YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Chayei Sara**

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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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**Divination and Prayer –**

**The Story of Eliezer the Servant of Avraham**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. The Divination**

The incident involving Eliezer and his encounter with Rivka at the well was recorded in the Torah in its entirety twice in succession: It is written as it happened, and it is written again as it was reported by Eliezer to Betuel, Lavan, and their family at a meal in their home. Why was this lengthy repetition necessary? There are several possible answers to this question; we will discuss one of them.

It would appear that Scripture tells us the story of Eliezer and Rivka twice in order to highlight the changes between the two versions of the story. R. Yitzchak Abravanel took this approach, and I will take a similar one, with certain differences. Here are what appear to be the central details in the two versions of the story (all of the verses are from chapter 24):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **The incident as initially reported** | **The incident as Eliezer reported it to Rivka's family** |
| 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 to my country, and to my homeland, and take a wife for my son, for Yitzchak. (3-4)  He will send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. (7) | And my master made me swear, saying: You shall not take a wife for my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell. But you shall go to my father's house, and to my family, and take a wife for my son. (37-38)  The Lord, before whom I walk, will send His angel with you, and prosper your way; and you shall take a wife for my son of my family, and of my father's house. (40) |
| So let it come to pass, that the girl to whom I shall say: Let down your pitcher, I pray you, that I may drink; and she shall say: Drink, and I will give your camels drink also; let the same be she that You have appointed for Your servant, for Yitzchak; and thereby shall I know that You have shown kindness to my master. (14) | Behold, I stand by the fountain of water; and let it come to pass, that the maiden that comes forth to draw, to whom I shall say: Give me, I pray you, a little water from your pitcher to drink; and she shall say to me: Both drink you, and I will also draw for your camels; let the same be the woman whom the Lord has appointed for my master's son. (43-44) |
| And it came to pass, as the camels had done drinking, that the man took a golden ring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold; and said: Whose daughter are you? Tell me, I pray you. Is there room in your father's house for us to lodge in? And she said to him: I am the daughter of Betuel the son of Milka, whom she bore to Nachor. (22-24) | And I asked her, and said: Whose daughter are you? And she said: The daughter of Betuel, Nachor's son, whom Milka bore to him. And I put the ring upon her nose, and the bracelets upon her hands. (47) |
| And the man bowed his head, and prostrated himself before the Lord. And he said: Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Avraham, who has not forsaken His kindness and His truth toward my master; as for me, the Lord has led me in the way to the house of my master's brethren. (26-27) | And I bowed my head, and prostrated myself before the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Avraham, who had led me in the right way to take my master's brother's daughter for his son. (48) |

One fundamental difference dictates all the other differences between the two stories.

Avraham sent Eliezer to bring a wife for Yitzchak from Padan Aram. There were two benefits that he wanted to gain from this: The woman would not be a Canaanite, as Avraham explicitly stated, and she would also be from the country that he had left. He sent his servant to Padan Aram, to his country and his homeland, to find a woman from among the descendants of Shem and Ever. The people who lived in the region to which Eliezer was sent were all members of this great tribe, and it fell upon Eliezer to choose a good and appropriate woman and marry her off to Yitzchak. Avraham did not say anything about taking a woman from his close family and from his father's house.

Eliezer prayed for a woman whose test would be her giving him and his camels to drink, but he did not pray for a woman from Avraham's family. Indeed, when Rivka passed the test, he gave her a ring and bracelets as an initial act of betrothal, even before knowing her family.

Rivka surprised him when she told him that she was from Avraham's family. The surprised servant bowed down to God and thanked him. He understood God's hidden intention – that the woman should be not only from the seed of Shem and Ever, but also from Avraham's family, from the house of Terach his father.

Eliezer thanked God for His “truth” – His having brought him the girl whom he had sought, a kind and generous girl – and for His “kindness” – His having given him also what he had not sought, a girl from the house of Terach, Avraham's father.

The story that he tells the family is different with regard to one important detail. According to Eliezer's story, Avraham had sent him to his family and to the house of his father (Terach) to take a wife for Yitzchak from there. From this it follows that in his prayer, Eliezer expected a miracle; he seeks a girl who will give him to drink, and from that he will conclude that she is indeed from Avraham's family and the house of Terach. He does not relate at all to the reasonable possibility that the girl who will give him to drink will not be from Avraham's family or his father's house and that he will not be able to bring her back as a wife for Yitzchak. What is the basis for his confidence that the girl who will give him to drink will in fact be from Avraham's family and the house of his father?

