

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH

תשפ"ה

This week, we read Parshas Chayei Soroh, which has three sections: the burial of Soroh Imeinu, the shidduch of Yitzchok, and finally, the story of Avrohom's marriage to Keturoh, who is Hogor.

There is an interesting universal Jewish practice that Jews always had in history – their own exclusive cemetery. It is a deeply entrenched practice in the minds of all Jews, and it comes from this parsha. What is the idea behind this practice?

Jewish burial comes from the idea that a Jewish body is holy. It is the means through which we do mitzvos. We do mitzvos with our hands and feet – with our whole body. We wear tzitzis covering our entire torso. These mitzvos sanctify and elevate the physical body and make it holy. When a Jew dies, it is forbidden to derive benefit from his corpse. The kedushoh of the body requires that the cemetery of a Jew be distinct from non-Jews. The section of a Jewish cemetery where Jews who were shomer mitzvos (and sanctified their body by doing mitzvos) are buried must be distinct from Jews who did not.

This is what Avrohom Ovinu told the Bnei Ches – he turned down their offer to bury Soroh in their cemetery and insisted in buying a separate burial spot for Soroh. This is why Rashi in Gittin insists on explaining that when the Mishna says we bury non-Jews as well as Jews for the sake of maintaining peaceful relations with non-Jews, it doesn't mean we bury them together in the same cemetery.

Then we get to the shidduch for Yitzchok. We learn a lot of things about human nature from this story.

Avrohom Ovinu had a chief servant, who he sends to find a wife for Yitzchok. He is not given a name in the Chumash except when he goes to war against the four kings to save Lot. Besides for this, he is simply "the slave". The posuk describes Eliezer as *אשר לו*. Chazal interpret this to mean he was completely in control over his physical nature. He followed all of Avrohom's practices. He is called *דמשק אליעזר* which Chazal say means he mastered all of Avrohom's teachings and even taught them to others. He is a great human being.

But Chazal tell us a very powerful backstory to this parsha. Eliezer had a daughter of his own, and he wanted to propose his daughter to marry Yitzchok. Avrohom turned him down. Why? Because Avrohom is 'boruch', and Eliezer is from Canaan, who is 'arur', and there cannot be a successful shidduch between 'boruch' and 'arur'. He makes Eliezer take an oath that he won't take a woman from the Canaanites. She must come from Avrohom's family in Choron. You would think Avrohom is telling Eliezer that he isn't on the proper level to have his son marry into his family, and Avrohom is looking for higher quality people. But look at Rivka's family! Besuel and Lovon aren't exactly high-quality people! Eliezer comes to Choron, and Lovon tells him he can come in to the house because he cleared out the avodo zoro. Lovon is a gangster and a swindler as we will later find out! So why is Avrohom rejecting Eliezer for Besuel and Lovon?

There are two things to keep in mind.

The Ramban in his commentary on Sefer Iyov teaches the following:

Iyov was a great tzaddik – he feared Hashem and stayed away from evil. Who was he? He was from the land of Utz. The Ramban says Utz is from the family of Nachor – Avrohom's brother. Avrohom had a deep impact on his family circle. Not on everyone, but a significant number. Avrohom knew that within the wider family there were individuals who carried on his message and were tzaddikim. This was one reason why

Avrohom sent Eliezer to find a wife from his wider family.

Another thing to keep in mind is that in last week's parsha, Hashem decides to tell Avrohom about His plans to destroy S'dom. Why? Because Avrohom is cherished by Hashem. He will go on to found a great nation, and Hashem knows that he will go to great lengths to instill the values of the derech Hashem in his family and household. It doesn't say that Hashem was impressed with Avrohom's discovery of Hashem and his willingness to go against the entire world civilization and make many converts. Rather, He cherishes Avrohom because he will raise a family who will continue to exemplify the middos of Hashem into the future. This family will carry on that legacy.

Why do we have to follow these middos of Hashem in particular? The secular world – especially the leftists in academia – are very involved in formulating ethical standards and defining moral behavior. (This is while they support people rioting and burning and looting in order to protest for the latest leftist cause.) But they always change and shift from society to society. However, if you believe in Hashem, you also behave morally in order to come close to Hashem. It requires emes and chesed. This is the basis for Hashem choosing Avrohom – there will be continuity because it isn't some abstract, philosophical ideal of ethics and morality. It must translate into concrete, daily behavior of chesed and emes.

In Germany before Hitler came to power, the German academic world was deeply involved in ethics. But the leading philosopher, Heidegger, turned completely around – 180 degrees – to support Hitler when he started his Nazi regime. The non-Jewish conception of ethics has nothing to do with getting closer to Hashem by emulating Hashem's middos of kindness. The derech Hashem requires chesed and emes, and it is defined as chesed and emes because they are the middos of Hashem. We don't define what is chesed and what is emes based on our own thoughts, feelings and intuitions.

Eliezer arrives in Choron and he goes to the water well. He davens to Hashem to be given a sign that the girl that comes out is the right one for Yitzchok Ovinu. He knows she of course has to be from Avrohom's family and not worship idols. But Eliezer requires something more. She has to be able to carry on Avrohom's legacy of derech Hashem and chesed and emes. Eliezer has to see overwhelming, extreme chesed – mirroring Avrohom's extreme chesed. Just imagine how far Avrohom Ovinu went to invite three dirty primitive Arabs – it was in the middle of a heat wave, on the third day after his bris. He runs after them to bring them in. He stands over them, waiting on them hand and foot! All of this while he is in extreme pain from his surgery! If this girl is going to fit in to Avrohom Ovinu's house, Eliezer has to see that extreme devotion to chesed first.

