

# AVRAHAM; Our Founding Patriarch

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## Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Chayei Sarah



### **Eliezer, the Model of Negation and Servitude to One's Master**

The narrative of *Eliezer's* mission regarding locating the appropriate wife for *Yitzchak* is repeated multiple times. *Rashi* cites the *Midrash*, "Rav Acha says, 'We learn from the repetition of the narrative of *Eliezer* that the ordinary speech of the servants of the Patriarchs is more beautiful (to G-d) than the *Torah* of the children.'" Although many fundamental laws are drawn from a single letter of a word or an allusion in a verse, the story of *Eliezer* is repeated several times. Since there is nothing that is superfluous in the *Torah*, it is evident that there is a profound lesson to be learned and applied from the narrative of *Eliezer*. What is there to be learned?

King David writes in Psalms, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of heaven..." In order for one to have the capacity to be a repository for *Torah*, which is the wisdom of G-d, one must have a sufficient level of

reverence (fear) for G-d. Reverence is a prerequisite for wisdom.

The *Torah* identifies *Eliezer*, the servant of *Avraham*, as "Damesek Eliezer – *Eliezer* from Damascus." It is clear that the *Torah* is not informing us of *Eliezer's* origin, that he came from the city of Damascus, but rather the *Gemara* in Tractate *Yomah* explains that the term "Damesek" is an acronym that connotes – "He drew and disseminates from the wellspring of *Torah* of his master (*Avraham*)." Meaning, all the *Torah* that *Avraham* had learned was transmitted to his servant *Eliezer*. As a result of *Eliezer* being mentored by *Avraham*, he became the qualified disseminator his master's teachings.

The *Midrash* tells us that when *Eliezer* had come to the home of *Besuel* to negotiate for the hand of *Rivka*, on behalf of *Yitzchak*, because of his degree of radiance of holiness, they had mistakenly believed that he was *Avraham*. In addition to *Eliezer's* spiritual dimension,



*Avraham* had fully entrusted him with all of his finances and wealth to be the guardian over his fortune.

*Eliezer's* dimension as a person in the spiritual and material realm was outstanding and unique. Since his level of spirituality was so unique, *Eliezer* believed that his daughter, would be qualified to be the future matriarch of the Jewish people, the wife of *Yitzchak*. However, *Avraham* explained to *Eliezer*, "It is not possible for your daughter to marry my son, because you come from a cursed stock and I come from a blessed stock. Something cursed cannot cleave to something that is blessed." *Eliezer* being a Canaanite was a descendant of the cursed son of *Cham*, who was *Canaan*. Since the future Matriarch was integral in establishing an eternal Jewish people, she needed to possess a pedigree that is blessed.

Despite his dimension of being and capacity, *Eliezer's* name is omitted within the context of locating a wife for *Yitzchak*. When *Eliezer* supplicated G-d to succeed in his mission of finding the appropriate wife for *Yitzchak*, it was only for the sake of doing kindness with his master of *Avraham*. As it states, "Do a kindness for my master *Avraham*." Although he was acting as *Avraham's* agent, his only interest was the good of his master and not that it should reflect well upon himself to succeeded as an agent.

When he presented himself to *Besuel*, the father of *Rivka*, *Eliezer* identified himself as "I am the servant of *Avraham*." He did not identify himself in any way that would have revealed his capability and dimension. Despite his level of accomplishment and renown, he was fully negated to his master *Avraham*. It is because of *Eliezer's* level of reverence for *Avraham* and negation to his master that *Chazal* are able to extrapolate from the repetition of the story of *Eliezer*, "...the ordinary speech of the servants of the Patriarchs is more beautiful (to G-d) then the *Torah* of the children."

If *Eliezer* had such a level of reverence, negation, and subservience for his mortal master, despite his dimension of person, how much more so must a Jew have reverence and subservience to G-d, who endows man with every aspect of his being. *Eliezer* was overwhelmed with the holiness of his master and thus appreciated him to a point that he was fully negated to him.

