

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

This parasha series is dedicated
in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

This shiur is dedicated
in memory of Howard (Haim) Greenspan z"l.

Ketura
By Rav Yaakov Medan

A. THREE WOMEN

Our parasha is clearly divisible into three sections, according to the main character in each. Chapter 23 deals entirely with Sara and her burial; chapter 24 discusses Rivka and her marriage to Yitzchak, and chapter 25 (or at least the first part of it) deals with Ketura [1.]

This structure presents a clear message. Sara's death leaves a vacuum on two levels: Avraham is left without a wife, and Am Yisrael is left without a matriarch. The first vacuum is filled by Ketura, Avraham's new wife, while the second is filled by Rivka. She enters Sara's tent as Yitzchak's wife, and survives Sara as the second matriarch of Israel for all future generations [2.]

Chazal focus, naturally, on the second level, and describe at length how Rivka filled the void left by Sara's death:

"Yitzchak brought her to the tent of Sara, his mother' – As long as Sara lived, a cloud was attached to the entrance to her tent. When she died, this cloud disappeared, and when Rivka came, it reappeared.

As long as Sara lived, the doors were open wide; when Sara died, the openness disappeared; and when Rivka came, the openness reappeared.

As long as Sara lived, there was blessing in the dough; when Sara died the blessing ceased; and when Rivka came it was restored.

As long as Sara lived, a candle burned from one Shabbat eve to the next; when she died, the candle ceased, and when Rivka came it was restored." (Bereishit Rabba 9, and Rashi 24:16)

Chazal compare the forefathers' tent to the Holy of Holies in the Temple, since the Divine Presence was revealed to the forefathers in their tents in the same way that it was revealed to Moshe from above the covering between the two keruvim. The structure of the matriarchs' tent therefore also paralleled the image of the Temple: the cloud attached to the tent resembled the cloud of ketoret (incense) that arose from the golden altar, the light that remained burning resembled the menorah, and the blessing that was bestowed on the bread parallels the showbread.

In a certain sense, though, Rivka may be perceived as filling a void left by Sara as Avraham's wife, even though she did not marry him. Proof of this is to be found in Avraham's command to his servant, the elder of his household, as to how to evaluate a bride suitable for his son:

"The servant said to him: Perhaps the woman will not agree to follow me to this land; shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?

Avraham said to him: Guard yourself lest you take my son back there. The Lord God of the heavens, Who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and Who spoke to me and promised to me, saying, 'To your seed I shall give this land' – He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there. And if the woman will not agree to follow you, you will be free of this oath; only do not take my son there." (24:5-8)

The woman destined to be Yitzchak's wife will be tested as to her willingness to leave her birthplace in Charan and to journey to an unknown land. She, too, will thereby fulfill the commandment that was given to Avraham: "Go, then, from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you." Without this test of faith, the woman is not worthy of inheriting Sara's heritage and becoming Avraham's daughter-in-law.

The wise servant understands the message that is left unsaid, and tests Rivka in terms of another characteristic of Avraham's home – the warm hospitality:

"Behold, I am standing by the well, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. Let the girl to whom I shall say, 'Please let down your pitcher and let me drink,' and she will answer, 'Drink, and I shall water your camels, too' – let her be the one whom You have destined for your servant for Yitzchak; thereby shall I know that You have shown kindness to my master." (24:13-14)

Avraham's daughter-in-law is evaluated in terms of the two founding pillars of the Nation of Israel: kindness and faith.

B. FOR WHAT REASON DOES AVRAHAM REMARRY?

The necessity of Rivka's inclusion into the family and her positive qualities are obvious. But for what reason does Avraham marry Ketura? Rashi attempts to present her positive traits:

"Ketura – this was Hagar. She is called 'Ketura' because her actions were pleasant like incense (ketoret), and because she had remained celibate, not having relations with anyone from the day that she separated from Avraham." (Rashi, 25:1)

But Rashi would appear to be contradicting himself. Previously, he commented concerning Hagar:

"'She departed and she wandered' – she returned to the idols of her father's house." (Rashi, 21:14)

How can Rashi speak of the actions of an idolater as being pleasant?

