**PARASHAT CHAYEI-SARA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Chayei-Sara begins with the story of Avraham’s purchase of the Makhpela cave as a burial site after the death of his wife, Sara. The Torah writes that Avraham wept and eulogized his wife, and then “Avraham arose from the presence of his deceased, and he spoke to the Chittites” (23:3).

Rav Yerucham Levovitz finds it significant that the Torah emphasizes Avraham’s “arising” from Sara’s presence before approaching the Chittites to request his desired burial plot. What this might signify, Rav Yerucham explains, is the efforts Avraham made to regain his composure and take control of his emotions before engaging with the people of Cheit. Avraham found it necessary to try, to whatever extent possible, distancing himself from his grief before dealing with people. A person experiencing hardship and grief, Rav Yerucham writes, should try not to wear his pain on his sleeves, so as not to impose the burden of his anguish upon the people around him. It goes without saying that when we see a person in pain we are obliged to speak and act sympathetically and see how we can help alleviate the pain. But the individual himself should not, at least not ideally, carry himself in a manner that broadcasts his grief and invites sympathy. We are to try, as much as possible, to exude serenity even as we struggle with difficult emotions.

Therefore, Avraham “arose from the presence of his deceased.” He made a point of creating some emotional distance between him and his grief before engaging the people of Cheit, in order to appear calm and composed and not burden them with his anguish.

Sunday

Parashat Chayei-Sara tells the story of Avraham’s servant’s journey to Aram Naharayim, Avraham’s hometown, where he was to search for a bride for Avraham’s son, Yitzchak. The servant invokes God’s assistance, asking that the girl destined to marry Yitzchak should be the one who offers water for him and his camels after he asks her for water at the well outside the city. Sure enough, he sees a girl going to the well, and in response to his request, she offers water for him and his animals. This girl turned out to be Rivka, the daughter of Avraham’s cousin, Betuel, and thus a suitable match for Yitzchak.

The servant tells of his experiences at the well to Rivka’s family, hoping to show them that God Himself chose Rivka as Yitzchak’s wife. Indeed, after he finishes speaking, the family responds, “The matter has come from the Lord; we cannot speak to you evil or good” (24:50).

Most commentators understand this to mean that Rivka’s family members felt they had no say in the matter one way or the other. Once God had clearly demonstrated that Rivka was selected to marry Yitzchak, they have neither the authority to refuse nor any reason to express consent. The decision has been made, so they have nothing at all to say. As Seforno writes, “We cannot speak to you evil, to annul His decree, or good, to affirm it, as if it requires our affirmation.” This general approach is also taken by the Rashbam, the Radak and Abarbanel.

Rashi, however, interprets the family’s response differently, explaining that both “evil” and “good” refer to refusal. According to Rashi, the family tells the servant that they could refuse neither with a “bad” excuse, nor with a “good,” or valid, reason. Even if they had a legitimate reason to deny the servant’s request and not allow Rivka to marry Yitzchak, they could not do so, once God had made it clear that this is her destiny.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, in his *Emet Le-Yaakov*, explains Rashi’s comment by referring to the Gemara’s discussion in Masekhet Kiddushin (49a) regarding the case of a betrothal which a woman accepts on mistaken assumptions. As a general rule, the betrothal in such a case is not binding, as the bride accepted with certain understandings which turned out to be incorrect. However, Rabbi Shimon (48b) ruled that if the woman had assumed that the groom was poor, and after accepting the betrothal she discovered that he was wealthy, the betrothal is valid. Since the groom’s financial condition was in fact better than she expected, it is assumed that she would certainly have been happy to accept had she known the truth about his financial status. (The majority view among the *Tanna’im* dispute this ruling.) However, the Gemara comments that Rabbi Shimon would not apply this ruling to the case of a mistaken assumption regarding *yichus* (family background). If the woman accepted betrothal without realizing that the groom comes from a distinguished family, the betrothal is not valid, even according to Rabbi Shimon. Even if a woman who accepted betrothal from a man whom she thought was poor could be assumed to have certainly accepted if she had known he was wealthy, we cannot assume that a woman who accepted thinking the groom came from a simple family would have accepted if she had known about his distinguished family background. In such a case, the woman might say, in the Gemara’s words, “I do not want a shoe that is larger than my foot.” Meaning, not everybody wishes to join a prominent family, as they might feel uncomfortable and insecure. Therefore, if a woman accepted betrothal unaware of the groom’s distinguished background, the betrothal is void.

