

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH

תשפ"א

We have a very interesting parsha. The parsha is separated into three parts:

- 1) The death of Soroh and her burial
- 2) The shidduch between Yitzchok and Rivka
- 3) Avrohom marries Keturoh.

We learn an important halacha from the significant effort Avrohom Ovinu made to acquire a special burial place for Soroh Imeinu. We learn that a Jew is buried separately from a non-Jew. Until last week, this was a universal custom among all Jews – secular and religious alike. Unfortunately, the Israeli government made a decision allowing fallen non-Jewish soldiers of the IDF to be buried alongside Jewish soldiers. This is something that even the most assimilated Jew understood. It just cannot be done. Avrohom turned down the offer of the Bnei Ches to bury his wife in one of their cemeteries.

There is a mitzvah of kovod hameis and an issur of nivul hames. The way we deal with a deceased Jewish body is different than other people. There is a deep reason for this.

Hashem created two parallel worlds – a physical world and a spiritual world. For the most part, these worlds do not intersect. Only the human being bridges both worlds.

We make a brocho under the chuppah which says Hashem achieved something incredible with the creation of Odom. He enabled a human being to engage in a biological process which can reproduce another tzelem Elokim. This combination of body and soul gives the human being the power to elevate his body to higher and higher levels of kedushoh.

Because of the human body's capacity to become kodosh, there is a requirement for tznius – not to display one's body as if it is only a physical being with no spiritual component. Wearing clothing signifies that the human body is capable of rising above a purely animal existence and become kodosh. Every item that is kodosh must be covered. The Sefer Torah is a beautiful work of skill and creativity. But it is kodosh and therefore it is kept hidden in an Aron Kodesh. If the body would be exposed, one might be confused into thinking that the main value of the body is not kedushoh but for beauty. So we make sure to keep the body covered. This is what tznius is all about.

One of the major points of conflict Judaism had with Greek culture was the approach to the human body. To the Greeks, the human body was primarily an object of beauty. This value of beauty was stressed by making statues of the human form, and performing sports without clothes. There is a great difference between the way we as Jews regard our bodies and the way the non-Jews regard their bodies. We regard it as a vehicle for the neshomo and becoming kodosh. One exposes beauty. One covers kedushoh. The aron kodesh in the beis hamikdash was beautiful. But, it was covered. Exposing it would distract the observer from its essence which is kedushoh.

This is why Jews must be buried separately and cannot share a cemetery with a non-Jewish body. A human being whose life is dedicated to imbuing his body with kedushoh, requires that after the neshomo leaves it, we respect the kedushoh that it has. So it is buried. We don't leave it exposed – that would be nivul hames.

We then come to the story of Yitzchok's shidduch.

Avrohom Ovinu had a loyal servant – Eliezer. But for the entire story, his name is never mentioned! He was no ordinary slave. His name was DaMeSeK Eliezer – Doleh u'MaShKeh – he was a talmid muvhak who mastered all of Avrohom's Torah and taught it to others. He was completely dedicated to his master and followed everything he did.

But when Avrohom told Eliezer to go to his family in Choron to get a wife for Yitzchok, Eliezer posed a challenge – 'ulai' – perhaps the woman will not agree to come along? Chazal say that, secretly, Eliezer was hoping the woman would not agree to come, so that he can then offer his own

daughter for Yitzchok to marry. And why not? Wasn't he worthy? After all, Eliezer is the leading talmid of Avrohom Ovinu. It makes perfect sense for Avrohom to pick his daughter for a daughter-in-law!

But Avrohom refused. He explains that Eliezer is an eved. He is arur and Avrohom is boruch. A boruch cannot intermarry with an arur.

But then, Eliezer is sent off to the house of Besuel to make him Avrohom's mechutan. Does this make sense? Is Besuel any better? After all, Rivka doesn't have the best family situation. Her brother Lovon is a master swindler. When Lovon comes to greet Eliezer he declares that he can enter now because the house has been cleaned of all the avodo zoro that they normally keep around. This isn't exactly the best environment for a prospective daughter-in-law. So why does Avrohom reject Eliezer because he is arur? Very strange priorities.

What was it that Avrohom Ovinu saw in Eliezer which disqualified him?

Eliezer, who is anonymous in the parsha, is still given many titles. He is first referred to as one who is in control of his entire physical body. But from then on he is referred to repeatedly as 'The Slave'. He is not his own person. He davens to Hashem by addressing Him as the Elokim of his master Avrohom – not his own personal G-d.

He davened to send a girl who has sterling middos and who is willing to draw water for his group of servants and for his animals.

Rivka immediately comes out and indeed offers to draw all their water! We have to keep in mind that camels are taken on trips through the desert precisely because they store a lot of water for long distances. A camel can hold something between 60 and 100+ gallons! Here we have an entire stable of thirsty camels and Rivka is willing to fill up all of them – to the end! This was a water well – not a sink with a faucet that you can just turn and water comes out. She had to draw each pitcher one by one. We are talking hundreds of gallons. This isn't ordinary chesed. It is unbelievable chesed – with sensitivity to animals as well.