From the narrative itself, it would seem that the entire purpose of this second marriage was to bear more children. The midrash teaches:

"'In the morning – sow your seed, and towards evening do not cease' (Kohelet 11:6) – if you have children when you are young, marry a wife in your old age and bear [more] children. From whom do we learn this? From Avraham, who married a wife and had children when he was younger, and he took [another] wife in his old age." (Yalkut Shimoni 109)

What is the point of bearing more children, when ultimately Avraham was going to send them away, just as he did Yishmael?

"Avraham gave all that he had to Yitzchak. And to the children of the concubines, Avraham gave gifts, and he sent them away from Yitzchak his son, while he was still alive, eastwards, to the land of the east." (25:5-6)

Perhaps Avraham's need to bear numerous children is related to the difference between the two covenants that God made with him. In the context of his circumcision, God tells him explicitly: "I shall establish My covenant with Yitzchak, whom Sara will bear to you at this time next year." This is a covenant that will be established only with his consecrated seed – Yitzchak the son of Sara. This covenant promises Avraham the land of Canaan, which will be given to Yitzchak's descendant – Yaakov, and will be settled by Yaakov's descendants, divided into inheritances for the tribes, each comprised of its households. This is the holy land, promised to Israel: "It shall be for you alone, no strangers [will inherit it] with you" (Mishlei 5:17.)

But God also made another covenant with Avraham – the "covenant of the parts" (berit bein ha-betarim), where He mentions not "the land of Canaan" but rather "the land" – from the Nile to the Euphrates [3]. The content of this covenant discusses not the sanctity of Avraham's descendants, but rather the historical process that they will endure in exile, as strangers, in servitude and oppression, until they build up their independent kingdom in their own land, no longer under foreign rule.

The land of Canaan lies between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea; it is holy ground, and concerning it the Torah teaches, "The land has become defiled and I have visited its iniquities upon it, and the land shall spew out its inhabitants" (Vayikra 18:25). But such a tiny land seems inadequate for the establishment of an independent sovereignty. Throughout the biblical period, so long as these were the borders of the Kingdom of Israel, independence was short-lived, and it was subject to whatever the reigning empire was at the time. The situation in modern times bears out the same conclusion: the State of Israel in its borders between the Jordan and the Mediterranean (the so-called "Greater Land of Israel") is not an independent entity; it relies upon the favor of foreign powers, especially that of the U.S.

The geo-political unit that represents the independent kingdom of Israel lies between the Nile and the Euphrates. If we look at a map, we note that this is not a particularly large area. The Persian Empire, this entire expanse constitutes only one province out of the one hundred and twenty comprising the Empire! These, then, are the borders of the independent kingdom of Israel, and indeed it was only when these were the actual borders – during the reigns of David and Shelomo – that the kingdom of Israel was entirely independent. Therefore, when discussing the inheritance of Am Yisrael from a historical point of view, and the transition from being

strangers to political independence, we are speaking of the complete Eretz Yisrael – from the Nile to the Euphrates.

However, the nation is unable to populate the wide expanses of this land and its vast wildernesses until God fulfills His promise (Devarim 1:11) and increases our number a thousand-fold over the number that originally entered the land (i.e., six hundred thousand times one thousand.)

This, apparently, is the reason why Avraham had many children and sent them away from Yitzchak, his son. Yishmael was banished to the wilderness of Sinai, which leads on to Egypt; the children of Ketura were sent to the eastern wilderness, which stretches up to the area around the Euphrates. In this way, Avraham tried to fill the land between the Nile and the Euphrates with his offspring: the children of Yishmael, the children of Ketura, Edom and the children of Lot – Ammon and Moav, who are also considered his descendants. All would live in "the land" – the land between the Nile and the Euphrates – but only Yitzchak, with whom God had established the covenant of circumcision, would live in the holy land of Canaan.

