YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**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.**

**PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA**

**Matchmaking, Prayers, and Acts of Kindness**

**I. Matchmaking and Prayers**

 The story of the arrangement of Yitzchak's marriage to Rivka stands at the center of our *parasha.* Arranging a marriage was never an easy task, understandably, and the task of finding a wife for Yitzchak – assigned to Avraham's servant, Eliezer – required investment and effort.

 Avraham Avinu makes two requests regarding the arrangement of his son's marriage. First, he asks that Yitzchak's wife be chosen from among the women of his birthplace:

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

 In addition, Avraham specifies, in response to Eliezer's concerns, that the woman should come to the land of Canaan and that Yitzchak must not leave the land for her, God forbid:

And Avraham said to him: Beware that you bring not my son there. The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me, and who swore to me, saying: To 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 is not willing to follow you, then you shall be clear from this oath; only you shall not bring my son back there. (*Bereishit* 24:6-8)

 Verses 6 and 8 describe Avraham's condition and could easily be read without verse 7, but Avraham includes a prayer (beginning with the words, "the Lord, God of heaven") because he is aware of the complexity of his request.

 Prayer is a central motif in the story of finding a match for Yitzchak, from Avraham’s prayer in verse 7 to Yitzchak’s *Mincha* prayer at the end of the chapter: "And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field" (*Bereishit* 24:65; *Berakhot* 26b). The main prayer is found in the middle – the prayer of Eliezer, servant of Avraham.

 We can and should learn from this motif about the importance of prayer in searching for a partner for marriage, for we know that "it is from God that a specific woman is [destined to be married] to a specific man]" (*Moed Katan* 18b).

 Aside from this important lesson, we will try in this *shiur* to delve into Eliezer’s prayer as interpreted by the *Or Ha-Chaim.*

**II. The Prayer of the Servant and the Prayer of his Master**

Let us begin with a brief examination of Eliezer's prayer:

And he said: O Lord, the God of my master Avraham, grant me success this day, and show kindness to my master Avraham. Behold, I stand by the fountain of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water. So let it come to pass, that the young woman to whom I shall say: Let down your pitcher that I may drink; and she shall say: Drink, and I will give your camels drink also; let it be she that You have appointed for Your servant, for Yitzchak; and thereby shall I know that You have shown kindness to my master. (*Bereishit* 24:12-14)

 This prayer can be divided into two parts:

1. A request that God answer Avraham's prayer and request.

2. Eliezer's famous condition and the "test" he conducts upon the young woman to determine whether it is she who is destined for Yitzchak.

 On the level of the plain sense of the text, Eliezer’s test raises many questions. Why does he need a test, when Avraham set no qualifications for Yitzchak’s wife other than her familial affiliation? Why does Eliezer choose this particular test? What would have happened if a young woman who was not from Avraham's family had passed the test?[[1]](#footnote-1) And many other such questions can be asked as well.

 Compared to that second part of the prayer, the first part seems clear and simple – Eliezer asks for success in his mission. What could be more natural than that?

 The *Or Ha-Chaim*, however,also raises a question about the first part of Eliezer's prayer, for it seems to be superfluous: Avraham himself had already prayed and asked God to assist Eliezer in his mission, so why does Eliezer also pray? Does the prayer of his master, Avraham, not suffice? The *Or Ha-Chaim* answers:

Eliezer was certain that his master's prayer, that God should send His angel [ahead of Eliezer to facilitate his mission], would be accepted, and he added a prayer that *he* should be found worthy to be the instrument through which [Avraham’s prayer would be answered]. For it happens on occasion that fulfillment of a prayer is held back due to the unworthiness of the petitioner's messenger. Therefore, he prayed to the God of his master... (*Or Ha-Chaim* 24:12)

 Eliezer did not suspect for a moment that Avraham's prayer would not be accepted. It was only his own abilities that he doubted.

 In our *parasha*, Eliezer is not called by name, but is always described as "the servant of Avraham." A servant serves as a middleman, who mediates between the master and his desires. He is responsible to carry out the will of his master. The same is true here; Avraham prays that a wife should be found for his son, and Eliezer is sure this will be the case, but he is afraid that *he* will not merit to fulfill his master's instructions. That is why he emphasizes in his prayer: "Grant **me** success this day," such that the marriage will indeed be arranged through him.

 The Alshikh sees the servant's desire to execute the mission himself as the reason for the second part of the prayer as well:

I say that there are two reasons that brought him to do this… because he was afraid and anxious lest the matter be executed but not through him, for her father and mother might say to him: Here is Rivka for your master's son to wife, but she will go not with you but with many great and distinguished free men, as it would be a disgrace for us to send our daughter in the hands of a servant, purchased with money. (Alshikh, *Bereishit* 24:12)

 Eliezer was afraid that Rivka's family would refuse to give her to Yitzchak through him, and therefore he came up with a Divine process that would direct Rivka to him.