At this point, when Eliezer realizes that this is the woman suitable for Yitzchok, Eliezer suddenly transforms from 'The Slave' to 'The Man'. But he is still anonymous and he is still referring to Hashem and the G-d of his master Avrohom. He gave Rivka the jewelry and she went to tell her family. Lovon came out to greet him and they invited him in to eat, and suddenly he turns back into 'The Slave'. Very strange sequence of events.

When they arrive back in Eretz Canaan, we read something important about Rivka Imeinu. As she sees Yitzchok in the distance going out to daven Mincha, she quickly gets off the camel and asks Eliezer who he is. 'The Slave' says, "this man is my master". In response, Rivka covers her face. Here we see Rivka's middoh of tzniyus. These are the two middos we see in Rivka Imeinu – chesed and tzniyus.

Yitzchok then brings Rivka to her mother Soroh's tent. While Soroh was alive, there was always a candle lit, there was blessing in the bread, and a cloud over the tent. Remember this cloud? We read about it when Avrohom was looking for the correct mountain to bring Yitzchok. Hashem didn't tell Avrohom which mountain it was. But when Avrohom came up from Chevron, he saw a cloud over one of the mountains.

Chazal tell us that Avrohom asked Yitzchok, Eliezer and Yishmoel what they see in the distance. Yitzchok answered that he saw a cloud. But Eliezer and Yishmoel said that they didn't see anything but hills. Avrohom realized that the cloud was over the mokom haShechinoh, and told the two who didn't see it to remain there with the donkey. Chazal explain that just as the donkey doesn't see the Shechinoh, so too these didn't see it.

This is the power of a Jewish neshomo. It is sensitive to kedushoh and it can elevate the physical senses of the body to the point where one's eyes can see the mokom haShechinoh. Avrohom and Yitzchok saw a cloud on the hill and that meant that there is kedushoh there. Yishmoel and Eliezer were as sensitive to kedushoh as a totally physical animal. This is why Avrohom told

Eliezer and Yishmoel to stay behind. They only saw hills. So they have no concept of what will be going on in the akeidoh.

As long as Soroh Imeinu was alive, the cloud was over her tent – the Shechinoh dwelled there. So Yitzchok brought Rivka to this tent and the Shechinoh reappeared. Rivka's family background didn't matter. Her brother was a famous thief; there were idols all over the house – all irrelevant. It didn't matter that Eliezer was Avrohom's greatest disciple. He couldn't perceive the Shechinoh. He didn't have that sensitivity to kedushoh. So he is out of the running.

At the end of the parsha, Avrohom marries again and takes Keturoh as a wife. Rashi tells us that this woman was really Hogor. Why is her name Keturoh? Because her actions were as pleasing as Ketores. Apparently Hogor is on a very high level. Chazal tell us that Yitzchok made the shidduch and brought back Hogor to be Avrohom's wife. Apparently the only woman Yitzchok considered a suitable replacement for Soroh Imeinu was Hogor.

Together, they had another six children. In total, Avrohom had seven children with Hogor and only one with Soroh. The only one who was chosen to continue the legacy of Avrohom is Yitzchok. So the question arises – what went wrong? Why couldn't Hogor give her children the necessary chinuch to be able to continue the mesorah of Avrohom Ovinu along with Yitzchok? Why do we see this stark contrast between Soroh's child and Hogor's children?

Granted, following Avrohom's unique path of going against the entire world isn't easy. But why couldn't she adopt his unique path? What was holding her back?

The Chumash identifies Hogor – even after she had been under Avrohom's influence for many years – as 'Hogor the Mitzris' – the Egyptian woman. When Hogor and Yishmoel are thrown out of Avrohom's house and they are alone in the midbor, Hogor goes back to Egypt to find a wife for Yishmoel. Rashi explains that Hogor is going back to her roots.

This is the exact opposite of the attitude of Rus when Naomi tries to discourage Rus and Orpah from following her back to Eretz Yisroel. Rus declared: "Your people are my people, your G-d is my G-d." She severed all ties with her past. She is starting her life afresh. "I will go wherever you go, where you die, I will die and I will be buried with you" – kevuras Yisroel – the ultimate statement of Jewish identity is right here in the megilloh!

As much as Hogor was the maidservant of Avrohom and Soroh, and a great tzadekes in her own right, she never stopped being Hogor Hamitzris – the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh. It remained part of her core identity throughout. This is what held her back from bringing up her children in the path of Avrohom. Hashem told Avrohom 'Lech Lechoh' – leave Ur Kasdim and your family behind. Not only geographically, but mentally. Avrohom had to start his own family and a new nation that has completely different goals and values than the rest of the world. Hogor couldn't do that. She couldn't make that clean break with her past identity and start completely anew.

What about Rivka Imeinu? Where did she get this capacity?