In addition, as *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* explains, after the circumcision *Avraham* (as the other Patriarchs)

was the location of the Divine Presence in this world ("hein hein haMerkava"). When *Eliezer* gazed upon his master and interacted with him, he sensed his holiness because he appreciated that *Avraham* was the equivalent of the Holy of Holies. If this was the degree of reverence demonstrated by a mortal to his mortal master, how much more should one be negated to the Presence of G-d and have reverence for Him, Who is the source of everything.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Sukkah* tells us that one may learn from the ordinary speech of a Torah scholar. This is because of his unique dimension of spirituality. The Torah scholar is not merely a repository of *Torah* knowledge but rather, as the *Gemara* explains in Tractate *Yomah*, "He is consistent on the inside as he is on the outside." Meaning, his essence is holy, because he has fully internalized the value of the *Torah*. He behaves in every aspect of his life in accordance of the *Torah*. The *Torah* repeats the story of *Eliezer* several times for us to learn the degree of reverence that one must have for G-d in order to be qualified to process the *Torah* and be a repository for it. If one is able to draw the lesson properly from *Eliezer*, he will surely achieve the level of reverence that is needed for the acquisition of *Torah*.

## **Satan Never Despairs from Hope**

The *Torah* juxtaposes the passing of Sarah our Matriarch to the *Akeidah* (the binding of *Yitzchak*). *Rashi* cites the *Midrash*, which explains that the juxtaposition of events teaches us that the *Akeidah* was the direct cause of Sarah's death. The *Midrash* tells us that when *Avraham* bound *Yitzchak* to be brought as a sacrifice and was about to slaughter him, Satan informed Sarah what was happening at that moment. Sarah believed that her son *Yitzchak* was surely going being to be slaughtered as a sacrifice by her husband *Avraham*. Although *Yitzchak* was not actually slaughtered, *Sarah* had believed based on what she was told that her husband had concluded the service of the *Akeidah*. Consequently, her soul departed from her because it was too much for her to bear.

The *Torah* states "...they had brought with them the souls that they had made in *Charan*..." *Rashi* cites *Chazal* who explain, that *Avraham* converted the men and Sarah converted the women. It is clear from *Chazal's* interpretation of the verse, that Sarah our

Matriarch was no less effective than her husband *Avraham* in espousing monotheism and converting the world to believe in G-d.

In addition, Chazal tell us that Sarah's level of prophecy was even greater than that of *Avraham*, as the verse states, "G-d said to *Avraham*, 'All that Sarah tells you, you should heed her voice.'" Meaning, *Avraham* should listen to the prophetic words of his wife, Sarah. If Sarah's potential was so great and thus invaluable, as we see that she was able to impact upon all humanity as *Avraham* had done, why did G-d allow Satan to inform her of the *Akeidah*, thus causing her demise?

After *Avraham* had bound *Yitzchak* and was about to slaughter him, the *Torah* states that an angel called out to him saying, "Do not extend your hand against the lad nor do anything to him..." After removing *Yitzchak* from the altar, *Avraham* believed that in order to gain the ultimate value of the *Akeidah*, which was not performed, he needed to actualize and concretize his intent of bringing *Yitzchak* as the sacrifice to G-d. He then saw a ram that he would sacrifice in the place of his son, *Yitzchak*.

The *Torah* tells us that a ram suddenly appeared to *Avraham* for him to sacrifice in place of his son, as the verse states, "...Behold, a ram! – afterwards caught in the thicket by its horns." G-d had provided the ram for *Avraham* to actualize his intent. Chazal tell us that the ram that *Avraham* was to use in place of *Yitzchak* was not an ordinary ram, but rather it was the ram that G-d created at the beginning of Creation during the twilight period on the eve of the first *Shabbos*.

The *Mishna* in Ethics of our Fathers states, "Ten things were created at twilight on the eve of the first *Shabbos*: The mouth of the earth (which swallowed up *Korach* and his community), the mouth of the wellspring (that traveled with the Jewish people in the desert and provided them with water for forty years), the mouth of the donkey (of *Bilaam*)... the ram of *Avraham*..." In order to have the value of a sacrifice that was the equivalent of *Yitzchak*, *Avraham* needed to bring a ram that G-d created specifically for that purpose.

Since the original Creation had a special dimension of value because it was the handiwork of G-d, the ram that *Avraham* sacrificed, in order to have the desired effect, needed to be the handiwork of G-d. We find that all the things that G-d created during the twilight of the eve of the first *Shabbos* have eternal value regarding

the destiny of the Jewish people. The mouth of the earth that swallowed up *Korach* proved that, "*Moshe* is true and his *Torah* is true." The mouth of the donkey of *Bilaam* demonstrated that his dimension of prophecy was not as he had purported it to be as the *Gemara* states, "If he did not know the intent of his donkey, how could he know the intent of G-d?"