He says the sign will be that the girl will offer to bring water for the camels, as well as for the people with him. This is a tremendous task! Camels can store an enormous quantity of water in their huge stomachs in order to make long trips across the desert without dying of thirst. These camels coming from Canaan have empty bodies and it is going to take a lot of water to fill them. Eliezer is expecting the girl to realize that after she gives the travelers to drink, they are going to have to bring water for the camels afterwards. If she can perceive that the travelers are exhausted and it will be very difficult for them to bring water for the camels, and then she will offer to take care of everything for them – that is the true test of a baal chesed. Perceiving a need that isn't obvious and takes consideration.

But the posuk has a shalsheles. The Torah tells us that Eliezer is hesitating. Because there is a part of him that doesn't want to succeed and come back with a wife, in order to promote his own daughter. He is making this test really hard – hoping the girl will fail. But Rivka passes the test – she brings water for all ten camels till they are full to capacity. She offers them a place to lodge, and Eliezer is convinced that she is the one.

They go to meet Lovon and Besuel and sit down for a meal. Eliezer introduces himself as the slave of Avrohom – no name. He insists on saying his piece before they eat. He tells them the whole series of events, ending with Rivka fulfilling the sign he made to be Yitzchok's wife, and they agree. They ask Rivka if she wants to leave immediately or to stay for a while before leaving, and she says she is going. She wants out – as fast as possible. She knows she belongs in Avrohom's household and not with these idol worshipping thieves.

Throughout the story, Eliezer has no name. Why? Because he is a slave. A slave has no independent identity of his own. He is the property of his master and is an extension of his master's identity. Whatever he creates and achieves belongs to his master. But at one point, the Torah calls him an "איש". An independent person. Why? Because although he has mastered all of Avrohom's Torah and can teach it to others, he cannot go beyond the finite existence of his human master. Avrohom, on the other hand, is free and capable of conceiving something beyond the physical – an ultimate Being that is completely transcendent. Eliezer isn't capable of making that connection. He worships an Infinite Being only because his master Avrohom worships this Infinite Being. He is 'arur' – he is inherently limited and can't connect to anything higher. Avrohom is 'boruch' – it is a different approach to life. He is connected to Hashem, Who is beyond this world.

Yitzchok needs a wife who can make that same connection to this infinite dimension. Someone who can live a life of chesed and emes – not because they were following their human master's behavior but because they have their own relationship with Hashem and are imitating the middos of Hashem. Only someone who does chesed because it is the derech Hashem will do it in the extreme manner that Avrohom does chesed. She takes care of all these servants and their ten camels without skipping a beat.

Eliezer davens to Hashem – not as his own G-d, but as the G-d of his master Avrohom. He is a slave the entire time, following his master's orders, until one point where he becomes an אִישׁ. This is the point

where he makes an independent decision – against his self-interest. He wanted Rivka to fail, to allow his daughter to come into the picture. A slave operates on total self-interest – the master treats him well, so he'll work hard in return. But here he decides he wants Rivka to be the one. He goes against his self-interest to do what is right, and this makes him an אִישׁ. This is the critical point. He had set up a tremendously difficult sign for Rivka to fulfill, and Rivka passed the test. Now he is stuck. He has to decide who he is – a self-interested slave? Or an independent man? For the first time in his life, he goes beyond himself and carries through to do what is right. He makes the enquiries about Rivka's suitability to join Avrohom's household. When he hears that they agree to let Rivka go with him, Eliezer turns in to a slave again. He couldn't sustain this status of אִישׁ for very long.

Then he gets ready to go back to Canaan with Rivka, and he has to be an אִישׁ again to act against his self-interest to actually bring Yitzchok the right wife for him. When Rivka saw Yitzchok, she asks Eliezer who this man is. She recognizes that Yitzchok is an אִישׁ, and Eliezer is back to being a slave.

When Rivka comes into Soroh's tent, Rashi brings an incredible midrash. All the special things that were present when Soroh lived there and left when she died, came back when Rivka came. One of those special things was the cloud hovering over the tent. We have already read about such a special cloud in last week's parsha. It is the hashro'as haShechinah which stood over Har HaMoriah. Only Avrohom and Yitzchok were able to see it among all the hills south of Yerusholayim, while Eliezer and Yishmoel could not. They had elevated their body and their physical senses to detect kedushoh where others could not. And here, when Rivka comes into the tent, the Shechinah returns.

This is what they were looking for – this is what the shidduch was all about. Finding someone who can be dedicated to the ideals of Avrohom Ovinu and is committed to following the derech Hashem to the extreme. He couldn't take anyone who was limited and couldn't go beyond the physical.

But it isn't enough to have spiritual ideals and concepts. They have to be translated into concrete acts of extreme chesed – living on the derech Hashem in your everyday life. They had to see that in Rivka in practice before they agreed to let her join the family – middos that come from a commitment to a life of avodas Hashem. This is what a shidduch is all about. Never forget that.