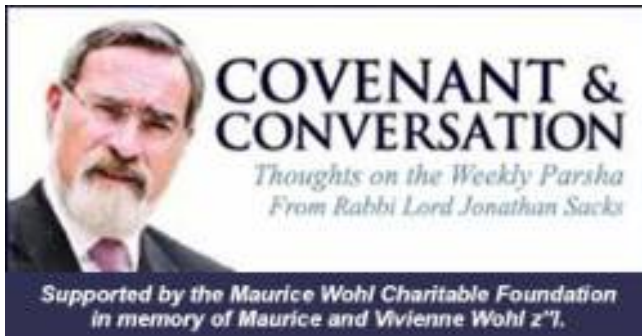


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On Leadership: Beginning the Journey

A while back, a British newspaper, *The Times*, interviewed a prominent member of the Jewish community - let's call him Lord X - on his 92nd birthday. The interviewer said, "Most people, when they reach their 92nd birthday, start thinking about slowing down. You seem to be speeding up. Why is that?"

Lord X's reply was this: "When you get to 92, you start seeing the door begin to close, and I have so much to do before the door closes that the older I get, the harder I have to work."

Something like that is the impression we get of Abraham in this week's parsha. Sarah, his constant companion throughout their journeys, has died. He is 137 years old. We see him mourn Sarah's death, and then he moves into action.

He engages in an elaborate negotiation to buy a plot of land in which to bury her. As the narrative makes clear, this is not a simple task. He confesses to the local people, Hittites, that he is "an immigrant and a resident among you," meaning that he knows he has no right to buy land. It will take a special concession on their part for him to do so. The Hittites politely but firmly try to discourage him. He has no need to buy a burial plot. "No one among us will deny you his burial site to bury your dead." He can bury Sarah in someone else's graveyard. Equally politely but no less insistently, Abraham makes it clear that he is determined to buy land. In the event, he pays a highly inflated price (400 silver shekels) to do so.

The purchase of the cave of Machpelah is evidently a highly significant event, because it is recorded in great detail and highly legal terminology, not just here, but three times subsequently in Genesis,⁽¹⁾ each time with the same formality. Here for instance is Jacob on his deathbed, speaking to his sons:

"Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife

Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites."
 (Gen. 49:29-32)

Something significant is being hinted at here, otherwise why mention, each time, exactly where the field is and who Abraham bought it from?

Immediately after the story of land purchase, we read, "Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and God had blessed Abraham with everything." Again this sounds like the end of a life, not a preface to a new course of action, and again our expectation is confounded. Abraham launches into a new initiative, this time to find a suitable wife for his son Isaac, who by now is at least 37 years old. Abraham leaves nothing to chance. He does not speak to Isaac himself but to his most trusted servant, whom he instructs to go "to my native land, to my birthplace," and find the appropriate woman. He wants Isaac to have a wife who will share his faith and way of life. Abraham does not specify that she should come from his own family, but this seems to be an assumption hovering in the background.

As with the purchase of the field, so here, the course of events is described in more detail than almost anywhere else in the Torah. Every conversational exchange is recorded. The contrast with the story of the binding of Isaac could not be greater. There, almost everything - Abraham's thoughts, Isaac's feelings - is left unsaid. Here, everything is said. Again, the literary style calls our attention to the significance of what is happening, without telling us precisely what it is.

The explanation is simple and unexpected. Throughout the story of Abraham and Sarah, God had promised them two things: children and a land. The promise of the land ("Rise, walk in the land throughout its length and breadth, for I will give it to you") is repeated no less than seven times. The promise of children occurs four times. Abraham's descendants will be "a great nation," as many as "the dust of the earth," and "the stars in the sky"; he will be the father not of one nation but of many.

Despite this, when Sarah dies, Abraham has not a single inch of the land that he can call his own, and has only one child who will continue the covenant, Isaac, currently unmarried. Neither promise has been fulfilled. Hence the extraordinary detail of the two main stories in Chayei Sarah: the purchase of land and the finding of a wife for Isaac. There is a moral here, and the Torah slows down the speed of the narrative, so that we will not miss the point.

God promises, but we have to act. God promised Abraham the land, but he had to buy the first field. God promised Abraham many descendants, but Abraham had to ensure that his son was married, and to a woman who would share the life of the covenant, so that Abraham would have, as we say today, "Jewish grandchildren."

