

Parashat Chayeh Sarah 5777, 2016:

What is True Loving-Kindness?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka and Leah bat Shifra, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the highlights of our *parasha* is Abraham's considered effort to find a proper wife for his beloved son, Isaac, from amongst the daughters of his birthplace. Given his age, and the considerable distance, Abraham was unable to undertake the journey from *Eretz Yisrael* to his homeland, "Aram Naharaim, the city of Nahor." He, therefore, sent his unnamed trusted servant, identified by our Sages as "Eliezer," as his *shaliach* (messenger) to accomplish this destiny-laden assignment.

Fascinatingly, Abraham does not give Eliezer any explicit criteria by which to choose Isaac's life-partner. Instead, he enjoins him:

And I will adjure you by the L-rd, the G-d of the heaven and the G-d of the earth that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose midst I dwell. But you shall go to my land and to my birthplace, and you shall take a wife for my son, for Isaac. (*Sefer Bereishit* 24:3-4, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press complete Tanach*)

At this juncture we might well ask, "Why did Abraham command his servant to 'not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose midst I dwell?'" The 13th century French commentator, Rav Chaim Paltiel *zatzal* (known as "Rav Paltiel of Falaise") suggests the following answer that is followed by other Torah exegetes as well:

Abraham did not want [Isaac to marry Eliezer's daughter or any other Canaanite woman], since he [Eliezer] was included in the category of being cursed [i.e. since the time of Noah, when Noah cursed Ham the father of all future Canaanites]. Therefore, it would be anathema for someone cursed to be joined in marriage to someone who was blessed [Isaac]. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit*, Parashat Chayeh Sarah, 24:3, translation and brackets my own.)

We now understand why Abraham strenuously rejected any notion of marrying Isaac to one of the maidens of Canaan. Yet, how did Eliezer know which *middah* (ethical characteristic) was necessary for Isaac's future wife? The early 19th century Chasidic master, Rav Chaim ben Solomon Tyrer *zatzal*, known as the Be'er Mayim Chaim after the name of his most famous work, suggests that everyone during Abraham's time knew that he was the personification of *chesed* (kindness). Indeed, Eliezer had witnessed countless examples of his master's overwhelming care and concern for others and all those in need. As such, he focused upon *chesed* as the singular *middah* for Isaac's spouse:

Behold, our father Abraham was known to everyone as the first *ba'al chesed* (master of loving-kindness) in world history. Abraham, throughout his entire life and with all his strength, pursued opportunities wherein he could bring guests to his home in order to give them food and drink... as the verse states, "Now the L-rd appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot." (18:1) [The correct interpretation of this verse is that] at first Abraham sent Eliezer to see if there were any potential guests traveling on their way – and he did not believe him when he stated there was no one to be found. Therefore, Abraham, himself, went to ascertain whether or not he might be able to find any [desert travelers]. (*Commentary to Sefer Bereishit*, Parashat Chayeh Sarah 24:14, this, and all translations and markings my own)

Given Abraham's pronounced emphasis upon *chesed*, Eliezer knew full well that this was the *middah* he needed Rebecca to demonstrate if she was to be deemed worthy to enter his master's family. Thus the Torah states:

And he [Eliezer] said, "O L-rd, the G-d of my master Abraham, please cause to happen to me today, and perform loving-kindness with my master, Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the water fountain, and the daughters of the people of the city are coming out to draw water. And it will be, [that] the maiden to whom I will say, 'Lower your pitcher and I will drink' and she will say, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels, she is the one that You designated for Your

servant, for Isaac, and through her may I know that You have performed loving-kindness with my master.” (24:12-14)

The Be'er Mayim Chaim explicates this passage in the following manner:

[Given the unique import of *chesed* in Abraham's family, Eliezer] wanted to test Rebecca as to whether or not she was a practitioner of loving-kindness, for only if this were to be the case would she be fitting to enter the house of Abraham. Therefore, if he would say to her, “Please give me a little bit of water to drink,” and she would respond, “Drink and I will also provide water for your camels,” [i.e. more than that which was requested] then, You [Hashem], will have proven incontrovertibly that she has the ethical characteristic of loving-kindness within her...

The Be'er Mayim Chaim concludes his penetrating analysis with a deep insight into the genuine nature of *chesed*, “The authentic sign of *gemilut chasadim* (loving-kindness) is that one runs after the unfortunate and dispirited [to help them], and if such an individual should come on their own – one goes beyond their immediate request [in order to truly provide for their needs].” Rebecca was just such a person and was, therefore, privileged to become one of the great matriarchs of the Jewish people.

Our Sages teach us that the *middah* of *chesed* is one of the constitutive elements of the Jewish people (*Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 79a*). Therefore, with Hashem's help, and with Abraham's and Rebecca's example ever before us, may we pursue lives that represent the highest level of true *gemilut chasadim. V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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