The prosecution of Satan on the Day of Judgment (*Rosh Hashanah*) is so intense and fierce that the only mechanism that could silence him is the sound of the *shofar* that is blown on that day. The only reason the Jewish people are able to survive until the end of time is due the merit of the *Akeidah* and the special ram that *Avraham* brought in the stead of *Yitzchak*. Despite the fact that Satan attempted to interfere and prevent the *Akeidah* from taking place, *Avraham* succeeded in actualizing it. Although Satan had failed in all of his attempts, he nevertheless did not despair from negating its value.

*Rambam* writes in the Laws of Repentance that if a person was devoutly righteous his entire life, and at the last moment he chooses to regret all the good deeds and spiritual accomplishments that he performed, his positive record is nullified and there will be no mention of his righteous deeds at the time of judgment. Satan believed that if the *Akeidah* would be the direct cause of the death of Sarah our Matriarch, there would be a possibility that *Avraham* would become angered and thus cause him to regret that he had taken his son to the *Akeidah*. If this were to happen, the *Akeidah* would have been nullified and the eternal defense for the Jewish people against Satan's prosecution would not exist.

The *Torah* tells us that despite *Avraham's* understanding and linkage of events, he remained unmoved. He had no regret or remorse for what he had done. As the verse states, "*Avraham* came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her..." G-d allowed Satan to inform Sarah of the *Akeidah* so that *Avraham* could truly secure the merit of the *Akeidah* for eternity, thus the Jewish people will be protected until the end of time.

The *Mishna* in Ethics of Our Fathers states, "Do not believe in yourself until the day you die." Although the holy Patriarchs were the location of the Divine Presence in the world (*hein hein haMerkava*), He did not associate His Name with them during their lifetime. As the *Midrash* states, "*Reb Shimon bar Yochai* says, 'G-d does not associate His name with the devoutly

righteous (*tzaddikim*) during their lifetime. It is only after their passing does He associate His Name with them..." Why is this? Even though one may be devoutly righteous, it is possible that at the last moment of one's life to regret the good that he has done, thus eliminating his status as righteous at the final moment of his life.

## Degrees of Appreciation

The *Torah* tells us that *Eliezer*, the servant of *Avraham* was sent by his master to locate the proper wife for *Yitzchak*, to be the future Matriarch of the Jewish people. The *Torah* presents the narrative of *Eliezer* to understand to what degree he was dedicated and negated to his master *Avraham*. His level of negation to his master was so great that he is not referred to by name from the time that he was summoned by *Avraham* to undertake the mission until it was concluded. He is referred to as "servant of *Avraham*."

When *Eliezer* supplicated G-d to succeed in his mission of finding the appropriate wife for *Yitzchak*, it was only for the sake of doing kindness with his master of *Avraham*. As it states, "Do a kindness for my master *Avraham*." The *Torah* states regarding another supplication of *Eliezer*, "He said, 'Hashem, G-d of my master *Avraham*, my You so arrange it for me this day that You do kindness with my master *Avraham*.'" *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* explains that *Eliezer* understood that his master *Avraham* was worthy of receiving G-d's kindness. However, regarding himself, being qualified to facilitate that kindness was a question. He therefore supplicated G-d, to allow him to bring about that kindness as his master's agent. It is clear that *Eliezer* understood and appreciated that his success was completely dependent on his master's merit and not his own.

The *Torah* tells us that after *Eliezer* shared with *Besuel* and *Lavan* all that had transpired prior to meeting *Rivka* and all that she had done on his behalf, it was evident to him that *Rivka* was predestined to be the wife of *Yitzchak*. They responded to him by saying, "The matter stemmed from *Hashem*! We can say to you neither bad nor good. Here, *Rivka* is before you, take her and go." Although *Besuel* and *Lavan* were pagans, due to *Eliezer's* cogent description of events, they recognized that this was the Hand of G-d.

The *Torah* continues, "And it was, when *Avraham's* servant heard their words, he prostrated himself to the

ground unto G-d." *Rashi* cites the *Midrash*, "From here we learn that one must give thanks for good tidings." According to the interpretation of *Chazal*, regarding *Eliezer's* prostration before G-d, that it is to teach us that one must give thanks upon receiving good tidings. This seems to be difficult to understand. It is known that the *Torah* only records events that are important for us to be aware of so that one could draw principles or laws. However, principles that are obvious beyond any doubt, the *Torah* does not share this information because it would be considered superfluous. It is obvious that locating *Rivka*, the future Matriarch of the Jewish people, and her family's acquiescence and consent to allow her to go with *Eliezer*, warrants thankfulness. If so, what is the significance of the *Torah* telling us that *Eliezer* prostrated himself before G-d in thanks?