Despite all the promises, God does not and will not do it alone. By the very act of self-limitation (*tzimtzum*) through which He creates the space for human freedom, He gives us responsibility, and only by exercising it do we reach our full stature as human beings. God saved Noah from the flood, but Noah had to make the ark. He gave the land of

Israel to the people of Israel, but they had to fight the battles. God gives us the strength to act, but we have to do the deed. What changes the world, what fulfils our destiny, is *not what God does for us but what we do for God*.

That is what leaders understand, and it is what made Abraham the first Jewish leader. Leaders take responsibility for creating the conditions through which God's purposes can be fulfilled. They are not passive but active - even in old age, like Abraham in this week's parsha. Indeed in the next chapter, to our surprise, we read that after Sarah's death, Abraham takes another wife and has eight more children. Whatever else this tells us, and there are many interpretations (the most likely is that it explains how Abraham became "the father of many nations"), it certainly conveys the point that Abraham stayed young the way Moses stayed young, "His eye undimmed and his natural energy unabated." Though action takes energy, it gives us energy. The contrast between Noah in old age and Abraham in old age could not be greater.

Perhaps though the most important point is that large promises - a land, countless children - become real through small beginnings. Leaders begin with an envisioned future, but they also know that there is a long journey between here and there and we can only reach it one act at a time, one day at a time. There is no miraculous shortcut, and if there were, it would not help. It would make achievement like Jonah's gourd, that grew overnight, then died overnight. Abraham acquired only a single field, and had just one son who would continue the covenant. Yet he did not complain, and he died serene and satisfied.

Because he had begun. Because he had left future generations something on which to build. All great change is the work of more than one generation, and none of us will live to see the full fruit of our endeavours.

Leaders see the destination, begin the journey, and leave behind them those who will continue it. That is enough to endow a life with immortality.

1. Genesis 23:17, 25:9, 49:30, 50:13.



The Servant of Abraham

This week's Torah portion deals primarily with two issues:

- A. the death and subsequent burial of Sarah, and
- B. the search for a wife for Isaac.

These subjects, especially the latter, are covered with painstaking detail. One is immediately struck by the amount of text devoted here, particularly when compared to the general terseness of the Torah.

One may posit that the first section, the acquisition of a burial plot for Sarah, is stressed due to its monumental importance: This is the

first step toward the acquisition of the entire Land of Israel by the Jewish people.

We recall the words of Rashi on the very first verse in the Torah, where Rashi questioned the propriety of beginning with narrative rather than law. He explained that the Torah wants to teach an important principle. The entire earth was created by and belongs to God, and therefore God alone chooses who will possess and inhabit any part of it -- especially the Holy Land.

Thus, when Abraham legally takes possession of the piece of ground for Sarah's burial place, thereby taking a foothold in the Land of Israel, the Torah recounts the events in detail. After all, if all of Genesis serves, in one way or another, to establish and clarify ownership of the land, no details should be spared in the description of Abraham's inaugural acquisition -- the purchase of the cave of Machpela.¹

A BRIDE FOR ISAAC

While this certainly provides a theological basis for the first part of this week's Torah portion, we are still mystified regarding the long, drawn-out description of the search for a bride for Isaac. Here the Midrash notes the problem and suggests:

And he gave straw and provender for the camels (Genesis 24:32). Rabbi Aha said: "The mere conversation of the slaves of the Patriarchs' household is more important than the laws [Torah] of the (Patriarch's) descendants. This chapter dealing with Eliezer covers two or three columns, and [his conversation] is not

only recorded but repeated. Whereas [the uncleanness of] a reptile is an integral part of the Torah, and yet it is only from an extending particle in Scripture that we learn that its blood defiles as its flesh." (Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 60:8)

The Midrash observes that the amount of text dedicated to the servant of Abraham is disproportional. This is a relative statement, which is especially poignant when we compare it with sections of law or ritual. One could have argued that the objective of the Torah, ostensibly, is to teach law, and not to tell, nor certainly to repeat stories. Therefore the Midrash declares that the amount of text dedicated to the topic is indicative of its relative importance.

A DIFFICULT STORY

The story of the servant of Abraham is difficult. While the narrative is detailed and repetitive, certain salient details are missing. For example the name of the "servant" is not mentioned at all in the text.