It is possible that *Chazal* are slightly critical of Eliezer's confidence:

But Rav himself has said: An omen which is not after the form pronounced by Eliezer, Abraham's servant, or by Yonatan the son of Shaul, is not considered a divination! (*Chullin* 95b)

The halakhic authorities disagree about how to understand this statement, and especially about whether or not Eliezer violated the prohibition against divination (*Vayikra* 19:26) when he determined on his own that the girl who would give him to drink would be from Avraham's family. According to the Rambam, Eliezer in fact divined in a forbidden manner:

Similarly, a person who sets up omens for himself – e.g. if this and this happens, I will do this. If it will not happen, I will not do it, as Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, did, and the things of the like – all this is forbidden. Anyone who does one of these things because of such omens is [liable for] lashes. (*Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 11:4)

The Ra'avad refuses to accept the Rambam's position that Avraham's righteous servant could have committed such a sin, and argues as follows:

[R.] Avraham said: This is a great mistake, for surely this is absolutely permitted. Perhaps he was misled by the wording of the statement: "An omen which is not after the form pronounced by Eliezer or by Yonatan is not considered a divination." And he understood that this was said in reference to the prohibition. But this is not so. Rather, this is what he said: It is not fit to rely on. How could he attribute this transgression to righteous men like them? If they were here, they would punish him with whips of fire. (*Hasagat Ha-Ra'avad*, ad loc.)

According to the Ra'avad, Eliezer committed no offense.

Either way, Eliezer, according to his version of the story, did not give the girl the ring and bracelets until after he established that she indeed came from Avraham's family. He thanked God only for His truth, but not for His kindness – that He brought him what he had sought: a polite and generous girl from the house of Avraham's father. Why did Eliezer veer from what had actually happened when he told the story to the family of Betuel and Lavan?

In my humble opinion, at the heart of the difference between the two stories stands the issue of divination. The "true" story, as it is reported in the Torah, describes what we would call *siyata de-shemaya*, help from heaven. The girl appeared immediately after Eliezer finished his prayer, and she was also from Avraham's family, something that Eliezer did not even ask for.

Eliezer told Betuel's family a story about a divination that succeeded – that the fact that the girl gave him to drink was a sign that she came from Avraham's family, as indeed was the case. Eliezer, who was originally a foreigner from Damascus in the north, knew how people relied on divinations in Charan and its environs. Indeed, Lavan engaged in divination when Yaakov lived in his house:

And Lavan said to him, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, I have observed the signs, and the Lord has blessed me for your sake.” (*Bereishit* 30:27)

Eliezer wanted to convince the family that a supreme force had directed his meeting Rivka for the purpose of bringing her to Yitzchak. The success of the divination was a strong and persuasive argument in his favor:

Lavan and Betuel answered and said, “The thing proceeds from the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Behold, Rivka is before you, take her and go, and let her be your master's son's wife, as the Lord has spoken.” And it came to pass, that when Avraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself down to the earth to the Lord. (*Bereishit* 50-52)

When his scheme succeeded,[[1]](#footnote-1) Eliezer responded in the same manner that he responded after his first prayer – he bowed down to God.

This explanation resolves the disagreement between the Rambam and the Ra'avad. Rav in tractate *Chullin* was referring to the divination as Eliezer described it to Rivka's family, and such divination is, of course, forbidden. In practice, however, Eliezer, as a disciple of Avraham, did not employ divinations, but instead prayed to God.

**II. The Prayer**

According to the explanation that we have offered, the Torah made a point of telling us twice the story of Eliezer's meeting Rivka in order to teach us about the relationship between divination and prayer. A more familiar explanation is that of Rashi based on a *midrash*:

R. Acha said: The ordinary conversation [*sichatan*]of the patriarchs' servants is more pleasing to God than even the Torah of their children, for the chapter of Eliezer is repeated in the Torah, whereas many important principles of the Law are derived only from slight indications given in the text. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 24:42)

According to this approach, the dearness of the story led to its being recorded twice in the Torah (similar to the offerings of the princes at the time of the dedication of the *Mishkan*, which are repeated many times), and there is no need to seek the reason for the writing of each detail.

What is the special dearness of the ordinary conversations of the patriarchs' servants? The *Sefat Emet* on our *parasha* comments that the term "conversation" (*sicha*) should not be understood as mere talk, but rather in the sense of prayer, as we find in many verses in *Tehillim*:

A prayer of the afflicted, when he faints, and pours out his prayer [*sicho*] before the Lord. (*Tehillim* 102:1)

Attend to me, and hear me; I am distraught in my prayer [*be-sichi*], and will moan. (Ibid. 55:3)

Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray [*asicha*], and moan; and He has heard my voice. (Ibid. 55:17-18)

I pour out my prayer [*sichi*] before Him, I declare before Him my trouble. (Ibid. 142:3)

Perhaps, then, it would be more accurate to say that the prayer of the patriarchs' servants is more pleasing to God than even the Torah of their children.

There are two main pillars of man's relationship with God: the Torah and its commandments, through which man hears the voice of God and fulfills his directives, and corresponding to this, prayer, through which God hears the voice of man and fulfills his requests. The *midrash* before us speaks about the dearness of prayer.

What is the special dearness of Eliezer's prayer, which is recorded here twice? The prayer of Avraham's servant teaches us certain fundamental principles that pertain to our own prayers. Eliezer opens his prayer as follows:

And he said, “O Lord, the God of my master Avraham, send me, I pray You, good speed this day, and show kindness to my master Avraham.” (*Bereishit* 24:12)

It is possible that this is the basis of our prayer, which opens with the blessing of the patriarchs (*Avot*), emphasizing that God is the God of the patriarchs and the shield of Avraham.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Eliezer continues by laying out his request before God, and when it is fulfilled and Rivka gives his camels to drink and tells him that she comes from Avraham's family, Eliezer thanks God and bows down before Him, as we do at the end of our prayer in the blessing of thanksgiving (*Modim*).

