats is done so for emphasis of its importance. Based on this rule, Eliezer's words must be more important than the Torah's commands. But how so?

I believe the one difference between the Patriarchs and ourselves, is that they followed God out of an internal realization of God's truth, with no externally imposed system. Even the speech of the Patriarchs is replete with wisdom, and their attachment to God included no coercion. The Midrash says, "At Sinai, God held that mountain over our heads commanding us in the Torah's observance, and if we refused this obligation, He would drop the mountain on us, and there would be our graves." This Midrash is of course metaphoric. But it teaches that the event of Sinai carried such clear proof of God's existence that His commands were undeniably emanating from the Creator, one Who we would be foolish to ignore. Our acceptance of the yoke of Torah was in a manner, "coerced", as if a mountain was suspended over our heads in threat.

Not so the Patriarchs. They arrived at a knowledge and service of God on their own. This is much more precious to God. The Megilla reads, "They arose and accepted that which they already accepted." This is referring to the Jews' re-acceptance of the Torah out of love, as opposed to their Sinaic acceptance out of fear. Again, we are pointed to the concept that adherence has levels. Greater than one who is commanded, is one who arrives at the truth using his mind. True, there is a statement of the Rabbis, "One commanded is greater than one who is not." But this does not mean 'greater' in every way. This latter Rabbinical statement, once elucidated by a Rabbi, means that when one is commanded, he has more to conquer and is greater. He must fight the additional desire to rebel against "obligations". One with no obligations, but who observes Torah, is great. But such a person has not conquered his rebellious instincts. But here we discuss only the sphere of "conquering his instinct". A totally different question than our topic, "adherence to God".

"More pleasant is the speech of the servants of the Patriarchs before God, than the Torah of their children." This teaches that love supersedes fear. Our ultimate goal in life is not "fear" of God, but rather the "love" of God: the attachment to His knowledge through a true appreciation for the Source of all reality, an attachment to Him. This is love of God. ■

Eliezer Testing Rebecca

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Eliezer was sent by his master Abraham to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham's son. His sworn to find a wife from Abraham's family. Eliezer reached Aram Naharayim and stopped at the well, one location where people meet. He prayed to God that He should send him a woman who would not only respond to his request for his own water, but a woman who would initiate hospitality in the form of watering his camels as well, without request.

"And it as that he had even finished speaking (to God) behold Rebecca came out, born to Besuale, the son of Milka, wife of Nachor, the brother of Abraham and her with her pitcher on her shoulder". (Gen. 24:15)

Of course Eliezer had no knowledge of her lineage, but the Torah teaches how God prepares most efficiently for the righteous. The prayer was not even complete, yet the response was already at hand.

What happens next catches one's eye, "...she went down to the well, she filled her pitcher, and then ascended. And the servant (Eliezer) ran to greet her and said, 'let me sip please, a little water from your pitcher. And she said, 'drink my master', and she rushed and took down the pitcher from her shoulder and gave him to drink. And when he finished drinking, she said 'I will also draw for your camels until they finish drinking'. And she rushed and emptied her pitcher into the trough, and she ran yet again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels."

Allow me to focus your attention on a problem, "...she went down to the well, she filled her pitcher, and then ascended. And the servant (Eliezer) ran to greet her..." Pause here for a moment. What strikes you?

What strikes me as I read this is one question, "Why the delay?" There must have been at least ten minutes which passed as "she went down to the well, she filled her pitcher, and then ascended." It is clear that time passed; yet Eliezer did not budge. His latter sentiment not to delay bringing Rebecca back to Isaac teaches that he was not wasting time. So if he saw her appear as he finished his prayer, why did he not approach her at that very moment? Why did he wait until "she went down to the well, she filled her pitcher, and then ascended?"

Let us better formulate the question: What was there to gain by waiting until Rebecca filled her pitcher? We can refine this question further, "In searching for a woman with the best qualities, what did Eliezer feel he would learn by waiting for Rebecca to fill her pitcher?" The answer is now apparent. Eliezer desired to learn how far Rebecca would go in her kindness. As Eliezer waits until Rebecca draws her own water, her offer is all the more gracious than if she would draw the water knowingly for another. When one works for herself, there is a connection with the object of their labor. To part with water drawn for herself, Rebecca would display a higher level of kindness. For this reason,

Eliezer waited until she drew the water - for herself - and only then, asked for it. He intended to see if she would part with water she drew for herself. We see that not only did Eliezer respond to Abraham's request, but he thought into the best manner of responding to his master. Ironically, Eliezer's own perfection mirrors Rebecca's, as they both responded to requests as best they could. Simply responding to a request in kind is not reflective of a high caliber individual. The righteous are perfected. They see a need, and think into the best way to respond. This may very well explain why Eliezer formulated his approach to Rebecca as he did. He too partook of the very kindness he sought in a mate for Isaac.

Notice, Eliezer's request was "let me sip please, a little water from your pitcher". He asked for a little, and received much. Not only did Rebecca give of her own, but she gave more than requested of her, and she gave all he needed, even though it meant watering all his camels, and did so with speed, again, to accommodate as best she could. ■

Letters

Reader: Is it not a contradiction that one the one hand, God afflicts women (Eve) with pains of birth, but on the other, this causes her to regret having children, and must bring a sin offering? God addresses one problem, but simultaneously causes another!

Mesora: Pains/depression were given by God to women as a means of focussing her on her pregnancy, birth and child rearing. This causes her to redirect her energies away from her husband, no longer directing him towards sin, as Eve did. This is a good, even though it might cause women to regret having children due to the pain.

Gen. 3:16 ends, "He [your husband] will rule over you." This I believe proves the point, that the purpose of the pains shares this objective; that woman now becomes subservient to man, which was not the case before. She was initially capable of urging Adam's sinful act, so her dominance was removed, expressed in the same verse that discusses her new subservience. We have a tradition that all elements of any verse must be related. I feel that relationship in this verse is the "subservience" to man, pronounced at the end of the verse. Redirection of her energies towards her pregnancy, birth and child rearing share this objective. Placing these two elements in a single verse, God hints to the common objective that both are to redirect her from dominating man. Each person must be uninfluenced so their respective choices are their own. ■

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