And Abraham said to the oldest servant of his house, who ruled over all that he had, "Put, I beg you, your hand under my thigh. 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 live. But you shall go to my country, and to my family, and take a wife for my son Isaac." (Genesis 24:2-4)

It is left to the Midrash and commentaries to make the identification: the servant is Eliezer mentioned a few chapters back. Eliezer was Abraham's trusted companion, the man whom Abraham had earlier imagined would perhaps one day be his heir.

*And Abram said, "Lord God, what will you give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?" And Avram said, "Behold, to me you have given no seed; and, one at home in my house is my heir." And, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This shall not be your heir; but he who shall come forth from your own bowels shall be your heir."
(Genesis 15:2-3)*

Based on logic, or perhaps tradition, the servant here in Parshat Chayei Sarah (chapter 24) is identified with the servant mentioned in Parshat Lech Lecha (chapter 15). Nonetheless it seems strange that he is not identified by name here in the section where he assumes the center of the stage.

Perhaps we have answered our own question: Eliezer viewed himself as a dedicated servant of his master, and he was aware that his role was ancillary. He was not "Eliezer", he was the "Servant of Abraham", and hence the conclusion of the Midrash cited above:

The mere conversation of the slaves of the Patriarchs' household is more important than the laws [Torah] of their descendants.

SERVANT OR MAN?

One apparent problem with this approach is that the appellation "servant" -- in Hebrew *eved* -- is not consistently used in the text (Genesis 24):

10. *And the **servant** took ten of his master's camels...*
12. *And he said, "O Lord God of my master Abraham, I beseech you, send me good speed this day, and show kindness to my master Abraham..."*
18. *And she said, "Drink, my lord;" and she hurried, and let down her water jar upon her hand, and gave him drink...*
21. *And the **man**, wondering at her, held his peace, to see whether the Lord had made his journey successful or not.*
22. *And it came to pass, as the camels finished drinking, that the **man** took a golden ear ring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold...*
26. *And the **man** bowed down his head, and worshipped the Lord.*
27. *And he said, "Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who has not left my master destitute of his mercy and his truth; As for me, the Lord has guided me in the way to the house of my master's brothers..."*
29. *And Rebecca had a brother, and his name was Laban; and Laban ran out to the **man**, to the well.*

30. *And it came to pass, when he saw the earring and bracelets upon his sister's hands, and when he heard the words of Rebecca his sister, saying, "Thus spoke the **man** to me;" that he came to the **man**; and, behold, he stood by the camels at the well...*
32. *And the **man** came into the house; and he ungirded his camels, and gave straw and provender for the camels, and water to wash his feet, and the feet of the men who were with him.*
34. *And he said, "I am Abraham's **servant**..."*
52. *And it came to pass, that, when Abraham's **servant** heard their words, he worshipped the Lord, bowing to the earth.*
53. *And the **servant** brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebecca; he gave also to her brother and to her mother precious things...*
58. *And they called Rebecca, and said to her, "Will you go with this **man**?"*
59. *And they sent Rebecca their sister, and her nurse away, and Abraham's **servant**, and his men...*
61. *And Rebecca arose, and her maids, and they rode upon the camels, and followed the **man**; and the **servant** took Rebecca, and went his way...*
64. *And Rebecca lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel.*
65. *For she had said to the **servant**, "What **man** is this who walks in the field to meet*

*us?" And the **servant** said, "It is my **master**." Therefore she took a veil, and covered herself.*

Who is this person -- a servant or a man?²

Evidently his identity poses challenges which are conveniently avoided when we simply call him Eliezer. Apparently, depending upon perspective and the role being fulfilled in any particular verse, the identity of this person shifts from servant to man and back to servant. The details which would otherwise have been glossed over, but are pointed up by this shifting identification, contain information which help us penetrate this story.

This man, Eliezer, sees himself as servant of Abraham (and Isaac). The locals see him as a man.

Verse 61 is therefore of note because it uses both terms, making the subtle shift in identity clear: Rebecca followed the man while the servant took her on the journey to meet his master. Yet even for Rebecca, he ceases to be the man when she beholds Isaac -- to whom she now refers as "man". In so doing, she speaks to the servant.

Rebecca is cognitively aware that Isaac, and not Eliezer, is the master of the house, even before ever seeing Isaac. Nonetheless, until she actually sees Isaac, Eliezer seems so impressive that he is called man. Only in comparison to Isaac does Eliezer pale, his stature reduced to servant.