Further on in the Torah, it becomes clear that the entire great land is given to Am Yisrael. We find this stated explicitly several times, especially in Sefer Devarim:

"If you will guard well all of these commandments which I command you to do, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to cleave to Him, then God will drive out all of these nations from before you, and you will possess nations greater and mightier than you. Every place where your feet tread – shall be yours, from the wilderness and Levanon, from the great River Euphrates up to the furthestmost sea shall be your border. No man shall be able to stand up to you; God will put the fear of you and dread of you upon all the land where you will tread, as He has spoken to you." (Devarim 11:22-25)

From the style, we note that the great land is given to the descendants of Yaakov, to rule it and to make it their kingdom, but together with them live all the descendants of Avraham [4]. Yaakov is blessed with the inheritance of the land after his battle against Esav for the birthright and the blessing:

"Nations will serve you and peoples will bow down to you; you shall be a lord over your brethren and your mother's children will bow down to you; those who curse you will be cursed, and those that bless you will be blessed." (27:29)

From the above, one might have the impression that perhaps the level of Avraham's descendants – the children of Ketura and of Yishmael, and later on the children of Esav – is somehow higher than the level of other gentiles. Perhaps their right to dwell in those areas of the great land that lie outside of the Land of Canaan (only!), on condition that they accept Jewish sovereignty over them, is a legitimate right anchored in the Torah [5.]

This question brings us to our final point: a dispute between the Tanaim in the Midrash as to whether Ketura was Hagar or another woman.

"Rabbi said: Hagar is the same as Ketura. Why is she called Ketura? Because she was completely celibate [after originally being banished by Avraham.]

But the Sages said: He married a different woman.

What is Rabbi's reason for saying that Hagar is Ketura? For it is written concerning Yitzchak, 'Yitzchak came from the way of Be'er Le-chai Ro'i' – the same that is referred to in the verse, 'She called the Name of God Who spoke to her: You are E-l Ro'i.' From this we learn that she was Hagar." (Tanchuma, Chayei Sara 8)

We have already noted that Rashi would appear, in his commentary on chapter 25, to adopt the approach of Rabbi, despite the fact that in chapter 21 he rejects Hagar completely, interpreting the text in accordance with the Sages who disagree with Rabbi.

Rabbi's proof for his claim is based on the juxtaposition of Avraham's marriage to Ketura to Yitzchak's arrival from Be'er Le-chai Ro'i – the place where Hagar dwelled. There may even be another proof: according to the description in our parasha, Yishmael dwelled in the western Negev and in Sinai up until Shur of Egypt, while the children of Ketura were sent "eastwards to the land of the east" – to the wilderness on the eastern side of the mountains of Gilad. In the story of the sale of Yosef, we witness, throughout the route from the eastern wilderness to Egypt, cooperation between the Yishmaelites and the Midianites. Likewise in the story of Gidon's battle against Midian and the "children of the east," we are told explicitly that the Midianites' earrings belonged to the Yishmaelites (Shoftim 8:24). In Sefer Divrei ha-Yamim, we find a description of a great war that Reuven, Gad and half the tribe of Menashe fight against the tribes of the eastern wilderness (where the children of Ketura dwelled), known as the Geri'ites (geri'im) – i.e., the children of Hagar (Divrei ha-Yamim I 5:18-20). From all of these sources, it would appear that the children of Yishmael and the children of Ketura are the same family. In light of these verses, Rabbi maintains that "Hagar is Ketura," and hence the descendants of Hagar and the descendants of Ketura are the same.

NOTES:

[1]Chazal maintain that Ketura is Hagar; if this is so, then chapter 25 in its entirety deals with Ketura.

[2]Yitzchak's love for Rivka similarly develops in the wake of her similarity to Sara, his mother: "he brought her" (va-yevi'eha) becomes "he loved her" (va-ye'ehaveha.)

[3]The Torah's consistent distinction between "the land" (with its boundaries between the Nile and the Euphrates) and the "land of Canaan" (with its boundaries from the Jordan up to the Great Sea) is explained well in a detailed article by Rav Yoel bin-Nun in Megadim 17.

[4]This, too, I learned from Rabbi bin-Nun.

[5]As above.

[6]This has no political relevance at present, since the author of this article is most doubtful as to whether any direct ethnic connection exists between Yishmael and the inhabitants of the lands in question, but in any case this topic lies outside the scope of the present discussion.

Translated by Kaeren Fish