 If we pay close attention to the verses describing the consent given by Rivka's family to her going with Eliezer, we see that what tipped the scales was indeed the Divine sign:

Then Lavan and Betuel answered and said: The thing proceeds from the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good. (*Bereishit* 24:50)

 However, this entire approach of the *Or Ha-Chaim* and the *Alshikh* requires explanation: Why was it so important to Eliezer that the mission be carried out by him? "The conversation of the servants of the patriarchs is more pleasing than the Torah discourse of their descendants" (*Bereishit Rabba* 60, 8); therefore, we will closely examine Eliezer’s words to discover what we can learn from them about his character and what we can learn from his character for our own lives.

**III. Eliezer, Servant of Avraham**

 The fact that Eliezer "repeats" Avraham's prayer can teach us about the deep connection between a slave and his master:

Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, was an elder and a member of the scholars' council, as it is stated: "And Avraham said to his servant, the elder of the house, who ruled over all he had" (*Bereishit* 24:2). Rabbi Elazar said: He ruled over [=knew] the Torah of his master. "Eliezer of Damascus [***d****a****m****e****s****e****k*]**" (*Bereishit* 15:2) – Rabbi Elazar said: He was so called because he drew [***d****oleh*] and gave drink [***m****a****shk****eh*] to others of his master's teachings. (*Yoma* 28b)

 In effect, the Gemara sees Eliezer as Avraham's student; he rules over his master's Torah and also draws from it to pass on to others. In this way, Eliezer disseminates his master's teachings throughout the world. An ordinary servant is charged with caring for his master's material needs, such as food, sleep, and the like; in the case of Avraham, the same thing takes place in a spiritual manner. Avraham's goal and vision is to spread God's Torah, and this is done, in part, by way of his servant, who has mastery over everything he has.

 Finding a wife for Yitzchak is not only a mundane, material mission, but primarily a spiritual task. A woman must be found who is connected to Avraham's family, who will agree to do something very similar to what Avraham did at the beginning of his journey: to leave her father's house and her native land and go – with nothing but God's command – to a husband she does not know.

 In light of this perspective on the arrangement of Yitzchak's marriage, we can better understand the two parts of Eliezer's prayer. In the first part, he indeed repeats Avraham's prayer, because that is his essence as a servant: bringing down the lofty ideas represented by Avraham into practical life. In the second part, since arranging a marriage is not a mundane, physical matter, but a spiritual matter, Eliezer reasons that the marriage should be arranged by God, not by him.

 Eliezer believes in his important mission and does not see it as a burden. He could easily have said "I did not find what you wanted," and brought back to the land of Canaan a woman who was not from the house of Avraham. Instead, the servant tries to perform his actions with the greatest precision, because he understands that he is part of a much larger process. It is not just another arranged marriage, but a spiritual mission to establish the yoke of the Torah. Eliezer accepts the task and even prays to God for His help with it.

 We are all God's servants, and we can learn from Eliezer's prayer how much we should desire that God's name will be sanctified in the world specifically through us.

**IV. The Test Regarding Rivka**

 The *Or Ha-Chaim* also addresses the second part of the prayer and the way Eliezer tested Rivka:

The reason Eliezer had to proceed in this order was that he feared that Avraham's family might deceive him when they understand that he was commanded to take a daughter from them, and give him one of their maidservants, while claiming that she was their family. He therefore acted wisely and proceeded in this order with a clear test of her willingness to do more than he asked of her. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 24:12)

 According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, the test was a means of identifying Rivka. Avraham's dominating attribute is lovingkindness. Eliezer mentions kindness in both parts of his prayer: "And show kindness to my master Avraham," on the one hand, and the acts of kindness expected from Avraham’s future daughter-in-law, on the other.

 It is not just a general attribute of kindness that characterizes Avraham. This attribute is woven throughout his life; he shows kindness toward Lot at the time of their quarrel, toward the people of Sedom and Amora, toward the five kings who were routed in battle, toward the three guests in the middle of the desert, and others.

 The foundation of the attribute of kindness is giving something beyond what is expected. Eliezer understands that this quality must be found in Yitzchak's bride. First, because it is a quality that Avraham imbibed in his house, and therefore it helps identify the young woman as a member of his family. In addition, it can be assumed that such a bride will know how to continue the same tradition of kindness, righteousness, and justice that Avraham started.

**V. The Bond of Kindness Between Rivka and Yitzchak**

 Many are puzzled about the Torah portion that is read on the second day of Rosh Hashana, the holy day of judgment. There is no more suitable reading for that day than the story of the binding of Yitzchak, but why do we have to include the account of the children of Milka, wife of Nachor. What is our connection to her?