The *Torah* is teaching us that one's degree of thankfulness is determined by the degree that one appreciates and values what he had received. If one minimizes the value of what he receives, although he may be appreciative, he is nevertheless not sufficiently appreciative. If one believes that what he had received was due to his own capability or worthiness, although he acknowledges that it is from G-d, this will minimize his sense of appreciation for what he had received.

However, if one is truly humble and feels that he is unworthy, he will have a greater degree of appreciation. Although *Eliezer* had demonstrated a unique level of humility, as he had expressed himself continuously throughout his mission, he nevertheless felt that unless he did an overt act to negate himself, his sense of self would interfere with his being able to internalize the value of the accomplishment. Thus, *Eliezer* understood that in order to be truly appreciative, he needed to do a physical act to negate himself to a greater degree and not simply understand that it was G-d who had done the kindness for his master. The act of prostration displayed that his value and ability was no greater than the dust of the earth. The act of bowing removed from *Eliezer* even the most infinitesimal sense self-worth that could have interfered with his thankfulness to G-d.

Therefore, the *Midrash* tells us that it is from the act of *Eliezer's* prostration that we learn, that one must give thanks for good tidings. Meaning, it is not sufficient to understand that one is a beneficiary of another, but in



addition, one must do whatever is necessary to give oneself a greater capacity to appreciate the good that has happened.

## A Blessing Can be a Curse

The *Torah* states after *Lavan* and his mother consented that *Rivka* be taken by *Eliezer* as the wife of *Yitzchak*, the son of *Avraham*, “They escorted *Rivka* their sister, and her nursemaid...They blessed *Rivka* and said to her, ‘Our sister, may you come to be thousands of myriads, and may your offspring inherit the gates of its foes.’” Although *Lavan* and his mother knew that *Rivka* was going to be the future Matriarch of the Jewish people, which was something that was the antithesis of who they were, they nevertheless jointly blessed *Rivka* that her descendants should be in the thousands.

We see clearly that *Lavan* was opposed to anything that had relevance to spirituality, as the *Torah* tells us regarding his future interaction with *Yaakov*; as the verse states, “The *Aramian* (*Lavan*) who killed our father (*Yaakov*).” *Lavan* would have destroyed *Yaakov* and his family had it not been for G-d’s intervention to not allow it to take place. Regardless of aversion to spirituality and what it represents, *Lavan* gave a sincere blessing to *Rivka* his sister. Why did *Lavan* bless *Rivka*?

*Chazal* tell us, “Evil emanates from evil.” *Lavan* understood what he represented. His beliefs and values were the antithesis of spirituality and holiness. He thus believed that if his blessing would be effective it would cause *Rivka* to have descendants that would be inclined to reject spirituality, due to the principle “evil emanates from evil.” Regardless of what dimension of *Yitzchak*’s devoutness, since her progeny would be affected by *Lavan*’s blessing, he was not concerned. His intent was to avoid the Jewish people to come into being.

The *Torah* tells us that initially *Bilaam* wanted to curse the Jewish people; however, G-d told him not to do so. After being restrained by G-d, *Bilaam* asked G-d if he could bless them. Again, G-d denied his request, saying “I do not want you to bless them,” Why did G-d not want *Bilaam* to bless the Jewish people, if blessing is something of a positive nature? *Chazal* explain just as one says to a bee, “not from your sting and not from your honey!” G-d did not want *Bilaam* to bless

the Jewish people because only evil emanates from evil. Although initially the blessing of an evil person may seem to have value, since it emanates from a source of evil, the outcome can only be tragic.

The *Torah* states in the portion of *Toldos*, “He (*Yitzchak*) took *Rivka*, daughter of *Besuel*...sister of *Lavan* the *Aramean*, as a wife for himself.” The *Torah* usually identifies individuals only by mentioning the name of their father. Regarding *Rivka*, the *Torah* also mentions that her brother was *Lavan*. Why does the *Torah* do so?

*Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* explains, “This is to allude that the reason *Rivka*, our Matriarch was barren was because of *Lavan*’s blessing. He should not see that his blessing accomplished something good.” Since the Jewish people descend from *Rivka*, as a Matriarch, if she would be fertile and conceive naturally, one may attribute their proliferation to the blessing of *Lavan*, the evil one. This cannot be. Therefore, *Ohr HaChaim* continues, “Even prior to the *Torah* informing us that *Rivka* was barren, she is identified as the ‘sister of *Lavan*’ so that we could understand why she was barren.” Since *Rivka* was barren, it was obvious that the only reason she was able to conceive was due to G-d’s intervention to perform a miracle that allowed her to bear children.