HEIR AND WARRIOR

To become Abraham's "right hand man", this servant must have been an extremely impressive individual. As seen above, there was a period of

time that Abraham had seen him as his heir apparent. Tradition tells us that Eliezer was an imposing warrior.

And when Abraham heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them to Dan. And he divided himself against them, he and his servants, by night, and defeated them, and pursued them to Hovah, which is to the left of Damascus.
 (Genesis 14:14)

The Talmud understands that there were only two people fighting: Abraham and Eliezer.

Three hundred and eighteen: Rabbi Ammi ben Abba said: "Eliezer outweighed them all." Others say, "It was Eliezer, for this is the numerical value of his name." (Talmud Nedarim 32a)

There are various attempts in tradition to identify Eliezer with other famous personalities. One tradition tells us that he was none other Og, King of Bashan.³ The historicity of such an identification is difficult and compounded by the fact that Eliezer is a positive character, which can not be said of Og. We may conclude that Eliezer was "head and shoulders" above others; only in relationship to Abraham (and Isaac) was he subservient.

WORDS OF THE SERVANT

The Midrash cited above attributes great value to the conversation of Abraham's servant. It states

that the words of the servant take precedence over the Torah laws that will be given to Abraham's descendents. The same type of comparison between narrative and legal sections of the Torah may also be distilled from the Midrash which relates to the first episode recorded in our Torah portion:

...unto Abraham for a possession, in the presence of the children of Het (Genesis 23:17). Rabbi Leazar said: "How much ink has been spilled and how many quills have been broken in order to write *the children of Het*, which is actually written ten times! These ten correspond to the Ten Commandments, teaching that if one assists a righteous man in his purchase, it is as though he fulfilled the Ten Commandments. (Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 60:3)

In other words, there is a relationship between "incidental" occurrences in Abraham's life and Torah, therefore even his servant's dialogue contains incredible worth.

But the value of Eliezer's words also seems to be called into question elsewhere in this Midrashic analysis:

"Behold, I stand by the fountain of water ... so let it come to pass, that the damsel to be chosen shall be she to whom I shall say: 'Let down thy pitcher'" (Genesis 24:13). Four asked improperly. Three were granted their request in a fitting manner, and the fourth, in an unfitting manner. They

are: Eliezer, Calev, Shaul, and Yiftah. Eliezer (said): *So let it come to pass, that the damsel...* Even a bondmaid! Yet God prepared Rebecca for him and granted his request in a fitting manner. (Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 58:8)

We are told that the mode of Eliezer's request was inappropriate; he "put God on the spot" with seeming irreverence.

But perhaps in Eliezer's very "irreverence" we discern his greatness. What was the source of Eliezer's confidence that God would truly answer his request? The answer is obvious (and stated): Abraham.

And he said, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, I beseech you, send me good speed this day, and show kindness to my master Abraham."
(Genesis 24:12)

Eliezer's eyes saw Abraham on a daily basis, we can only imagine the sight he had the good fortune to behold. The spiritual stratosphere of Abraham, and indeed all the Patriarchs, eludes our imagination. Eliezer saw the majestic holiness of his master, and he was content in serving Abraham.⁴ He saw the wonders and knew of the miracles. Eliezer had no doubt of his master's holiness, and merit.

While Eliezer's request of God at the well was posed in an inappropriate way, the actual wording compounds the problem:

And he made his camels kneel down outside the city by a well of water at

the time of the evening, the time that women go out to draw water. And he said, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, I beseech you, send me good speed this day, and show kindness to my master Abraham."
(Genesis 24:11-12)

He arrives just before sunset, yet asks God to "work things out" before the day is done. This shows Eliezer's incredible trust in God. What was the source of this trust? He was a servant of Abraham. He had seen Abraham. His words contain more Torah, more belief, than the words transmitted at Sinai.

LIVING THE TORAH

The Sages credit our forefathers with having kept all the precepts of the Torah. Whether this is meant in a literal sense or a spiritual sense is the subject of debate. Among Hassidic⁵ sources -- such as Izbitch and Berditchev -- there is an understanding that Abraham did not literally fulfill Torah law, but nonetheless fulfilled the Torah in a spiritual sense. His actions were such that they indicated a lofty level of spiritual accomplishment.

We would be mistaken today to believe that we, through following the Torah, are on a higher spiritual plane than the Patriarchs who were not so commanded. Rather they "fulfilled" the Torah despite not adhering to its literal words.