 In *Parashat Vayera*, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that the main point of that section is the birth of Rivka, and he adds that it is not by chance that Rivka's birth immediately follows the story of the *Akeida*:

"And it came to pass after these things, that it was told to Avraham." The reason for this story, as well as for the words, "after these things," for there is no connection between the birth of those mentioned here and what the Torah spoke about previously, is to tell us about the birth of Rivka, Yitzchak's wife. As for the reason that Rivka was born only now, and not earlier, we have already explained that Yitzchak originated in the female emanations, i.e., the left side, and he only acquired a soul from the male emanations, i.e., the right side, after the *Akeida*. "After these things, it was told to Avraham… and Betuel begot Rivka." This is the main part of the story. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 22:20)

 The *Or Ha-Chaim's* words are quite deep and I do not fully understand them. Nevertheless, we can try, to the best of our abilities, to understand a tiny bit of them. The idea that Yitzchak originated in the female emanations, and that he acquired a soul from the male emanations only at the *Akeida*, appears in the *Or Ha-Chaim*’s commentsthroughout the story of the *Akeida*:

"And lo, Sara your wife shall have a son." This means: from the left side of the emanations, the female, weaker side. The word "lo" indicates that at first he will be of this nature. And he says: "I will return," i.e., a second time with the nature of Avraham, which is the world of the male. This was at the *Akeida*, as it is written: "And the angel of the Lord called to him out of heaven" (*Bereishit* 22:11). These are two acts of remembrance: one, that Yitzchak be in the world, and a second, that he have a soul that would bear children for him. (*Or Ha-Chaim* *Bereishit* 18:10)

 This is also how the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains Sara's death immediately after the *Akeida* (see *Or Ha-Chaim Bereishit* 21:1), and he also draws a connection between "the female side" and Sara's laughter:

And according to what I wrote, that God was displeased about Sara's laughter and upheld the decree that Sara would only give birth to a son from the female side, as it is stated: "But Sara your wife shall bear you a son" (*Bereishit* 17:19). (*Or Ha-Chaim Bereishit* 21:1)

 Elsewhere, *the Or Ha-Chaim* connects the "female side" in Yitzchak to Avraham’s actions:

It is also possible to say that God was displeased that Avraham said “if only Yishmael...” – that he chose Yishmael. It is possible that this was the reason He gave him Yitzchak from the female side of the emanations. This is what is stated: "Sara shall bear you a son." He was very distressed because of this when he bound him on the altar, for [it was] because of the *Akeida* [that] he was given a soul that would bear children, and at that time Rivka, his partner, was born for him. (*Or Ha-Chaim Bereishit* 17:19)

 Without delving into the concept of "the female side," we see that the *Or Ha-Chaim* (based on the words of the Ari) implies that Yitzchak became able to procreate only at the time of the *Akeida*.

 I wish to preface that I write the following with great reservation, because I am not an expert on these concepts and their meaning – but "it is Torah, and we must study."[[2]](#footnote-2) Therefore, I will try to propose an explanation of the *Or Ha-Chaim*’s approach*.*

 It is possible that there is a connection here between the concepts of physical and spiritual procreation. Yitzchak "sacrificed" himself before God. Avraham was commanded, but Yitzchak acquiesced of his own free will (*Bereishit Rabba* 56, 4; and elsewhere). If so, this is an enormous example of the attribute of kindness in Yitzchak.

 Apart from the kindness that found expression in Yitzchak's actions, it seems that regarding Avraham as well, there was a degree of *tikkun* (repair) involved. What is common to the actions of both Avraham and Sara, that led to Yitzchak's birth in this manner, is the ignoring or denial of God's ability to give seed. It may be possible to explain that with these thoughts, Avraham and Sara minimized God's capacity for kindness, and thought He would not in fact reward them with all the kindness He had promised. Therefore, Yitzchak's capacity to procreate was stopped – but with the *Akeida*, Avraham repaired this sin.

 Avraham took his only child, that God had promised him, his chance of seed and continuity, and "sacrificed" him on the altar while ignoring the promise "for in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you." This demonstrated enormous confidence in God that He would keep His promise and kindness – repentance commensurate with the sin of a lack of trust in His words prior to the birth of Yitzchak.

 Yitzchak's act of kindness and Avraham's full recognition of God's kindness pave the way for the continuity of that attribute of kindness. Therefore, Rivka appears immediately afterwards. The bond between Rivka and Yitzchak was created by way of kindness, the kindness of continuity and life, by way of giving water to the thirsty in the middle of the desert.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The Gemara (*Ta'anit* 4a) asks a similar question: What would have happened if a woman who was blind or crippled had appeared? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Editor’s note: This phrase is based on an account in *Berakhot* 62a, and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)