The *Torah* tells us that *Yitzchak* our Patriarch prayed for *Rivka* his wife to be able to conceive. Regarding *Yitzchak*’s supplication, the term that is used by the *Torah* is “*vayetar*,” The *Gemara* in Tractate *Succah* tells us that *vayetar* is the most intense expression of prayer. It has the ability to overturn G-d’s decree. Just as the pitchfork, which is referred to as the ‘*atar*’ has the ability overturn what is below to what is above. Had it not been for this level of intense prayer, *Rivka* would have never conceived. This was so that it would be clear and evident to all that the blessing of *Lavan* had no relevance to the proliferation of Jewish people.

## The Transformation of Avraham to Become another Dimension of Person (From Vayeira)

The *Midrash* states, “*Reb Levy* says, ‘The first test (of *Avraham*) is similar to the last test.’ The first test was ‘*lech lecha* – Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house.’ The last test was ‘*lech lecha* – Go to the land of *Moriah* (to bring

*Yitzchak*) as an offering upon one of the mountains which I shall tell you.' (*Akeidah*- binding of *Yitzchak*)."

What is the significance of comparing the first test to the last? Seemingly, there is no similarity between the difficulty of the first test, which was *Avraham* leaving his homeland, and the difficulty of the last test, which was taking his beloved son *Yitzchak* and bringing him as a burnt offering. In addition, it cannot be that they are similar because he was able to withstand the challenge of both tests, because this is true regarding all ten tests that were presented to *Avraham*. Evidently there is something unique and similar between the first and the last test, other than the words "*lech lecha*."

*Chazal* tell us that *Avraham* began to espouse monotheism before he had come to *Canaan*. Even while *Avraham* was in *Charan*, he and his wife Sarah were successful in converting pagans to monotheism. As the verse states "...they had brought with them the souls that they had made in *Charan*..." *Rashi* cites *Chazal* who explain that *Avraham* converted the men and Sarah converted the women. G-d had said to *Avraham* regarding the first test, "Go for yourself and you will have children, wealth and renown." Seemingly, the basis for being worthy in all of these areas was if he would meet the challenge of G-d and leave his land, birthplace, and family.

It is evident from the narrative that because a spiritual transformation had taken place within *Avraham*, his level of effectiveness to impact upon humanity surpassed all previous levels. This is the meaning that it is "similar to the last test." After he had succeeded in the *Akeidah*, an angel called out to him, "I swear that you have done this, that you did not withhold your only son from me, I will bless you and I will increase your progeny like the stars in the heaven...and through your children the nations of the land shall be blessed because you heeded My voice."

The similarity between the first and the last test was that as a result of succeeding in each, the effect upon his dimension of being assumed unlimited ramifications. He was able to effect humanity at another level because he had succeeded in the first and last test.

The *Gemara* tells us that *Hillel* the elder had eighty students. The greatest of his students was *Reb Yonason Ben Uziel* and the least of his students was *Reb Yochanon Ben Zakai*. The *Gemara* asks, what was the difference between the two of them? If both knew the entire *Torah* with the same degree of proficiency, what was the discerning factor between them? The *Gemara* explains that when *Reb Yonason Ben Uziel* would study *Torah* birds would fly over his head would be consumed by fire, but when *Reb Yochanon Ben Zakai* would study *Torah* they would not. The *Gemara* states that this was the difference between the greatest student of *Hillel* the elder and the least of his students.

If factually, the *Torah* of both *Reb Yonason Ben Uziel* and *Reb Yochanon Ben Zakai* was studied and retained to the same degree, why would the birds be consumed by fire over the head of one and not the other? *Ramchal* explains the difference between these two *Torah* sages with an allegory. A watch has within it many movements, which allow it to tell accurate time. The movements are linked to one another. When one wheel turns it moves another wheel that is attached to it and so on. The movement of one affects many others.

Similarly, when *Reb Yonason Ben Uziel* would study *Torah*, because of his intensity of holiness, its effect would change many worlds. The holiness that was generated by his *Torah* study would cause the birds over his head to be consumed. In contrast although the proficiency of *Torah* studied by *Reb Yochanon Ben Zakai*'s was identical; however, because of his lesser degree of holiness, it did not have that same level of effectiveness.



**Yad Avraham Institute**