God looked into the Torah and created the world; Abraham looked into the world and discovered God. He did not "need" the commandments; he was in touch with the inner message of the Torah.

This concept is highly antinomian, for the seeking individual today may posit that he does not need the revealed Torah, that he is "in touch" with the soul of the Torah via his own path. Yet this type of individual spirituality was only possible prior to Sinai. Once the Torah was given, the Torah alone now defines and directs spirituality. Individual paths become impossible.

Just as a person has a body and a soul, so too the Torah. The body is the commandments and stories. Abraham existed prior to the revelation of Torah in its current garb. Nonetheless, Abraham kept the entire Torah. His servant was that much closer to this authentic Torah; his words were therefore superior even to the words of the revealed Torah. Therefore, when the Torah expends so much space on the words of this servant, we must take notice, for in his words lies truth, incredible trust and faith, and knowledge of God.⁶

It is for this reason that so much space was used on these words and "so much ink spilled." These words, which were uttered by a man who knew and learned from Abraham himself, are now the words of Torah. These words are permeated by trust in God, and indeed there is much to learn from them.

1. The Zohar, however connects at least some of the prolixity with the uniqueness of Sarah. "Rabbi Abba said: 'Of Sarah alone among all women do we find recorded the number of her days and years and the length of her life and the place where she was buried. All this was to show that the like of Sarah was not to be found among all the women of the world. You may object that we find a somewhat similar record in connection with Miriam, of whom it is written, *And Miriam died there, and was buried there* (Numbers 20:1). But the object there was to show the unworthiness of Israel, for whom water was made to flow forth only through the virtue of Miriam. Hence Miriam's death was

not recorded with such full details as that of Sarah.'" (Zohar, Bereishit, Section 1, Page 124b.)

2. These questions were raised by Rav Mordechai Breuer, in a class I attended in 1980. Over the years his questions have remained with me, while his answers have eluded me.
3. Pirki D'Rebbi Eliezer Chapter 15. See Daat Zikanim Ba'aley Tosfot 24:39
4. *Who is among you that fears the Lord* alludes to Eliezer. *Who hears the voice of his servant*, for he was Abraham's servant. *Who walked in darkness* when he went to fetch Rebecca. *And has no light* who, then, gave him light? The Holy One, blessed be He, illumined his path with meteors and lightning. *Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay on his God*. Thus it is written, *And he said: "O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, send me, I pray thee, good speed this day.* (Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 60:1)
It is written, *A servant that deals wisely shall have rule over a son that puts (his father) to shame*, (Proverbs 27:2). *A servant that deals wisely* alludes to Eliezer. And wherein lay his wisdom? He argued thus: "My curse lies upon me from aforesaid. Perhaps an Ethiopian or a Barbar will come and enslave me; then it is better that I be enslaved in this house than elsewhere. (Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 60:2)
5. See Maor V'Shemesh Rimzey first day of Sukkot, Maor Enayim Yitro. See Parshat Derachim 1.
6. The Midrash notes that more could have been stated: *And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done* (Genesis 24:66). Rabbi Eleazar said: "There is more general statement in the Torah than detailed statement, for had he wished, he could have written two or three columns." The Rabbis said: "He disclosed to him the more welcome incidents [only, e.g.] that the earth had contracted before him." (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 60:15)



Avraham's Very Hard Day

According to tradition (Avos 5:3), God put Avraham to the test ten times, and he passed them all with flying colors. It is generally accepted that

the ten tests were progressively harder, that once he proved himself in a lesser test, Hashem presented him with a more difficult test until he proved himself to have the highest level of faith. It is also generally accepted that the tenth and most difficult test was the *Akeidah*. After all, what could be more challenging than to be commanded to sacrifice the treasured child born to him in his old age?

Rabbeinu Yonah in *Avos* (ibid.), however, lists the *Akeidah* as the ninth test. What was the tenth? When Avraham could not find a place to bury Sarah, he was forced to buy a plot from Ephron for an exorbitant sum.

The question springs out from the pages. True, it must have been exceedingly frustrating for Avraham to be forced to pay anything at all, let alone an exorbitant sum, for land Hashem had promised him as an everlasting birthright. True, it must have been difficult to deal with this frustration in his bereavement over the death of his wife Sarah. But still, is this at all comparable to the test of the *Akeidah*? Does this even begin to come close to being asked to sacrifice a son on the altar?