Rav Kamenetzky suggests that this may have been the legitimate grounds of refusal to which Rivka’s family referred in their response to the servant. Their intent was that even if they wished to refuse the match, feeling uncomfortable with their daughter marrying the daughter of somebody as distinguished as Avraham, they could not refuse, once God had decreed that Rivka should marry Yitzchak.

One of the difficult challenges that we often confront over the course of life is determining when the “shoe” is too “large” for our “foot,” which undertakings are within are reach and capabilities, and which are beyond our limits. Sometimes, we feel the need to refuse an opportunity because we see ourselves as too small, as unqualified for the task. Rashi’s interpretation of Rivka’s family’s response perhaps reminds us to always remain open to the possibility that we are qualified even when we feel we are not. While certainly our intuitive feeling of “smallness” is often correct, sometimes it is not. Just as Rivka’s family was shown that Rivka was, in fact, chosen for the distinction and challenge of joining Avraham’s family, we, too, may at times be shown that we are capable of more than we had previously thought. We must be both realistic and honest in determining our capabilities, ensuring not to pursue goals that lie beyond our limited reach, but never tiring of working to reach those that lie within it.

Monday

The opening verse of Parashat Chayei-Sara tells us that Sara died at the age of 127. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 58:3) tells an unusual story of Rabbi Akiva, who observed that this number is also the number of provinces that comprised the Persian kingdom under King Achashverosh during the time of the Purim story (Ester 1:1). Rabbi Akiva was delivering a lecture, the Midrash relates, and he noticed that his students were beginning to doze off. In an effort to arouse their attention, Rabbi Akiva remarked that Ester rose to power and ruled over 127 provinces because she descended from Sara, who lived for 127 years. Many writers and *darshanim* have attempted to identify the specific point of connection between Sara and Ester, and to explain why Rabbi Akiva hoped this observation could help keep his audience awake during his lecture.

Rav Dov Weinberger, in his *Shemen Ha-tov*, suggests that Rabbi Akiva sought to draw a comparison between time and place. We intuitively recognize the difference between geographic locations, and realize that no two places on earth are identical. Time, by contrast, is commonly viewed linearly, as a simple continuum on which different points are not inherently different from one another. In our minds, the current moment is not fundamentally different from the moment that will occur one hour from now, or the moment ten minutes from now. Whereas geographic spaces are all quite evidently different and distinct, different points in time seem to us as basically the same. But Rabbi Akiva sought to impress upon his students that a person’s life is no different than a large area of territory. Just as a kingdom consists of numerous different regions, provinces, cities, municipalities, streets and buildings, none of which are precisely identical to any others, likewise, our lives consist of many years, months, days and hours, each with a distinct opportunity to offer. At any given moment in our lives, we are able to accomplish something unique, which cannot be accomplished at any other time. Although today might seem not all that different from yesterday, and tomorrow is not likely to be much different from today, the truth is that every moment in our lives finds us in a unique set of circumstances, thus affording us a unique opportunity. We might follow the same general schedule every day, but no two days are ever precisely the same. Something in our condition is bound to change from one day to the next, and thus each day offers us a new challenge and new opportunity for growth and achievement.

This is how Rabbi Akiva sought to “awaken” his drowsy audience. If they lacked the energy and passion to concentrate intently and stay awake, this is perhaps due to their lack of appreciation for the unique opportunity presented by each and every study session. Rabbi Akiva thus reminded them, and us, that every moment in time is unique and distinct, just like every place on our planet, and we must therefore make every effort we can to make the most of each one.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Chayei-Sara of Avraham’s servant’s experiences at the well outside Aram Naharayim, where he asked God to arrange that the girl suited to marry Yitzchak would be the one who offers to draw water for both him and his camels after he asks for water. After the servant saw how Rivka drew water for all his camels in response to his request for some water, the Torah writes, he “took a gold nose ring…and two bracelets” (24:22).