The Ramban at the beginning of Iyov tells us who Iyov was and what kind of society produced him. He says that Iyov's society basically descended from the family of Avrohom. Avrohom had an incredible impact on the ancient world. He made thousands of baalei teshuvoh. He stood for one idea which made him separate and distinct. There is a higher Being who is above this world, yet involved in this world. The ancient world at the time believed in very limited deities – each one in charge of a specific nation or force of nature. They are all tied to something physical. There was no single transcendent Being which is purely spiritual yet created and controls the entire physical universe. Such a concept didn't exist and Avrohom was the first to publicize the notion that there is something much higher than the physical world and the forces of nature.

Some people can't relate anything beyond the physical, material world. They can talk and talk about spiritual ideas but they are unwilling to move themselves into a place where there is something higher, something beyond the immediate here-and-now. They want to go shopping.

What is a slave? It is someone whose identity is completely wrapped up in his master's identity. He is not independent – he is not capable of transcending his own self-interest. The minute Eliezer realizes that Rivka is the proper match for Yitzchok and he gives up on his own scheme to get

Yitzchok for his own daughter, Eliezer becomes an Ish. He can see beyond his own self-interest and do something genuinely for someone else. But it is only temporary. Soon after, Eliezer is back to being 'The Slave' again.

This is what Avrohom Ovinu dedicated his life to promoting. The idea that you can transcend the physical world and imbue your physical body with kedushoh and have the Shechinoh dwell over your tent. He reached many people, but Eliezer remained arur. Avrohom knew that his family was confused – they were swindlers and idol worshippers, etc. But he knew that they were familiar with his ideas. Some of them had the capacity to raise themselves above the physical and connect to spirituality. This is what produced Iyov and his society down the line and this is what produced Rivka Imeinu.

Eliezer was testing Rivka for her middoh of chesed. Not just the kind of basic chesed where you could expect something in return. It was chesed that went above and beyond anything practical and typical. She gave all his camels to drink till the end! Total selflessness, and tzniyus and kedushoh. These things show that you understand that there is something higher than the physical world. These were the core values – what it means to be a Jew – that Avrohom imprinted in his family before he left for Eretz Cana'an.

From this parsha we see that when looking into a shidduch, you try to find these three elements. Chesed, tzniyus and kedushoh. The kedushoh that left when Soroh died came back when Rivka came to the tent.

Rivka's family asked her if she wants to go with Eliezer. She jumped at the chance and she knows she is never going back to Choron. She makes a clean break with her family to join Yitzchok in Eretz Cana'an. Hogor is different – she maintained her connection to her roots. She goes back to Egypt to get a wife for her son. She can't produce a Yitzchok or a Yaakov the way Soroh and Rivka did. She can't follow the call of 'Lech lecha' like Avrohom did – to completely sever her family ties.

We find the same renouncing of family ties from Rochel and Leah at the end of Parshas Vayeitzei. Yaakov tells them of his plans to go back to his father after 20 years of living with Lovon. His wives are completely behind him. They tell that they feel no connection to their father's house. They don't belong there! Even Lovon understands that we are estranged from him and he treats us like strangers.

Parshas Chayei Soroh is all about realizing that there is something beyond the physical. That a Jew's neshomo has the power to connect to Hashem and elevate the physical body. This is why we bury our dead separately. The body becomes kodosh and must be given a special kovod. Rus tells Naomi that she is becoming a Jew and that means she must be buried with other Jews. Her body is now a different kind of body and it doesn't belong in a non-Jewish cemetery.

But Eliezer can't make this direct connection. He is Avrohom's servant and he can only connect to Hashem through his master, Avrohom. He can't bring the kedushoh into the world independently and perceive the Shechinoh with his physical senses.

We are different – we have a whole different way of life – complete with different ideals and goals. Where do our ideals come from? They have to come from Torah. And it isn't easy to keep our values and goals undiluted if we grew up in the crazy confusion of the corrupt western world.

What does it mean to be a ben Torah? It is to define our goals and ideals, our middos, our sensitivity to kedushoh and our perception of who we are. It has to be shaped by the Torah. I am an eved Hashem whose whole goal is to have my body uplifted by my neshomo which is the center of my identity.

Twice a year, we read about the asarah harugei malchus who were martyred by the Romans. Once on Tisha B'Av and once in the avodah of Yom Kippur. The towering figure of these 10 great tzaddikim was Rabbi Akiva. He was moser nefesh to teach Torah in public and was brutally murdered while screaming Shma Yisroel. One could praise Rabbi Akiva for many great accomplishments in Torah and mesiras nefesh. So it is quite interesting that when the bas kol came out as he died, it paid him the ultimate compliment: "Fortunate are you Rabbi Akiva – your body has been purified in all forms of taharoh." This was the highest achievement in Rabbi Akiva's life. Among all the things he accomplished, the greatest was using his neshomo to uplift his body to incredible levels of kedushoh and taharoh.

This is why there is a Jewish cemetery – the neshomo within every Jew demands that we can't just be limited to a purely physical existence.