There is tendency among people to look forward to the golden years of retirement. They work very hard. They struggle to be successful, to build a reputation for themselves and to provide their families with a good standard of living. Then there comes a point in a person's life when he steps back and surveys all he has accomplished, and he says, "Enough! I've done all that could be expected of me and more. It's time to stop, to ease up on the pace, to sit back and enjoy life. After

all, I've earned it!" And indeed, he has. There is no reason he should not enjoy his golden years of retirement.

But in the realm of spirituality, it is not so. There is never a point when a person can sit back and say, "I've done enough!" In the realm of spirituality, a person either moves up or he moves down; he never remains in one spot. If he "retires," he immediately goes into decline. The struggle for spiritual growth does not end until a person draws his very last breath.

When Avraham came back from the *Akeidah*, he had reached a level of achievement so exalted that the Jewish people throughout history are sustained by its merit. It undoubtedly took every last ounce of spiritual courage and fortitude he could muster to withstand such a horrific ordeal. And he did it! Avraham found those hidden reservoirs of strength and faith, and he showed himself ready to sacrifice his son if Hashem so commanded. And in the end, everything had worked out for the best. He had proved himself, and his son's life had been spared. Avraham returned home with a sense of boundless relief, ready to share his experience with his wife. One can imagine his shock when he found her dead, and his frustration when he encountered so many difficulties in bringing her to eternal rest.

Avraham could easily have raised his voice in righteous indignation and complained. "Enough already! How much do I have to go through? Isn't it enough that I have just gone through the ordeal of the *Akeidah*? Do I have to go through this as well? I have put in so many years of effort. I have glorified Hashem's Name in so many places for so

many years. I have made so much *kiddush Hashem*. Don't I deserve a little respite to sit back and enjoy the golden years of my life?"

This was a very subtle test, the ultimate test, and Avraham could easily have reacted instinctively, as most people would. But he did not. He realized that he had one more important lesson to teach the world. By his example, he could demonstrate that there is no retirement from his service, that being a faithful servant of God is literally the work of a lifetime. There is no retirement. But the years are certainly golden.

Rav Eliahu Dessler, in *Michtav m'Eliahu*, offer a different explanation. He sees in this tenth and final test the demonstration of two of the most critical aspects of Avraham's personality.

Consider the situation. Avraham finds himself forced to conduct business dealings with the wily and duplicitous Ephron. He is exceedingly frustrated both by his own circumstances and by Ephron's opportunistic behavior. How does he conduct himself?

Imagine you set out to purchase a used car, or perhaps we should say a pre-owned car, and you run into the proverbial used-car salesman. He is wearing a loud checked suit and a fluorescent smile, and he bombards you with an incessant stream of high-pressure sales pitch. He turns a deaf ear to your stated preferences in price and model and does his best to persuade to buy the high-priced clunker that you absolutely do not want. After five minutes, you are gnashing your teeth and clenching your fists.

How do you speak to this man? Do you treat him with the respect and deference due any human being formed in the image of the Lord, the *tzelem Elokim*? Or do you respond to his crudeness with a crudeness of your own? Do you allow external frustrations get the better of you?

And how about internal frustrations?

I was recently at a supermarket, and I asked the person bagging my groceries not to make the bags too heavy.

"If you don't like the way I do it," he barked at me, "do it yourself!"

I was taken aback, to say the least. "Excuse me," I said. "Did I say something nasty to you? Why did I deserve such a response?"

The man gave me a sheepish grin. "Sorry. I had a hard day."

I guess that explains it all. He had a hard day, which gives him the right to give me a hard time, I suppose.

Having a "hard day" is obviously not a justification for rude behavior. But how about something that goes beyond your ordinary "hard day"? Imagine you have just come off an overseas flight. You have spent a solid hour watching the luggage circulate around the carousel until you have each piece memorized down to its smallest details, but your own luggage seems to have disappeared into thin air. You go to the ticket office to report your loss. Are you justified in snapping at the agent because of what you are going through?

Let us take this a little further. You are in the hospital attending a relative who is in serious condition, perhaps even in mortal danger. A doctor or nurse or some other hospital functionary gives you a hard time, and you respond with a sharp retort. Does your anxiety about the health of your relative justify such behavior?

Now let us consider Avraham's circumstances. He has just come back from the *Akeidah*, where he narrowly escaped slaughtering his own son. Can you imagine his mental and emotional state? Then he comes home to discover that Sarah, his wife of a century, has died and that he has to go through some difficult negotiations in order to secure a burial plot for her. I suppose one could safely say that Avraham was having a rather "hard day." To top it all off, he must contend with Ephron, who may not have been wearing a checked suit but was certainly no better than the sleaziest used-car salesman.