A number of commentators noted that a verb seems to have been omitted from this verse. The Torah here tells of the servant “taking” the jewelry, but does not say that he gave it to Rivka. Clearly, he took the jewelry to give it to Rivka, and indeed, later, when the servant recounted the events to Rivka’s family, he said, “I placed the nose ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her hands” (24:47). Curiously, however, the verb “placed” does not appear in the original account.

Rashi does not comment on this oddity, and was apparently not troubled by the omission. Presumably, he felt that since the purpose of taking out the jewelry is obvious and self-evident, the Torah in the interest of brevity did not bother to mention the verb “give.”

However, the Ramban and the Radak explained this verse differently. They claimed that upon seeing Rivka draw water for his camels, the servant became hopeful that God answered his prayer and she was the intended match, as he had requested. He therefore prepared the jewelry, in anticipation of giving it to the girl. The servant did not give the jewelry to Rivka, however, until after he inquired about her family background, and she informed him that she was a granddaughter of Avraham’s brother, Nachor. Only at that point, when the servant realized that indeed, his prayer was answered, as Avraham had specifically instructed him to find a wife for Yitzchak from his family in Aram Naharayim (24:38), did he give the jewelry to Rivka.

On the basis of reading, the Ramban and Radak reconcile the sequence of events as presented in the Torah’s initial account with the servant’s narration of the events when speaking to Rivka’s family. The servant told the family that he gave Rivka the jewelry only after she identified herself as Nachor’s granddaughter (24:47), and not before, whereas the initial account speaks of the servant producing the jewelry even before Rivka identified herself. The explanation, according to these commentators, is that the servant merely prepared the jewelry before inquiring about Rivka’s family background, and then gave it to her afterward. This approach is in contrast to the view of Rashi, who, commenting on the servant’s description of the events to the family (24:47), writes that the servant gave an inaccurate report. He in truth gave Rivka the jewelry before inquiring about her family, but, realizing this would sound unusual, dishonestly said that he gave the jewelry only afterward.

Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha’kabbala*, offers a characteristically novel and creative theory to explain this verse. He seeks to demonstrate that the word “*kach*,” which generally means “take,” can also be used to mean “tie” or “bind.” Rav Mecklenberg draws our attention to a verse in Sefer Yeshayahu (61:1) in which the prophet describes his role as proclaiming, “*Pekach koach*” – that the Israelite captives shall be freed. The word “*koach*” (derived from the same root as the verb “*kach*”) here refers to the bonds tied around prisoners which would be eventually be untied. Accordingly, Rav Mecklenberg suggests, when the Torah says about Avraham’s servant, “*Va-yikach*” – which is generally translated as “he took” the jewelry – it could be understood to mean that he tied the jewelry onto Rivka.

Rav Mecklenberg points also to the Mishna in Masekhet Keilim (16:4) which discusses the susceptibility of leather bags for *tum’a* (ritual impurity). *Tum’a* cannot descend upon an item before its production is complete and it is ready for use, and in the case of a leather bag, the Mishna rules, the final stages of production include making the “*kichot*” – the straps used to close the bag. Once again, the root *k.ch.* is used in reference to tying.

Extending this theory further, Rav Mecklenberg proposes that this explains the use of the word “*lekach*” to mean effective teaching and instruction. When a teacher or lecturer succeeds in delivering his message, there is a certain bonding that occurs between the teacher and the students. By the same token, he writes, the famous verse in Sefer Mishlei (4:2) refers to Torah knowledge as “*lekach*” – “*Ki lekakh tov natati lakhem*” – because Torah study has the effect of binding a person to the Almighty. As Torah connects us with our Creator, it is referred to as “*lekach*,” which has the meaning of “bind” or “tie.”