We thus find in Eliezer's prayer two of the blessings found in our own prayer, *Avot* and *Modim*. As stated, Eliezer's prayer is characterized by the fact that he prostrates himself and bows down to God. This is what the Halakha teaches us:

Our Rabbis taught: These are the blessings in saying which one bows: the *Avot* blessing, beginning and end, and the *Modim* blessing, beginning and end. (*Berakhot* 34a)

The two blessings of Eliezer are also the blessings in which *Chazal* have instructed us to bow down.

The *Rishonim* introduced another halakhaconcerning these two blessings:

It is written in the *Semak* [*Sefer Mitzvot ha-Katan*]: If one cannot maintain proper intention in all of the eighteen blessings, he should maintain proper intention in the *Avot* and *Modim* blessings. (*Beit Yosef*, *Orach Chayim* 101).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The main requirement of proper intention, according to the *Semak*, is in these blessings.

Since we are dealing with *sicha* that is prayer, let us examine also the prayer of Yitzchak mentioned in our *parasha*:

And Yitzchak went out to meditate [*la-su'ach*] in the field toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, there were camels coming. And Rivka lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Yitzchak, she alighted from the camel. (*Bereishit* 24:63-64)

*Chazal* expounded:

Yitzchak instituted the afternoon prayer, as it is stated: "And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field toward evening," and "meditation" means only prayer, as it is stated: "A prayer of the afflicted when he faint and pours out his meditation (*sikho*) before the Lord" (*Tehillim* 102:1). (*Berakhot* 26b)

How did *Chazal* know that "meditating" in the field means praying? Perhaps, they deduced this from the obscure phrase, "And he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, there were camels coming." What does this verse, which has no continuation, come to teach us? Perhaps, just as the Torah bothered to tell us twice that Eliezer merited that immediately upon completion of his prayer Rivka came to meet him at the well, so too Yitzchak merited that as soon as he finished praying, Rivka appeared before him. Based on the prayer for a wife that Yitzchak offered toward evening, *Chazal* instituted the afternoon service (*Mincha*).

**III. The Meal**

Before we conclude this *shiur*, let us examine another aspect of Eliezer's story. Eliezer sits down in his hosts' house for a meal:

And there was set food before him to eat; but he said, “I will not eat until I have told my errand.” And he said, “Speak on.” (*Bereishit* 24:33)

Why did Eliezer insist on explaining his mission even before he ate? Above, we hinted at the possibility that the ring and the bracelets constituted an initial act of betrothal by way of money, an act that we perform to this very day with the ring that is given to the bride. The betrothal could not be complete without the consent of the girl's parents. The meal was perhaps a marriage meal, even though the groom was absent and only his agent was there. The connection between a meal and marriage is stated explicitly in the Torah:

… and they call you, and you eat of their sacrifice; and you take of their daughters to your sons…. (*Shemot* 34:15-16)

Similarly, we find in *Chazal* that a meal is liable to lead to a marriage agreement, when the hearts of the parties are filled with wine, and even to forbidden marriages with non-Jewish women:

They made a decree against their bread… and oil on account of their wine; against their wine on account of their daughters; against their daughters on account of another matter [idolatry]…. (*Avoda Zara* 36b)

Eliezer did not want to eat, nor commit himself to marriage, until he made sure that the bride's family agreed that she would leave Padan Aram and go to the land of Canaan, to Yitzchak. In the next generation, Lavan would do everything in his power to keep his son-in-law of the family of Avraham in his house together with his daughters and keep himself as the head of the family. If Eliezer had first eaten of the wedding feast before speaking with Rivka's family, after the goal of marriage was understood when Rivka came home with her new jewelry, he would have been asked to bring Yitzchak to the home of his bride's parents. He agreed to eat only after he clarified the main condition for the marriage – the agreement that Rivka would go with him to the land of Canaan.

It is possible that even his consent to eat at Lavan's table after the family had already agreed to his condition was a mistake. The moment he agreed to tarry there, to eat and to drink and to lodge there, Lavan and Rivka's mother asked that Rivka stay with her family for a few days or ten before leaving. But Eliezer succeeded in removing her with her agreement from her family's house, he returned to the land of Canaan to his meeting with Yitzchak, and thus he fulfilled his mission.

1. Lavan was convinced that the matter proceeded from God, and it therefore fell upon him to allow his sister to go with Eliezer. Years later, Lavan would allow his daughters to go off to the land of Canaan together with Yaakov, and then too because of God's explicit revelation to him in a night dream (*Bereishit* 30:24). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also Yaakov's prayer, *Bereishit* 32:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The *Beit Yosef* (ad loc.) questions the *Semak's* source, and the *Bach* proposes a solution. But according to our approach, the *Semak's* source is Eliezer's prayer. Either way, it should be noted that the *Mishna Berura* brings this position as the halakha. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)