This was Avraham's test. He could have played hardball with Ephron. He could have wiped the floor with him. But he didn't. He treated him with the respect and deference due every human being. Just because he was having a hard day, he did not have to make Ephron suffer.

On the night Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach's *rebbeztin* died, he was standing in the hall of the hospital trying to deal with his profound grief. A student of his, whose wife had just given birth, was also in the hospital at the time. The student noticed Rav Shlomo Zalman in the hallway, and he ran over to give him the wonderful news. He was so excited that it did not even occur to him to

ask what his *rosh yeshivah* was doing in the hospital at that time of the night.

Rav Shlomo Zalman gave the student his warmest blessing and graced him with his famous smile, so full of love and sheer joy. The student walked away with his heart singing, completely unaware that his *rosh yeshivah* had been told just a few minutes earlier that his wife had passed away.

Following the example of his forefather Avraham, Rav Shlomo Zalman saw no reason to diminish his student's joy in the very least just because he himself was suffering.



One Step Ahead

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's portion begins with the death of our matriarch, Sarah. The Torah tells us (Genesis 23:2) that upon Sarah's passing, Abraham eulogized her and wept. According to our tradition, the letter *kaf* in the word "*v'livkota*" ("*and he wept over her*") is written smaller than the other letters in the word. The commentator Kohelet Isaac understands this small *kaf* as an indication that Abraham cried only a little bit over Sarah's passing.

We might find this comment surprising. Surely Abraham was devastated over the loss of his beloved wife. Why would he cry only a little bit?

This question becomes even stronger when we look at Rashi's comment (Genesis 23:2) regarding the juxtaposition of the binding of Isaac and the death of Sarah. According to Rashi, when the news reached Sarah that Abraham had brought Isaac as an offering to God, Sarah was so overwhelmed that she died. How can we understand Abraham weeping only minimally in such a situation? Not only did his wife pass on; it seems that, indirectly, his own actions actually killed her!

A deeper examination of Abraham's motives will help us resolve this troubling question. When Abraham returned from Mount Moriah to find that Sarah had died, he could easily have regretted following God's will. This would have been an understandable reaction; after all, his obedience to God resulted in the death of his beloved wife! Yet Abraham understood the tremendous power of regret to undo the effect of past actions. When repentance is used positively, as part of the *teshuva* process, it has the ability to erase our misdeeds. But repentance can also erase the reward we receive for performing mitzvot. Had Abraham regretted bringing Isaac as an offering, countless future generations would have lost the ability to draw from the merit of his actions.

Therefore, Abraham cried only a little bit over the passing of his beloved wife to show that, despite the challenges, he did not regret having performed the Divine will. He knew that there are no negative consequences to performing mitzvot

wholeheartedly, and that his actions could therefore not have been the true cause of Sarah's death. In overcoming this test of faith, Abraham preserved the merit of the binding of Isaac as a powerful spiritual inheritance for generations to come.

This idea also helps us understand a puzzling passage from the evening prayers. Before reciting the Amidah of the evening Ma'ariv, we beseech God to remove the Satan from before us and from after us (*v'haser satan mil'faneinu u'mei'achoreinu*). What does this strange phrasing signify?

The Satan is the evil inclination (*yetzer hara*) that challenges our connection to God. The Satan "before us" is the *yetzer hara* that tries to prevent us from performing mitzvot and following the Divine will. If the *yetzer hara* does not succeed in convincing us to give up before we've even started, however, it tries again after the fact. This is the Satan "after us," that wants to undo the positive effect of the mitzvot we have performed by causing us to regret our actions. If the *yetzer hara* can make us think we've lost out in some way by doing mitzvot, then we are robbed of the reward for performing them.

Thus, we ask God both for the strength to resist temptation "before us" - so that we can carry out His will, as well as for the ability to remain committed to our decisions after the fact and not lose the reward.

May we merit to perform all the mitzvot and to be happy with them, knowing with certainty that no



Chayei Sarah (Genesis 23:1-25:18) *advanced compendium*

negativity or bitterness is caused by our fulfillment of the Divine will. May our wholehearted performance of mitzvot cause us to be blessed with reward - both in this world and the next.

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