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted a disagreement among the classic commentators as to whether Avraham’s servant altered the facts when telling Rivka’s family about his encounter with Rivka at the well outside her city. A cursory reading of the Torah’s account of this encounter in Parashat Chayei-Sara (24:22) indicates that the servant gave Rivka jewelry – essentially designating her as Yitzchak’s bride – even before asking who she was. Rashi (24:47) indeed writes that as soon as Rivka gave water to both the servant and his camels, after he requested water only for himself, he determined that she was the girl chosen by God to marry Yitzchak, as he had stipulated. However, in the servant’s report of his experiences to Rivka’s family, he imprecisely told of his giving Rivka jewelry only after learning that she belonged to Avraham’s extended family and was thus suitable as a wife for Yitzchak. The Ramban and the Radak (24:22), however, understand the Torah’s account differently. In their view, the servant did not give Rivka jewelry until after he inquired about her family and discovered that she was Avraham’s great-niece. According to this reading, then, there is no discrepancy at all between the Torah’s account and the servant’s report.

Interestingly, these different readings of the text may yield halakhic implications. The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (95b) points to the story of Avraham’s servant – who is commonly identified as Eliezer – as an example of forbidden *nichush* (use of omens). Eliezer randomly determined that the girl who would offer water to both him and his camels is the one chosen to marry Yitzchak, and the Gemara comments that this kind of omen falls under the Torah prohibition of *nichush*. *Tosefot*, working under the assumption that Eliezer – as is commonly assumed – was a righteous man who followed Avraham’s ideals and teachings, raise the question of how Eliezer violated this prohibition. According to one view cited by the Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (56b), the Torah’s prohibitions against superstition, sorcery and witchcraft apply even to gentiles. As such, Eliezer was forbidden from practicing *nichush*. How, then, according to this view, did Eliezer choose a bride for Rivka based on this kind of omen, which the Gemara says falls under the *nichush* prohibition?

*Tosefot* answer that those who apply the prohibition of *nichush* to gentiles must necessarily understand the story of Eliezer differently. They read the Torah’s account to mean – like the Ramban and Radak explain – that Eliezer gave Rivka the jewelry only after she told him of her family background. Eliezer did not, according to this view, make the selection of Rivka dependent exclusively on her offering water to his camels. Even after she drew water for his camels, he did not definitively determine that she was Yitzchak’s intended bride until after discovering that she was his relative. Therefore, as his decision was not based entirely on his omen, this did not qualify as *nichush*. The passage in Masekhet Chulin stating that Eliezer’s omen indeed qualifies as *nichush* disagrees with this view. It understands that Eliezer gave Rivka gifts immediately after she drew water for his camels, and it follows the view that the prohibition of *nichush* does not apply to gentiles, and thus it was permissible for Eliezer to make use of an omen that is forbidden for *Am Yisrael*.

According to *Tosefot*, then, these different readings of the text indirectly affect the question as to whether gentiles are bound by the Torah prohibition of *nichush*. If we follow Rashi’s reading, that Eliezer gave Rivka jewelry before inquiring about her identity, then we must conclude that the prohibition of *nichush* does not apply to non-Jews. According to the Ramban and the Radak’s reading, that Eliezer gave the gifts only after learning that Rivka belonged to Avraham’s extended family, this episode does not involve *nichush* at all, and thus reveals nothing about the parameters of the *nichush* prohibition.

A much different approach to this topic is taken by the Ra’avad, in his critique of the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 11:4). The Ra’avad there asserts that as Eliezer was a righteous figure, his use of an omen incontrovertibly proves that omens are permissible. When the Gemara points to Eliezer’s omen as a model of *nichush*, the Ra’avad boldly asserts, it means to say that one should not place his trust in such an omen. Although such omens are permissible, the Gemara advises against reaching decisions in such a manner. In the Ra’avad’s view, then, the Gemara there does not intend to point to Eliezer’s omen as an example of forbidden *nichush*.

Thursday

The Torah tells towards the end of Parashat Chayei-Sara of Avraham’s marriage to a woman named Ketura (25:1). The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 61:5), as Rashi cites, famously identifies Ketura as Hagar, Sara’s maidservant whom Avraham had previously married but was then forced to send away from the home. Now, towards the end of Avraham’s life, he brought Hagar back.

Rashi cites from the Midrash two explanations for why Hagar here is called by the name “Ketura.” The first is because, in Rashi’s words, “her deeds were pleasing like incense,” and the word “Ketura” is related to the word “*ketoret*” (“incense”). The second explanation Rashi cites is that the root *k.t.r.* means “knot,” and Hagar “knotted” herself in the sense that she did not engage in intimacy with any man during the interim years, out of her commitment to Avraham and her hope that he would one day bring her back.

It appears that these two readings of the name “Ketura” reflect two very different, though not contradictory, aspects of Hagar’s character. The powerful scent of the *ketoret* spread far and wide, as it emitted a strong, pleasing fragrance that wafts through the air. This characterization of Hagar, as somebody whose “deeds were pleasing like incense,” likely refers to her pleasant, amicable personality, her spreading warmth, kindness and joy through her “fragrant” words and conduct. The second characterization of Hagar, by contrast, describes her as having “knotted her opening,” which we may assume refers not only to sexual abstinence, but also to a “knotted” mindset and outlook. All throughout the interim years, *Chazal* seem to be telling us, Hagar remained committed to Avraham’s lifestyle and teachings, and she thus “knotted” herself in the sense of firmly and stubbornly maintaining her values and resisting opposing ideas and mores. She insistently “closed” herself, passionately adhering to Avraham’s value system and refusing to yield to any competing set of ideals. Thus, while on the one hand she spread warmth and pleasantness like incense, she was also “closed,” remaining steadfastly committed to Avraham’s values and forcefully rejecting opposing values.

If so, then these two descriptions of Hagar teach us that “closedness” and pleasantness do not need to be mutually exclusive. One can be “closed” in the sense of passionate adherence to a set of beliefs and values, and still be “fragrant,” creating an aura of pleasantness that spreads far and wide, and which is pleasing to everybody around him. It is wrong to assume that we cannot “knot” ourselves, firmly rejecting beliefs and practices which conflict with our value system, because we will then need to compromise our “scent,” the pleasant, joyful and respectful demeanor with which we are to relate to other people. Conversely, it is wrong to assume that we cannot deal pleasantly with those who follow opposing values and ideas, in light of our desire to “knot” ourselves and reject those values and ideas. *Chazal*’s depiction of Hagar instructs that we can firmly adhere to our ideals without diminishing one iota from the pleasant” fragrance” that ought to characterize all our conduct and dealings with other people.

Friday

The bulk of Parashat Chayei-Sara is devoted to the story of the search for a wife for Yitzchak, and the Torah introduces this story by informing us that Avraham had grown old: “*Ve-Avraham zakein ba ba-yamim*” (24:1).

*Keli Yakar*, commenting on this verse, notes that the Torah described Avraham in the precise same terms already earlier. In Parashat Vayera, amid the account of the angels’ visit to Avraham and their announcement that Sara would soon beget a child, the Torah interjects, “*Ve-Avraham ve-Sara zekeinim ba’im ba-yamim*” – that Avraham and Sara were aged at the time. The angels’ visit took place one year before Yitzchak’s birth, and Yitzchak was forty years old when he got married (25:20), such that the story of Avraham dispatching his servant to find Yitzchak a wife occurred some forty years after the angel’s visit to his tent. It seems puzzling, *Keli Yakar* writes, that the Torah would now describe Avraham’s advanced age with the exact same words it used to describe his advanced age forty years earlier.

*Keli Yakar* answers this question by suggesting that Avraham’s aging process was thwarted, or at least slowed, by the birth of Yitzchak. The more a person enjoys the company of people in his close inner circle, *Keli Yakar* writes, the more energy and vitality he has. Avraham and Sara aged before Yitzchak’s birth, but once Yitzchak was born, the presence of a child had the effect of keeping them youthful. However, after the death of Sara, of which the Torah tells in the beginning of Parashat Chayei-Sara, Avraham again aged at an accelerated pace. The loss of his closest companion resulted in diminished vitality, and so once again Avraham aged and grew old.

*Keli Yakar*’s comments perhaps remind us of just how much an impact we can have upon the people closest to us, and how much we are impacted by them. As people ambitiously strive to achieve in various fields and exert a positive influence upon their community or the world generally, they might forget about those closest to them, particularly, their family. This results not only in irresponsible neglect, but also in their losing what should be their greatest source of joy and fulfillment. *Keli Yakar* teaches us that the greatest impact upon our level of happiness and vitality comes from those closest to us, and they should always remain at the center of our focus and attention.

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